

Biblical Ethical Teaching on Current Prevalence Divorce

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the biblical ethical response to the growing prevalence of divorce in contemporary society, with a specific focus on Nigeria. Amid rising global and national divorce rates, the paper investigates whether divorce aligns with God's will as revealed through Scripture. It begins by identifying key causes of modern divorce ____ including infidelity, infertility, sexual incompatibility, and domestic abuse ____ before examining biblical texts that address marriage and divorce. Drawing from both Old and New Testament teachings, and engaging with scholarly interpretations and ethical frameworks, the paper argues that Scripture consistently upholds marriage as a lifelong covenant instituted by God. While acknowledging ongoing debates around texts such as Matthew 19:9 and the "exception clause," the study concludes that divorce contradicts the biblical vision for marriage, except in cases such as abuse where moral responsibility may necessitate protective separation. Ultimately, the paper affirms that the Bible does not support divorce as a normative solution, and encourages a return to biblical ethics as a foundation for marital fidelity, restoration, and holistic well-being.

Keywords: *Divorce, Marriage, Couples, Sexual, Immorality.*

INTRODUCTION

Divorce has become an issue of concern in our societies today and the world at large. The prevalence increase in divorce rate is gradually eating up the structure and organization of the family. The rate is becoming so alarming today and calls for urgent attention. According to a statistical report in 2022, using the available data on marriage and divorce, the average crude divorce rate in the world was about 1.6 percent per 1000 people. In 2023, it rises to 1.8 percent per 1000 people. In 2024, another statistic report has it that Nigeria current divorce rate, though varied by region and states is 2.9 percent, putting Nigeria at 11th position for highest divorce rate out of 26 countries with Maldives at first position having 5.52 percent.

What we see today is couples getting divorce or filing for divorce over trivial issues and not minding its effect on God's ordained plans for marriage. This paper seeks to attempt the following questions: Is divorce right according to biblical injunctions? Does God permit divorce? Is divorce the will of God for marriage? These pertinent questions are often raised when looking at divorce from Christian perspectives. This paper is therefore aim at exploring the biblical ethical teaching on divorce, with the purpose of knowing the stand and mind of God on divorce through His word, so as to provide valuable insights and guidance for divorced couples or couples intending divorce.

II. Causes of Divorce

A look at some definitions of divorce will be necessary as we consider some of the reasons for current prevalence divorce today. Divorce has been defined as a legal process for severance of marital ties and the dissolution of marital union. Another definition has it as the legal dissolution of marriage, leaving the partners free to remarry. The process however, may involve adherence to some specific procedures depending on the type of marriage conducted. Wayne House has postulated that divorce has permeated the society today such that marriage rate and divorce rate are almost equal. This according to him is not restricted to non-Christian community. He said Christians are also flooding psychologists and marriage counselors, seeking to

resolve seemingly irreconcilable conflicts. Some of the reasons for current prevalence divorce include the following amongst many others.

Infidelity has been widely considered as one of the most common reasons for divorce. It can be define as the situation in which one partner in a marriage or intimate relationship becomes sexually or emotionally involved with a person other than the partner's spouse. Infidelity is a wrenching and devastating event that is difficult for couples to navigate even under the best of circumstances. When one spouse cheats, it can cause a significant emotional pain and betrayal of trust. As a form of reaction, the betrayed spouse may get angry and resolve on divorce as the next option not minding its effect on their marriage.

Another reason for the prevalence of divorce in marriage is infertility. Infertility which is described as the inability to conceive a child after a period of regular intercourse without contraception can place significant emotional and psychological strain on marriages. According to Nichole Dixon, these impacts can eventually lead to divorce. In further supporting infertility as a reason for divorce, Dixon also affirms that studies has revealed that couples who do not have a child after fertility treatment are three times more likely to divorce or end cohabitation.

