

The Joy of Marriage

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Introduction

The joy of marriage is something that we often think of when we attend weddings or see a happy couple walking in the park. These days, we are forced to revisit the concept sometimes when we conduct burials or console each other during funerals. I have sat at weddings, observed the joy of the new union, and questioned the sustainability of that joy. Will the joy at the wedding mirror the joy in the marriage or will it be cut short as the couple succumbs to the unrelenting assault of HIV and AIDS?

Background

Our continent threatens to snap under a divisive, diffusive, and destructive bloodthirsty monster and epidemic (HIV and AIDS) that is ravaging and claiming millions of lives annually, leaving a pathetic trail of millions of orphans and threatening development by swallowing man hours and robbing progress and creativity. We are reliably informed that in sub Saharan Africa, HIV infection rates account for 70% of the total world HIV infection. A tragic statistic indeed. We have also learned that multiple concurrent partnerships are the main driver of HIV infections in southern Africa, and therefore, the challenge is clearly ours as the Church because we are best placed to intervene.

This is why the MCP consultation meeting is important to me because it brings to mind Rejoice, my cousin; Patrick, my brother; and Tsitsi, who all fit the profile of most women who call me for prayer and counsel and sometimes ask me to go with them to the New Start Center for HIV testing. The struggle against HIV is a real one. We each have in some way been affected by it. We have either buried a colleague, or visited a congregant in hospital, or cried with an infected relative. Yet the fight against HIV will be won first not in the laboratories of America and the rest of the West, but by nations, cultures and stakeholders in Africa as we come up with homegrown contextualized solutions to our unique circumstance.

Kathy Hegeman and her team at Emory University did a research in Zimbabwe and found out that as much as 22% of the HIV infection rate was among “married, lifetime monogamous women in a nationally representative sample of Zimbabweans aged 15–29 years. The latter suggests ... HIV risk largely appears related to the partner’s past and present sexual behavior, resulting in limited ability for married women to protect themselves from infection. Overall, lifetime monogamy offers insufficient protection for women” unless the men are also monogamous (and vice versa).

In a nation that is 82% Christian, the mathematics simply does not add up. Our African worldview is largely the cause and reason for our woes, from poor leadership to bad governance, from coups to tribal wars, and from HIV infections to rampant corruption.

From the Beginning It Was Not So

When dealing with questions of deviations from the norm regarding marriage, Jesus said, “from the beginning it was not so.” (Matthew 19:8) The beginning was the very beginning of the

institution, before the fall of man and the resultant deviations. Jesus wanted the hearer to clearly understand that after the fall of man, what is seen is already a deviation from the norm, from what was in the beginning. Therefore, marriage in the socio-historic context reveals to us marriage as interpreted by culture, culture which is fallen and must be redeemed. Hence, we see MCPs in the socio- historic context of the bible as in the following examples: Abraham with Sarah and Hagar; Jacob with Leah, Rachel, and their two maids Zilpah and Bilhah; David with Bethsheba, Michal, Abigail and others; and Solomon with thousands of female partners.

In the African context, like in any other time and day after the fall of man, there are elements in our worldview that sanction MCPs. The African worldview is not yet fully Christian. In too many cases, Christianity was simply added to traditional African religion. The majority of Africans are mere adherents of Christianity and not real converts; they have adapted Christianity to traditional religion.

The beginning, therefore, takes center stage, and it is important to explore what was in the beginning, the intent in the mind of God regarding marriage. Any other standard is below par.

Definition of Marriage

Marriage is the *lawful* union or coming together of *two heterosexual* people out of *mutual love* and *agreement* for the purpose of establishing a *family*.

The dimensions of lawfulness are important in our consideration: People have to be married lawfully according to the laws of the kingdom of God. It is not about the culture of the people, or what they believe. It is about what is acceptable in the kingdom. It has to be lawful in the courts in the context of the nation where the people get married. There is a legal framework for marriage in each nation. It is important to consider the legal framework within the context of the laws of the kingdom of God, the laws of the latter being the governing principles because in some nations, some laws are contrary to the kingdom of God, potentially sanctioning polygamy or illicit sex or MCPs.

