

JESUS' TEACHING ON DIVORCE IN MATTHEW 19:3

ABSTRACT

The marriage union is a holy institution originated by God; it is one of the social facet of human existence. One of the global ravaging vices in the contemporary times is divorce. Divorce for whatever reason, breaks up this intended union both for marriage in general and for each affected marriage (Gen 2:18-24; Mk 10:2-12). There have been several debates in Christendom over decades on this subject matter (divorce) as a solution for marital issues; this research identifies its stance, either being permitted or ordained by God. This research employs a descriptive and analytical methodology engaging the Matthew 19:3-9. The issue of divorce is seen as a two-sided matter in the sense of it being ordained or permitted by God. This research is significant in the sense that the biblical text forms the premise on which the question about divorce is answered. Matthew 19:3-9 got Jesus Christ talking, reveals that divorce was not part of the original plan of God for marriage. Although, the participation of Christian in divorce is allowed on some grounds, Jesus made it clear that it has not place in the novel programming of the Creator. On this note, divorce is said to be permitted by God but not ordained by God.

Keywords: Divorce, God, Man, Marriage, Matthew.

Introduction

Marriage is a common significant phenomenon generally acceptable in the universe. The scripture reveals it clearly as a lifelong bond that unites husband and wife in a "one flesh" relationship (Matt 19:5) (Van'tHul, 2001). Even though a violation of God's will and therefore sinful, divorce, like other sins, can be forgiven and persons involved cleansed "from all unrighteousness" (1 Jhn 1:9) (Smith, 2000). A good case in point is the story of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well (Jhn 4). Separation (divorce) of this bond displeases God and poses a serious threat to the social order (Lockyer, 1986). If marriage is for life, what is the rationale for re-marriage after a divorce? Is divorce a panacea for divorce? Is it biblical? Did God authenticate divorce or permitted it? These form the bedrock of this discourse. Clear enough, divorce though permitted by God as seen in the statement of Jesus; it is not ordained by God, in fact, it is a direct contrast of what God wants and intend for marriage which he originally instituted.

Understanding the Concept of Marriage

The discourse on divorce is incomplete without marriage; this is because marriage is the beginning of a home. Dictionary defines marriage is a legal union between a man and woman either in court, mosque Church and traditionally, or it can be defined as the “slate in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group (Howard and Millard, 1996). In the same vein, marriage is a union between a man and a woman with the intention of permanent togetherness (Sheinling, 1982). Marriage, from an ethical perspective is defined as a physical, legal and moral union between a man and a woman living in complete community of life for family establishment (Ellywood, 1973).

One of the significant stages of man’s life is marriage. It is noteworthy that the availability of plant and animals do not substitute for Adam’s companion; in other words, there was no same creature to love and to be loved “no suitable helper was found” Gen 2:20. This made God to create a woman out of man; “Then the lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and he brought her to the man” Gen 2:22. God initiated and instituted marriage because it is essential to man’s being “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife and they become one flesh” Gen 2:24.

Marriage was instituted in the context of creation, making it an ordinance of faith. God’s purpose in giving marriage to all mankind was ...

1. To compensate the weakness a man or woman has in being alone;
2. To establish a faithful, monogamous relation (procreation and reproduction), which is essential for the successful survival of society; and
3. To create the one-flesh relationship.

The biblical standard for marriage is a relationship in which a man and a woman share a lifetime commitment to each other, second only to their commitment to God (Jackson, 1976). God affirmed this as the principle of marriage inherent in His creation. Since man is a social; God understood that man needs a complement to aid him (Gen 1:27). This union makes man complete and it brings about fellowship, companionship and child bearing (Kolawole, 2019).