Anna and Maria in a research have also buttresses the fact that among the factors and life events that might affect marital stability, childbearing is crucial. According to them, the desire to have a child can be a reason for establishing a union in the first place, and there is consistent evidence that having children substantially decrease the probability of union dissolution. This writer support the assertion of Anna and Maria that childbearing is crucial among factors that can affect marital union. This is because history has revealed that in most of the African culture, child bearing is one of the prerequisite to marital union sustainability. African men marry more wives with the desire of having a large family for the purpose of their farming business. This made Child bearing to be crucial for the sustainability of such union.

Sexual incompatibility is another reason for the prevalence divorce today. It is the term used to describe couples different sexual needs. Spouses may enjoy different types of foreplay, fantasies, intensity, or frequency of sex. When spouses do not have

this understanding, it will lead to sexual dissatisfaction that may result into infidelity. Juan Luciano also affirms that sexual incompatibility is not a trivial issue; he explains that, it can gradually erode the mutual respect, love and understanding that form the foundation of a marriage. He also stated that, often it can lead to feelings of rejection, guilt, or resentment that can be difficult to resolve.

Studies have also revealed that most couples always avoid discussing their sex life with their marital counselor. They feel it is a marital issue that should not be made public. So, they rather continue keeping to themselves, while opting for divorce for no reason.

Other causes of divorce worthy of note are communication problem (like frequent argument), domestic violence, substance abuse and addiction, lack of compatibility, In-Laws and family conflicts, amongst others.

III. Biblical Perspectives of Divorce

Divorce in time past was a personal decision determine by individuals, not by religion or law. But with the rise of Christianity, the church began to control marriage and divorce. Jesus' often quoted response to the question, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" has become the corner stone of every Christian marriage ceremony: "what God has joined together let no man put asunder. Whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity, and marries commit adultery."(Matth 19:5-9)

From biblical perspective, God's plans for marriage is revealed in Genesis 2:24, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they becomes one flesh," a text that is quoted twice in the Gospel (Matth 19:5 and Mk 10:7-8) and once in the Epistles(Eph 5:3). This foundational passage reveals that marriage was divinely designed and instituted as a lifelong relationship. Though, many scholars have argued that Gen 2:24 are words of Adam, but the New Testament in Matthew 19:4-5, clarifies this when Jesus answered the Pharisees: "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this a reason a man will leaves his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'"

The above New Testament passage clearly affirms that the words of Gen 2:24 are not that of Adam but that of the creator himself. It is clear from the biblical perspective,

that marriage is a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman without separation by any man. This again, can be established by the hermeneutical and exegetical studies of some of the passages on divorce from Old and the New Testament.

Divorce in The Old Testament

The biblical passage that is usually referred to when it comes to the issue of divorce in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This passage outlines a law prohibiting a man from remarrying his former wife if she has married another man after their divorce. It emphasizes the seriousness and finality of divorce and aims to preserve the sanctity of marriage and prevent defilement of the land. The law states that, if a man divorces his wife and she remarries, he cannot take her back if she is divorced or widowed from her second husband. This is described as detestable before God and not allowed in the land the Lord is giving them.

Scholars have however argued that, this Old Testament passage does not require, recommend or even sanction divorce. The primary aim of the passage is not with divorce, nor certificate of divorce. What it says is, “if a man divorces his wife...” but because this passage is the main reference to divorce in the Pentateuch, it has become central to the Jewish debate on the subject matter, with attention focusing on the exact meaning of the Hebrew word ‘ervah’ (indecency) which indicates the ground for divorce.

Two Jewish schools of thoughts, the Shammai and the Hillel interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4 differently. For the Shammai, “unchastity” is the only ground for divorce. This understanding stems from the phrase “something indecent,” which was translated to mean unfaithfulness. The Hillel however, came up with many reasons for divorce which are favorable to men. One of it is that a man can divorce his wife for trivial reason, like burning his food. This writer seems to agree with the assertion that the passage is not about divorce, however, the writer considered the fact that the passage was taken as a ground for divorce by Jews in the Old Testament. A critical look at the passage reveals that it was an instruction given to the Israelites

by Moses as directed by God as they go into the promise land. The passage actually does not suggest or recommend divorce.