The Sanctity of Marriage

God, not man, initiated marriage. Marriage is a creation of the Almighty, divinely instituted by him and sanctified by Jesus Christ. When God said it is not good for man to be alone, Man already had fellowship with God. He enjoyed the company of all the created animals and had responsibilities in taking care of the garden which would have kept him preoccupied. Yet God saw a need for him to have a suitable companion. Hence the creation of Eve. The woman was a direct divine response to a need within man which man himself was oblivious to. Therefore the marital blueprint must and should only come from God and his Word.

The divine institution of marriage was established as the basic building block of the human race. A valid question is: If we are killing each other with the blade of the HIV and AIDS scourge, if we are forced to bury 700 people weekly in the name of holy matrimony, are we still building the human race or annihilating it?

Before there were children or cities or nations, the perfect relationship was marriage. The man and the woman were complete with each other. The man represented life and the woman

represented love. They bonded with perfect coalescence of spirit, soul, and body. Recreation wasn't badminton or tennis or hiking or fishing. It was sex.

The purpose of the biblical marriage was and is to glorify God by becoming like him (Genesis 1:26-28, 31). God is a family of one Spirit. Faithfulness in marriage and becoming one flesh teaches us how to become one Spirit with the Almighty (I Corinthians 6:15-20). God joins together husband and wife, just as he joined Adam and Eve together (Matthew 19:1-6). Notice that God made *twain one*. Monogamy (one man and one woman) is the divine rule. Involvement of MCPs in a marriage dishonors God the creator of the marriage.

Reflecting on the above-mentioned two scriptural passages, we find that God said, "Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves." We are God's image and likeness in a special way because of our spiritual nature. The image of God is in us precisely as male and female. It takes both sexes to truly reflect how we are the image of God. When men and women look at each other, they should see a reflection of God.

Genesis 2:18-25 implies that the union of man and woman is the full image of God. Both of them together express the full meaning of what it means to be in the likeness of God. This union is so important that it takes precedence over the sacred bond between parents and children, and this union has a deep sexual dimension, which is an intrinsic and natural part of it.

When the Church speaks of "vocation," it means a calling out to each person to accomplish a task preordained by God in the co-redemption of the world. The highest joy in the life of a Christian is searching out, discovering, and pursuing the purpose for which God called him or her into existence. Our calling, according to scripture, is more about our character and the kind of person we are than simply our job description. The idea of vocation implies and demands a larger design to life. There is only one fundamental Christian vocation, and no Christian, no matter what path he or she takes, can escape it. We are all called to go on the road that leads to union with God, and for most of the people in the Church, the road they take to that union is that of Christian marriage.

The modern secular world rarely even uses the word *vocation*. And when it does, vocation is drained of its sacred resonance and becomes merely a synonym for a craft or profession. In a Christian marriage, vocation takes an even special meaning. The blessing found in the ancient Gregorian Sacramentary best describes it thus: "Oh God, you consecrated the union of marriage by a mystery so profound as to prefigure in the marriage covenant the sacrament of Christ and the Church."

To put it in the simplest and boldest terms, marriage was God's best and brightest idea. Marriage was the primordial sacrament. It was in our spouse and in our children that God intended to become visible to us. The family was the Church and the sacraments, as it were, and living in the marriage context was meant to be a delightful way in which to grow closer to God. Marriage was to be the place where the physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of our personalities could reach full development. From our first parents would have grown a mighty family that expressed ever more richly the beauty of God. God intended us to draw close to him

by seeing him reflected in our spouses and in our children. By loving them, we would be loving God. Marriage was God's best and brightest idea in creating human beings.

Through marriage each spouse was to add value to the other. To be a friend and closest companion for each other and to minister to the other spouse's needs. I hear a lot of overtones of lack of satisfaction that is inconsistent with the teaching of scripture. We are there to meet the other's need as opposed to getting our needs met. Is this not what Christ modeled as quoted in Ephesians 5:22? Is that reference rather not supposed to challenge the man and the woman to seek the other's highest good? God said being alone was not good because we would miss out on the added value of companionship, ministry and needs being met. Does the bible not teach that it is more blessed to give than to receive?