According to Rosa L. Carson, many people plan to get married for some unreasonable reasons. Some get married because they think they should, some because they think it is what the society expects, some because they think it will solve whatever problem they are having in the journey of their single lives. Some get married because their friends’ children now call them uncle. However, these are not justifiable reasons for getting married. While embarking on marital life, their hope is that it will last, (even till death) but reverse is the case as the outcome most of the time is divorce (Carson, 2012). God did not get Adam married because of the highlighted reasons but

because God knows that Adam is at the stage that he needed it; there is a vacuum to be filled with a helper that is Eve.

Marriage can be the most rewarding relationship; however it also brings with it many problems and issues that need to be handled (Johnson and Jones, 2000). From the above definition, the first connotation of Johnson and Jones here presents the fact concerning marriage. The fruitfulness of marriages when it works is explicit; it is an investment that yields result and profits. The second connotation has to do with the obvious reality of its difficulties having to do with the coming together of two different persons with different personalities, world view, background and understanding.

Since God's ordination entails an establishment done absolutely by God; it in turn suggests that marriage is God's absolute ordination and establishment as revealed in the Biblical text. Even Jesus made reference to the text in the gospel of Matthew 19:6; "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." On a contrary to several views and opinions, marriage is a covenant between three parties: the man, the woman and God. Thus, it is logical to say that marriage is an institution established by God. No marriage, no matter how good is totally immune to a vice or vices. In other words, divorce is always a threat to the home; it depends on the couple to determine whether or not to pave way for vice(s) in their home.

The Reality of Divorce

Divorce is the termination of the marital union between a man and a woman. Divorce is separation or the ending of a relationship between two consenting partners (Oxford Advanced Learners, 6th Edition). Divorce is the dissolution of a marriage contract between a man and a woman by the judgment of a competent jurisdiction by an act of the legislature. In other words, divorce is a means whereby a legal marriage is dissolved publicly and the participants are freed from further obligation of matrimonial relationship (Douglas, 1963).

In view of this, divorce is a formal or informal ending of marital union between a man and a woman. Divorce has become a notable reality in the society today. Families are breaking up and established relationships are becoming bitter. Divorce put a full stop to marital relationship and it is brought about by many factors. Unlike before that many people are committed to their marital vows, today, many things are changing and old ideas are giving way to the new ones either for good or evil.

In Yoruba culture, divorce implies the putting away of one's husband or wife i.e. to dissolve the contract of marriage or marriage bond. Marriage at this point comes to an end and each party goes separate way and decides whether or not to remarry. Tenney states that "divorce is a means whereby a legal marriage is dissolved publicly and the participants are free from further obligations of the matrimonial relationship (Tenney, 1987). In some cases, divorce may not follow due legal processes; there are number of couples who divorce their partners without due legal procedure; they isolate

themselves from their partners illegally and live in reclusion. Thus, divorce is an ugly incidence with many negative consequences.

Biblical Exploration of Divorce

It is clear that the entire purpose of the Mosaic Law was to reveal the sinful state of humanity and to help them return to a right relationship with God. He knew that people needed guidance for their daily lives, but they also needed the mercy and grace only He could provide. This would allow for the process of returning to Him without forcing them to adhere to the Laws through some radical, arbitrary method. The more gracious, gentle method was to show mankind a higher level of good and let the seed have time to grow, even though this seems to be a slower process.

Divorce did not begin with the children of Israel. When Moses presented the laws for governing divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, God did not permit him to do so in order to give approval for divorce. These laws were simply given to regulate a practice that already existed and was a familiar custom throughout the known world. The Deuteronomy passage tried to dispel this confusion (Gbile, 2004). In the same vein, viewing the issue of divorce from the Old Testament perspective, Kolawole Paul argues;

Divorce penetrated man's indissolubility marital bond; the Bible recognizes this and so in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 there are brief guidelines that govern the practice of divorce. However, such practice is only permitted but not commanded or divinely approved by God base on the situation then. The researcher opines that in Genesis chapter one and two, the absence of divorce in the course of establishing marriage reveals that divorce is contrary to God's original plan for marriage (Kolawole, 2019).