Divorce in the New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus' teachings on divorce appears in four passages of the synoptic gospels, Matthew 19:3-12, Mark 10:2-12, and Luke 16:18. Considering the account of Matthew in 19:3, "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" The Pharisees according to Matthew came to Jesus to test him. The issue was not divorce itself, but rather, the justification for divorce. Would Jesus side with the school of Shammai, which allowed divorce only on the grounds of unfaithfulness, or would he side the school of Hillel, which sanctioned divorce on the most trivial grounds. Jesus responded in Matthew 19:8, "Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."

The bone of contention is in Matthew 19:9 where Jesus says "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." The exceptional clause "except for sexual immorality," raised a lot of arguments by scholars. The Greek word 'porneia' as used in this passage for sexual immorality is variously translated. While some argued that porneia refers to premarital unchastity, others hold that porneia here mean adultery. Some however, holds that marriage is for life and can only be terminated by death. Those who take this view hold that the words translated "except for sexual immorality," should actually be translated "even in the case of "sexual immorality." In support of their position, they quoted the analogy that Paul used in Roman 7:2-3. Though Paul's topic of argument is not marriage, the analogy implies that a marriage endures as long as a spouse is alive.

The above approach also justifies the creation ordinance in Gen 1:27 (So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them) and 2:24 (That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh) which Jesus referred to in his comment on divorce in Matth 19:3-6. 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is

it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” 4“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? 6So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Supporting the above view, Stephen Busoye also asserts that the reason why the Jew were seeking for justification for divorce from Jesus, was because, at the time of Jesus Christ, divorce was difficult to practice among the Jews because the Jews were not free under the Roman rules to follow the Old Testament law that condemned adulterers to death by stoning. Therefore, the option for divorce is what they most settled for, which generated much debate among their lawyers on the legal ground by which divorce could be granted. From the above passages, it is obvious that Jesus’ teaching in the New Testament does not in any way support divorce.

Biblical Teachings on Divorce

Biblical ethical teachings from the Old and New Testament are the bases for which the Bible stand on divorce shall be establish in this paper. However, an understanding of the definition and meaning of biblical ethics will be needful before proceeding into that. According to Jacob Shatzer, biblical ethics is the process of discerning right and wrong rooted in and in response to Scripture. He further explained that, biblical ethics provides for the progressive and unfolding nature of God’s Word to create a matrix of commands, values, and virtues embedded in an ongoing story, a story in which we still find ourselves and our ethical challenges.

David Jones in his own definition described biblical ethics as the ultimate authority and it also dictates the method of ethics. Jones affirms that, “Biblical ethics differs from secular ethics; in that it is distinctively Christian in its approach to ethical evaluation as it uses the Bible as its source of moral authority.” He further reveals that, “it is more specific than Christian ethics, in that it specifically focuses on the study, structure, and application of the moral law as it is revealed in Scripture.” Both Shatzer and Jones affirms in their definitions that in biblical ethics, the Bible alone is the sole authority for ascertaining what is right or wrong when it comes to the

evaluation of matters from Christian perspectives. In line with their definitions, this writer also takes biblical ethics as the application of scriptural teachings by Christians to issues of life for moral living.

For the effective application of the scripture on ethical matters, Thomas Schreiner, emphasized on the need to have the understanding that in both the Old and New Testaments, the word law focuses on the commands and regulations of the Mosaic covenant. He further reveals that, in most instances the word law does not refer to instruction in a general sense but concentrates on what God demands that his people do.” Schreiner position that biblical law emphasizes more on what God demands from us as his children sets a good background for understanding the Bible stand on divorce.

Christopher Wright also posits that, Old Testament ethics are built upon Israel’s world view; therefore, to understand the Old Testament passages ethically, we must not take them out of their historical, literary and cultural context. We have to try and put ourselves in Israel’s position and understand how Israel perceived and experienced their relationship with God and how that experience affected their ethical ideals and practical living as a community. From Wright’s view, we have to consider how Israel perceive and relate with God based on their own historical background, learn from it and see how it can fit into our own contemporary time. That is when we can apply the scripture ethically to our situations. From the above understanding of biblical ethics, and based on the biblical perspectives of divorce from both the Old and the New Testament, this paper draw out the following as the Bible position on divorce.