Love as described in 1 Corinthians 13 must be the underlying principle in the home and all the relationships therein including marriage. All discipline and parental authority should be exercised in love and for the purpose of building Christian character. I often tell couples, "If you love your spouse with less than the agape love, then you are loving him or her less than God would expect of you."

Another purpose for marriage was to produce godly offspring (Genesis 1:28; Malachi 2:15). At the beginning of human history, God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and to fill the earth. The worldview focuses on child bearing, but not on the health and well-being of the children and the well-being of the parents. Marriage is participation in God's continued creation through the procreation of children. We believe that every life that comes into the world must be considered as a wonderful gift from God, and should be accepted and loved and cared for by the parents. Christian parenthood is a blessed opportunity and a solemn responsibility. Parents are the first teachers and from their example come the greatest learning experiences for children and teenagers. As our youth face the complex problems, temptations and opportunities of our day, there is a greater need for parents to guide children and to help them evaluate and make Christian choices (I Thessalonians 5:21-22). Parents must have a faith that is real. They need to interpret their faith in language and lifestyle that their children can understand. A spirit of family togetherness in worship, work, recreation, and hobbies is encouraged.

Marriage is meant to create a unit for the purposes of the kingdom of God. The bible highlights that two is better than one and a threefold chord is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

The Foundation of Marriage in the Backdrop of MCPs

From Genesis to Revelation, the bible's dominant theme is faithfulness in marriage. From Noah, Moses, Jeremiah, Malachi, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the apostles Paul and John, the message has been to stress the sanctity of marriage. God's laws in both testaments are designed to protect marriage and the family. From the Garden of Eden to the New Heavens and New Earth, God's purpose for mankind is summed up by holy marriage.

The bible clearly shows that marriage is a covenant. By paralleling the relationship that Jesus has with the Church to marriage, marriage is also qualified as an irrevocable covenant. It is for this reason God hates divorce and Jesus warns, "What God has joined together let no man put asunder." (Matthew 19: 5) Let us consider that the biblical procedure for covenants was that the parties would cut the animals, vertically lay them on either side, and walk between them in figure

8 configuration while discussing the terms of the covenant. Reference to a vow was made that indicated how God swore by himself because there was none greater. By invoking God's blessing, the inference becomes that covenanters are leaning on a higher unchanging power to keep the terms of the covenant. Has the Church done a good job to ascertain that those participating understand the marriage covenant? In the bible, a prerequisite for the covenant's sacrifice was the priest's validation of the purity of the animals. Does this sanction the Church's vigilance against MCP as opposed to an indifferent or uncommitted participation?

In marriage, there is also a *leaving and cleaving* implied by Genesis 2:21-24. Man is supposed to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. This leaving is in all dimensions, i.e., physically, emotionally, financially, and psychologically. May I suggest that this leaving should also include leaving communal autonomy, the clan, the aunt, the uncle, the peers, the culture and the gospel of societal norms that sponsors ungodly illicit MCPs and challenges mutual monogamy.

Threefold Oneness

The core meaning of *cleaving* is a threefold oneness. Since man is tripartite, i.e., spirit, soul and body, then cleaving is meant to occur at the same tripartite dimensions. There should be the unique product of spirit oneness, soul oneness and body oneness that reflects the very nature of Elohim, the pluralistic God in concert with himself. Spirit oneness is revealed in genuine conversion of both spouses; forging common Christian traditions; and unity in exercising graces, in bible study, in prayer, in ministry, and in witnessing. As both parties seek to please God and glorify him and honor him, the unity of purpose and pursuit brings them into a oneness with God and each other.

Soul oneness is revealed in commonality of interests, the couple advantage, building friendship by acquaintance, commitment, care, equality, the joy of sharing, and sensitivity to each other's needs. The soul comprises of the thoughts, the will, and the emotions. There has to be an emotional and an intellectual dimension to marriage. The intellectual dimension should challenge people to engage their full faculties, think with their brain and not their genitals.