In addition, Paul further explained that divorce in the lens of the Old Testament was legal and permitted with (divorce bill) for only 'infidelity.' Regrettably, the meaning of this infidelity has been subject to debate for decades. Some people have suggested that it includes any nonchalant attitude, be it anger, lies, etc. and others have held to the view of fornication (*porneia*) which means extramarital intercourse. On this note, preferably, the latter is believed to have being the reason for the grant of divorce in the Old Testament evidently; God sees the marriage bond as being holy.

Because of God's declaration, the marriage bond is to be a lifetime commitment. It must be viewed as a permanent commitment and not as a temporary arrangement. However, because of the hardness of the heart, Moses provided a way to protect those who were victimized by the sinfulness of another person's heart (Kolawole, 2019). Divorce should never be elevated as being more sinful than other acts of disobedience to God's Word. On the other hand, it should never be excused as simply a regretful necessity. It is noteworthy, divorce takes place either one or both parties have allowed hardness of the heart (Matthew 19:8) to guide their actions in breaking the marriage bond.

The truth is that nowhere in the Old Testament is divorce recommended or approved, even though it was allowed in specific situations. It is equally true that God hates divorce just as much as he hates sin in any form. God did make provision for man to be forgiven of sin. This includes forgiveness for the choice of divorce. God gave His laws (rules), told us of the rewards we would receive if we followed them, and explained the consequences if we disobey. He then stepped back and allowed us to choose which path to walk in.

Whatever choices one makes, there will be consequences or rewards. Even when we suffer the consequences, God never stops caring, loving, nor disowns us. He forgives and forgets. We will never be able to fathom the extent of God's grace and love evident in the fruit grace produces. We must pursue God's standard (Williams, 1992). Thus, the pervasiveness of divorce both in the wider culture and the evangelical church is the rupture of a union God created to last a lifetime (Adeniyi, 2009).

Background to Matthew's Gospel

Matthew is one of the important documents in the New Testament considering its account of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of the messiah, Jesus Christ (Blomberg, 1992). It entails a number of questions bringing about several debates and arguments among scholars and commentators (Mcknight, 1992). Although, the writer of the gospel of Matthew did not identify himself by name, the church traditional belief is that it was written by Matthew the disciple (Bultman, 1963; Thiessen, 1974).

Morris opines; "very little can be said about the provenance of this book (Morrism 19021). The indications that it was written for a Jewish Christian community might point to a place in Palestine and this is supported by the tradition recorded by Papias that it was written for the Hebrews (Streeter, 1951). Much of the argument as to when Matthew was written depends on relative dating. According to Carteve, there is no manuscript evidence which details exactly when Matthew was written (Carteve, 2000). The most common suggestion is that it was somewhere around 80 and 90 AD, because several scholars accepted that Matthew use Mark as a source, and Mark is thought to be written around 60-70 AD. If Matthew was dependent on Mark, and Mark was written around 65 A.D. Scholars suggest several years for Mark to have become known enough for Matthew to have used it as a source. It is likely that both Ignatius and the Didache referred to Matthew's gospel, meaning this gospel could not have been written after 100 A.D.

Meanwhile, Johnson argued that Matthew, referring to the destruction of the temple proves the book must be written after 70 A.D as Matthew gives a theological interpretation of why the events happened (Johnson, 1999). The orientation of Matthew reward as a church community and the debate Matthew's gospel projects against the Pharisees, suggest that Matthew aims to define the church community as separate to a Pharisees tradition. In view

of this, Frances asserts that one could argue that the prophecies make a strong case for a dating before 70 A.D, as if the prophecies were already fulfilled, one would think there would be some reference to the fulfillment of these prophecies (Francis, 1985). However, there are references in Matthew gospel that suggest that the temple was still intact. Ignatius was the Bishop of Antioch also, if Matthew's stylistically Hebraic Gospel was originally composed in Greek, then Antioch would serve as a logical place of origin of Greek speaking Jews.