Starting first with the Bible position on marriage, it is evidence that the bible is clear about the duration of marriage from the scripture. It is a lifelong commitment, till death intervenes. The lifelong nature of marriage is entailed in the concept of permanence in marriage, to which Jesus referred; “What God has joined together, let no one separate”(Matth 19:6). It is also stated by Paul, “By law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.” (Rom 7:2). It is also clear from Malachi 2:16 that the Bible is not in support of divorce in marriage. God himself said to the prophet

Malachi in that passage that “I hate divorce.” These are all affirmative scripture that the Bible is against divorce.

There have been a lot of argument and debate on Jesus response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:7-9:7“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away” 8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.

The difficulty to pin down the exact meaning for porneia because of the variety of words used, has led so many interpretation of Jesus response in Matthew 19:9 “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” The basis for argument and debate challenge is the ‘except clause’ as a ground for divorce. Though, Buttrick have argued that, only Matthew account includes this exception, it was not in the original text; but the question is, does it mean that Jesus accept divorce on the condition of sexual immorality?

The answer is no, Jesus did not accept divorce on the ground of immorality. Supporting this view, Mueller argues that from the biblical perspectives, divorce is impossible even in the case of adultery; otherwise Jesus would not differ from Moses and would have taken a position more liberal than the Mosaic Law that requires a death penalty for adultery. Normal Geisler also argue that the Greek word used in the verse, porneia, also includes illicit sexual relationships of married as well as unmarried people (Acts 15:20; Rom 1:29). It is used in parallel with the word adultery in this very passage, indicating that they have overlapping usages.

Although, today, majority uses Jesus’s statement in Matthew 19:9 to justify divorce, but the Bible teaching on marriage is that God’s intention for it right from the beginning, is for life (Gen 1:27, 2:24). Christians should respect God’s teaching on this matter. A man is bound to his wife (and she to her husband), for life, no divorce, that is the Bible stand. There are no biblical grounds for divorce; divorce is against biblical ethical teachings. This can be ascertained by some biblical passages as enumerated below.

Divorce stands in opposition to God's ideal design for marriage, which is a lifelong monogamous covenant (cf. Matt. 19:6; Rom. 7:2-3). Within the biblical framework, marriage is portrayed as a sacred vow made before God (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14), and the breaking of such a covenant constitutes a serious moral and spiritual breach. Scripture consistently upholds the inviolability of vows made to God, emphasizing that it is better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill it (Eccl. 5:5). The Apostle Paul, addressing the Corinthian church, explicitly commands that a wife must not separate from her husband and that reconciliation should be pursued wherever possible (1 Cor. 7:10-13).

Furthermore, in the context of church leadership, divorce is seen as disqualifying. One of the qualifications for an elder is that he must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2). Proponents of a strict interpretation argue that this phrase implies a man who has never been divorced, as divorce would render him the husband of more than one wife in a covenantal sense. Thus, from a biblical-ethical perspective, divorce is consistently viewed as contrary to God's moral order and covenantal intent for marriage.

However, in the situation of domestic violence against a spouse, the writer upholds that the church must prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the abused, supporting them with compassion rather than insisting on submission or endurance under harmful conditions. Temporary separation can be a morally justified action if it protects the victim and allows for healing or assessment of future steps. Russell Moore, from a situational ethics perspective also emphasized that when domestic violence is present, the ethical imperative is not to maintain the marriage at all costs, but to act in a way that most reflects God's love, justice, and mercy. This often means prioritizing the safety, healing, and dignity of the abused party — even if it leads to separation.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to look at the biblical ethical teaching on divorce. By considering the biblical perspectives on divorce from both the New Testament and the Old Testament and some scholarly views based on some exegetical and hermeneutical explanation of some biblical passages, the paper was able to discover

that the Bible is against divorce in its teachings. Though, studies have revealed that there is no universal agreement among Christians on the issue of divorce, but as long as the Bible remains the source of moral authority for all Christians, this paper agrees that the Bible is against divorce for any cause.

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