Body oneness is expressed on the marriage bed in the uniqueness of marital sex. Man was created for a much higher level of existence than animals, in as much as he was created for communion with God. According to the bible, sex life implies obligations; it demands discipline and restraint. When it is misused, it necessitates the admission of guilt and the asking of forgiveness. But the apology may not eliminate the consequence. The creation story indicates how husband and wife completely belong to each other, and how openness and mutual trust are necessary in the free sharing of life's experiences with one another for the fellowship God intended for them (Genesis 2: 21-25). This fellowship is symbolized and nourished by the sexual union. Inherent in this wonderful relationship is a sacredness and a sanctity that need to be held in fear and trembling. This is part of God's wonderful creation in which he is glorified only in marriage.

Oftentimes, men argue that monogamy and faithfulness to one marriage partner is impractical. Variety is the spice of life, they say. Expecting man to be faithful to one woman is like expecting man to have chicken dinner for the rest of his life, others exclaim. May I highlight that there are

many recipes for the chicken - baked chicken, grilled chicken, roasted chicken, deep fried chicken, stewed chicken, curried chicken, chicken Ala King, chicken cordon bleu, chicken schnitzel, chicken masala, chicken tika, chicken tibes etc. I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

It is in seeking this intended goal of threefold union that there is the added advantage of discovery of deeper depths and higher heights of the same one person. My pastor used to say a woman is as complex, deep and vast as a world - a lifetime is simply not enough to explore and discover her. Unfortunately, most people only seek physical union. They never pursue the goals of mutual deep affection in phileo, which is friendship, love, and deep unconditional love as expressed in the agape love. Sadly, they limit themselves and sentence themselves to the sad equivalent of an imperfect marriage experience. Getting to know each other, romance, courtship, and the real experience of being naked and unashamed is the key to holy monogamy for life.

Unprecedented Challenges to Marriage

From the Garden of Eden to the sons of Cain, the days of Noah, Abraham and Hagar, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jacob and his famous four partners, unfaithful Israel, King Herod, the Romans, King Henry VIII, and especially today, mankind has defiled, perverted, and been a total failure in living up to faithfulness in marriage. Divorce, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, and disobedient children are so prevalent today that a faithful marriage and a wholesome, happy family is a rarity. Faithfulness in marriage is not proclaimed or practiced in most churches, even evangelical churches. Something this important is often given very little time and attention.

Noah, Lot, Moses, Jeremiah and Malachi preached against marital infidelity, divorce, and sexual perversion. They preached the gospel message of Hebrews 4:2. They preached monogamy for both parties. Malachi prophesied that the forerunner of the Messiah, Elijah, would preach the same message, "He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country" (Malachi 4:6). John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:15-17) to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. What does this mean? How are fathers separated from their children except through divorce or an unhappy marriage? Preaching against divorce and remarriage, and favoring monogamy for life, faithfulness, and love - this is the true Elijah message.

John the Baptist preached the Elijah message and lost his head preaching it (Mark 6:14-29). Josephus reports that Herod divorced Aretas his first wife and then married Herodias, his half-brother Philip's wife (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18:5:1). When John said this was not lawful according to the Creator's laws, Herodias became incensed and caused John to be beheaded. If God doesn't hold unconverted people responsible for keeping his laws of marriage, then John certainly died in vain! Where is the modern day Elijah who has the courage to tell a political leader that he is living in adultery?

Jesus and Paul preached marital faithfulness. Those faithful in marriage during this life [a type of marriage to Christ (Ephesians 5:22-23)] demonstrate the faithfulness required for the eternal marriage to Christ (Revelation 19:5-9). Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage is to be honored by all, and husbands and wives must be faithful to each other. God will judge those who are immoral and those who commit adultery."

Therefore, we urgently need biblical values in word and deed. We need a biblical worldview that provides us with norms or guidelines for every aspect of life – spiritual, social, economic, political, cultural, intellectual, and moral.

African Culture and Worldviews

Christianity is growing at an astounding rate in Africa. The current estimates of Christians in the continent are in the excess of 400 million. In spite of the numbers, Christians have little impact on the political, social, and economic situation in the continent. The Christianity we received from the West emphasized a spiritual aspect of life that sometimes neglected or excluded intellectual and social affairs by African Christians. They failed to apply the whole gospel to the whole of life. They read the Word of God selectively, placing emphasis on spiritual salvation and neglecting those sections of the bible that speak of justice, peace, and material well-being.