It is clear from the content of this book that Matthew was written for the Jews, since the first hearers of the gospel were mainly Jews, it is not surprising that one of the four gospel was directed especially to them to answer such questions as; whether Jesus truly descended from David or not (Jensen, 1986). Matthew's gospel is the link between the Old Testament and New Testament. The comment that Matthew is the gospel of fulfillment is noteworthy. Martin explained that "the purpose for writing to the Jews was to show them that Jesus of Nazareth was the expected Messiah and both His genealogy and His resurrection were legitimate proofs of this (Martin, 1975). In view of this, the research opines that the Jews were the recipients.

Analysis of Matthew 19:3-9

The study notes that the Gospel of Matthew recorded two teaching Jesus on divorce (5:32-33; 9:3-9); however, the periscope of this research is the second scene (ch 9: 3-9). In Matt 19:3 Jesus' arrival in the region of Judea (1-2; 2:1, 5, 22; 4:25) is met with Pharisaic opposition. Matthew informs the reader that the Pharisees came to "test" *πειράζοντες* – Matt 4:1; 16:1; 22:35. They evidently hope to legally discredit him by drawing him into the rabbinic debate concerning the legitimate grounds for divorce (Chouinard, 1997). Hence, they pose the question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" The question calls for Jesus to take sides in the contemporary debate (Bockmuehl, 1989). Perhaps they had heard about Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce (Mk 10:11-12; Lk 16:18). Whatever their exact motives, they certainly hoped that their exchange would provide sufficient leverage to call for Jesus' absolute repudiation (Ilan, 1995).

Jesus responds by first underscoring their ignorance of Scripture by sarcastically asking, "Haven't you read?" (Matt 19:4-6). Jesus speaks authoritatively about God's original intention with respect to marriage (Allison, 1993). Originally, God created male and female and decreed that in marriage the husband is united to his wife and the two will become one flesh (Gen 2:24). "One flesh" symbolism spells out in the strongest possible terms the relational and personal intimacy that should characterize the marital union (Hays, 1996). Marriage is an inseparable bond, grounded in covenantal commitment, "man is to stop separating what God has united" *μὴ χωρίζετο*. In verse five, it is once more Jesus speaking his own words; the Genesis citation ends at the end of verse 5 (Newman, 1992). Some translators have had to indicate this shift with a phrase such as, "So I tell you that they" Jesus' initial response goes beyond major rabbinic

interpretations to label all divorce as a violation of God's original intention for the one-flesh union in marriage.

The Pharisees respond to Jesus' words (Matt 19:7-8) by appealing to Deuteronomy 24:1, Mosaic command - ἐνετείλατο giving authorization to divorce. The text was read as legitimizing and mandating divorce. But Jesus reads the text not as a command but as a concession to their hardness of hearts.

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,” (Deut 24:1).

In fact, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 presupposes the practice of divorce and attempts to bring an element of restraint and legal protection for an already abusive situation. Jesus thus undermines any reading of Deuteronomy 24 that attempts to use this text as a basis for legitimizing the practice of divorce. The text must be read in light of God's original intention from the beginning. Jesus' reading of the Torah counters any manipulation of texts or faulty hermeneutic that attempts to circumvent the ultimate intention of God.

Having escaped the Pharisaic effort to discredit Jesus as opposing Moses (Matt 19:9), Jesus closes the discussion with his own pronouncement concerning marriage: anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness - πορνεία, and marries commits adultery. πορνεία simply reinforces the sanctity of marriage and counters *halakah* regarding divorce.

For any cause except for adultery reveals Matthew's nearness to the Jewish scholastic debates of his day. Both the schools of Hillel and Shammai regarded divorce as lawful. They disagreed however over what constituted just cause, for their interpretations of Deut 24:1 differed. Matthew's 'for any cause' appears to have as its background the more liberal and presumably dominant Hillelite position, according to which many things constituted grounds for divorce. That is, the question is whether Jesus accepts the teaching of Hillel or on the contrary holds a less liberal position (Davies and Allison, 2003).

