

THE CONCEPT OF DIVORCE IN MATTHEW 19: 3-9 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS

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ABSTRACT

Divorce has become so rampant. Nowadays, divorce is a popular occurrence among many people. This high divorce rate in Nigeria today is having a devastating effect on the society in general, and on the church in particular. This ugly situation and the diversity in contemporary views regarding divorce in Matthew 19: 3-9, call for attention. In the light of the above, this paper has attempted to examine Jesus' teaching on divorce which was then applied to the current situation. The methodology for this research work was a historical interpretation of Matthew 19:3-9 where Jesus taught on divorce. The essay is an exegetical research involving biblical passage. The Bible, therefore, was the main source. This was supplemented by dictionaries, encyclopedias, Bible dictionaries, commentaries and concordances, journals and articles.

A review of relevant literature on the concept of divorce in Old and New Testaments and in Nigeria, were done. It was discovered that Jesus never gave any concession for divorce, rather, the words "except for fornication" are an interpolation introduced by Jewish Christians to modify the excessive strictness of the original utterance; Jesus himself forbade divorce altogether.

Hence, Christians should hold steadfastly to the ideal of marriage set forth by the Lord Jesus Christ, that marriage be permanent and indissoluble. The response of Christians to the problem of divorce must begin where Christ Himself began, with the institution of marriage. The weight of Jesus' response to contemporary questions concerning divorce rested not on what may or may not be justifiable reasons for dissolving the marital union, but on the origin of marriage in creation. Contemporary Nigerian Christians must, therefore, underscore the fact that Jesus never gave any

concession for divorce. This will definitely bring a drastic decrease in the high rate of divorce.

5.2. CONCLUSION

Thus far, this thesis has focused on Jesus' concept of divorce studied by means of exegetical analysis of Matthew 19:3-9. The occasion of Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:3-9 was a question about the interpretation of the Mosaic Law found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, where a man is allowed to divorce his wife if some "unseemly thing" is found in her. Jesus' response to all of this is that divorce was allowed by Moses- but only because of the hardness of the human heart. It was never the will of God, only permitted. Rather than abolishing the Law, Jesus moves to another passage, Genesis 2- weightier passage than Deuteronomy.

In returning to the original purpose of marriage in Genesis 1: 27; 2: 24, the principle that is drawn shows that sexual union is exclusive and unbreakable. Thus divorce is an action contrary to the pattern of "one man, one woman, and one lifetime" revealed by God at creation. Divorce was not *commanded* but *allowed*, and that concession was an accommodation to human hardness of heart. Jesus, therefore, refuses to allow a necessary concession to human sinfulness to be elevated into a divine principle.

With the reading of verse 9: "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery," some scholars argue that Jesus approves of divorce in the case of sexual immorality. Does Jesus really approve of divorce in any circumstance? What does *πορνεία* actually mean? Does it really mean "adultery"? And if Jesus actually said anything of such, he would have made use of the word *μοιχεία* (adultery) not *πορνεία* (fornication). The two words fornication (*πορνεία*) and adultery (*μοιχεία*) are repeatedly used in distinction from each other in the New Testament (see, Matthew 15:19). Again, if the exceptive clause "except for fornication," actually proceeded from the mouth of Jesus, it should be

understood in the light of marriage within the forbidden degrees (see, Lev. 18:16-18), in which the marriage is already null and void.

The implication of the foregoing for contemporary Nigerian Christians is that divorce is absolutely prohibited by Jesus. Hence, contemporary Nigerian Christians must put the teaching of Jesus on divorce in Matthew 19:3-9 into its proper content. Contemporary Nigerian Christians should underscore God's intention that marriage be permanent and indissoluble.

5.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Having carried out a study of Jesus' concept of divorce, it is pertinent to make the following recommendations.

When Jesus was faced with difficulty due to the questions asked by the Pharisees, he appealed to the foundation of eternal principle. Jesus' statement is absolute and unambiguous. Jesus states that at the time of the world's creation, prior to God delivering the Mosaic Law, divorce was not allowed. In the same vein, when Christians are in doubt or difficulty, they are not to appeal to teachers who are interpreters; to a lawgiver who was the lawgiver of an age, and whose ethical code has been superseded by a higher; Christians are rather to make their appeals to divine intention.

The Christian response to the problem of divorce must begin where Christ Himself began, with the institution of marriage. The weight of Jesus' response to contemporary questions concerning divorce and remarriage rested not on what may or may not be justifiable reasons for dissolving the marital union, but on the origin of marriage in creation. The principle "What God has joined together let not man put asunder" holds true according to the Scriptures "from the beginning," when the

Creator "made them male and female" (Gen. 1:27) 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" (Gen. 2:24). At a time when divorce was commonplace and legitimized even on Biblical grounds (Deuteronomy 24), Jesus taught "but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). Christians, therefore, must look first to God's original intent for the estate of marriage and seek to know why God wills this union to remain permanently inviolate.

Furthermore, it is highly necessary to distinguish between the sufferance or toleration of divorce, on the one hand, and divine approval or sanction, on the other. Toleration or sufferance as granted or conceded is not spoken of in connection with what is intrinsically right or desirable. It is this line of distinction that underlies or is expressed in the treatment Jesus provides on the question of divorce.

Divorce should not be sought because the marriage is no longer convenient for one. Marriage is consummated by God himself, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." Hence, it should be viewed as something much deeper than either human convenience or social convention.

All believers are called to turn away from hardness of heart, to work on their marriages, to grant forgiveness and new beginnings, and to set an example of what a Christian marriage is all about. Where conditions are unhealthy, the Christian solution is to change the conditions, but not the partner. Even in cases that seem to be hopeless, the Lord who has risen from the dead can also resurrect marriages to new life.

In this vein, it is true that most cases of divorce are results of inconsiderate marriages. Hence, marriage should never be embarked upon unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, but soberly, discreetly, and with due consideration. To guard against

divorce, marriage which is the most intimate union God ever provided for human beings must be entered thoughtfully.

When a marriage falls apart, the church is always affected. Therefore, the church must apply preventive care in order to prevent spouses from getting divorced, and it must react in a balanced and biblical way if a marriage is threatened or a couple has been divorced. Not to react at all may be irresponsible. The goal of the church's involvement must be to help, to bring about healing, and to assist those who otherwise may become lost. In some cases, this may include church discipline and removing a person from church membership.

Finally, Nigerian biblical scholars are encouraged to carry out exegetical researches on this subject matter, to provide all important answers to many burning questions regarding divorce. Divorce is really devastating our society in general, and the church in particular.