It is probable and plausible that Matthew's Jewish male readers would have taken for granted that a marriage would be irreparably damaged by any form of sexual impropriety on the part of one's wife. Some rabbis went as far as to recommend divorce of one's wife who even “gives the impression of having betrayed her husband.” Jesus continues by quoting another Scripture, Gen 2:24; a secondary interpolation which appears to be ‘generically anti-polygamous and implicitly anti-divorce. Again the created order is a guide for the moral order. Given Jewish sensitivities to the state of impurity that incurs if one remains in a relationship with an immoral woman, the exception clause speaks to that issue. The exception clause is therefore another concession to the fallen state of humanity. Divorce, for whatever

reason, must always be viewed as a tragic failure and a serious perversion of God's original intention regarding marriage.

Relevance of Jesus' Teaching on Divorce

The explicated text reveals that Christ teaches divorce as that which originates as an accommodation to man's sin that violates God's original purpose for the intimate unity and permanence of the marriage bond (Gen. 2:24). He taught that God's law allowed divorce only because of "hardness of heart" (Matt. 19:8). Legal divorce was a concession for the faithful partner due to the sexual sin or abandonment by the sinning partner, so that the faithful partner was no longer bound to the marriage (Matt. 5:32; 1st Cor. 7:12-15). For Jesus Genesis 1 and 2; not Deuteronomy 24 provides the primary framework for understanding the covenant of marriage. One of the problems with the Pharisaic fixation on Deuteronomy 24 is that they neglected the normative vision for marriage as revealed in the creation story.

Jesus does agree that Moses permitted divorce. But he makes two significant observations regarding the ruling that Moses made: (1) divorce was a concession which resulted from the rebellious attitude of the Jewish people, and (2) it is contrary to God's original intention in creation. Therefore, the Torah should not be read as either endorsing or mandating the practice of divorce. This connotes that the law of divorce which Moses introduced was made invalid by the prior law of creation.

Matthew's exception clause has been treated in much the same way today. Preoccupation with the grounds for severing a marital union has often been done at the expense of affirming the permanently binding commitment of marriage. It is clear from the discourse that divorce is permitted in some situations, believers must remember that Jesus' discourse here is to correct the Jews' idea that they could divorce one another "for any cause at all" (Matt. 19:3), and to show them the gravity of pursuing a sinful divorce.

Those who take seriously God's reign will understand the marital union in terms of God's original creative will. Christians should not consider divorce except in specific circumstances and even in those circumstances it should only be pursued reluctantly because there is no other recourse. Christian intent ought to be the enhancement and improvement of marriage rather than the contemplation of how to avoid marital commitments. While being sensitive to human frailty and failure Christians must not dilute Jesus' vision of marriage as a permanent one-flesh union that cannot be dissolved except by the most grievous of circumstances. When divorce happens Christians must exhibit a redemptive response that seeks to love, encourage, and rebuild shattered lives.

Conclusion

The center of Christianity is the teaching of God's mercy, love and forgiveness; the New Testament shows that Jesus forgave people who had done wrong. Suffice to the fact that God himself established the marriage institution in the beginning; the research observes and concludes that God's ideal for marriage remains one man and one woman for life in a one-flesh relationship. The Biblical basis for marriage is for life; in other words, husband and wife (couple) become 'one flesh' when they get married. The analysis made in this discourse reveals that divorce is not God's ideal (ordination), as it is separating those that God has joined together. Jesus makes it clear that the Jewish practice based on Deuteronomy 24:1 is never an ordination but a permission; which stands succinctly in the basis of marital unfaithfulness. From the discourse of the analysis of the analyzed text; divorce is a vice that affects and threatens the success of Christian home (spouses live, siblings, church, colleagues and most especially innocent children). Therefore, divorce goes against God's ideal plan for marriage as explicitly seen from the analyzed portion of the Scripture; though permitted, it was not ordained by God.

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