Kinoti (1994)¹ suggests that the type of African Christianity is man centered tailored to meet human needs, particularly spiritual and emotional needs. True biblical Christianity, however, is rather God centered. It emphasizes that the will of God should be obeyed in our entire life. The greatest challenge facing Christianity in Africa today is how to teach and live by the whole Word of God. We need a holistic Christianity, one that emphasizes full-time service to God, no matter what our work or profession is: *Corum Deo*.

The dominant form of Christianity in Africa can be described in the following terms:
Dualistic: A division between a sacred or private domain (faith, the church) and a secular or public sphere (the rest of life) in which the bible faith and the church has no influence.

The two kinds of dualism that plague Africans are on the one hand an evangelistic and piestic dualism that calls for an inward Christianity that fails to apply the gospel to the whole life, and on the other hand, the liberal or humanistic form of dualism which calls for a political and social Christianity that lacks the personal salvation and transformation through faith in Christ Jesus.

The Kingdom Model

We already have many churches and Christians in Africa. What we urgently need is a fundamental conversion and the much broader kingdom perspective of the bible. A real Christian worldview still has to be developed in black Africa. It will be a worldview with the correct focus or religious direction (real deep conversion) as well as the correct *ocopus* (serving God in every area of life) or *Corum Deo* (the viewing of life and vocation as a unit spelt in giving glory to God and serving him).

Every aspect of African worldview is colored by its emphasis on community. It has a communalistic notion of religion, being human, and also of time. It does not regard the laws that give guidance and direction to life as commandments of a Supreme Being or God. While the West favors individual autonomy, Africa derives its norms from community, that is, communal autonomy. It may be called the law of kinship. The family, the clan or the tribe, and all those related by ties of blood are the highest law determining what is good or bad.

¹ Kinoti, G. (1994). *Hope for Africa and what the Christian can do*. Nairobi: AISRED.

In other words, if society sanctions it, then it is okay. If a mother, a cousin or friends accept a married man's girlfriend, then it is acceptable. Many people do things because others are doing them. It is this notion that hinders us from challenging the status quo. It is common in Zimbabwe for *tete* or aunt to advise a girl who is getting married that her man shall be unfaithful – it is explained as an unquestionable male tendency. The young man, despite the boisterous tongues he speaks in at church, will also be advised by his *sekuru* or uncle that a real man will wait, but the true man will have a small house on the side. That is communal autonomy. Even the term *small house* is a communal autonomy term; it is not prohibitive but sanctioning. It sanctions mistresses and infidelity in the marriage.

In a realistic Christian worldview, God and his Word are the absolute authority that sanction deed or creed. The real biblical view emphasizes our human responsibility in the present to reform the world. Reformation in essence can be described as a return to the correct norms applicable to the different aspects of our lives. Both the individual autonomy of the West and communal autonomy of the African worldview imply a subjectivist view of God's will. Instead of obeying God's laws, men elevate themselves to the law. We as Christians have to respond to any autonomy with the biblical standard of theonomy stemming from God's theocracy.

The Church is Called to Reform Culture

Both the Old and New Testaments are given to us in the words and histories of the different people through many ages. It is not a culture free revelation. It is always embodied in cultural clothes or forms. God met Israel in their culture. They were not without a culture. Apart from their own language, they also had their own culturally defined family life, laws, government, ways of commerce, and types of worship. God did not provide them with a sacred language or culture.

The Old Testament accounts appear in the clothes of the near East. In the New Testament, especially in the Book of Acts, we see the gradual transition from an embodiment of the gospel in the culture of Judaism to a more western, Hellenistic form - the dominant culture of the Roman Empire. The Gospel associated itself with different cultures, never to be domesticated nor become the captive of these cultures, but to liberate them. Instead of conformity to culture, there should be the Roman 12 model of reformation or transformation of culture. We have the same kind of mandate that Ezra had of reforming Israel after religious syncretism emanating from mixed worldviews after the Babylonian culture crept into Israel during the 400 silent years.

Jesus gives the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 as the mission of the Church. The key word is *matheo* meaning to make disciples. It highlights that the Church's mandate is to disciple the nations. That is the Kingdom model. Discipleship and the Kingdom should be the object, not a church. We are responsible for nations not buildings.

How Do We Reform Culture?

Victor Babajide Cole² sites that at times, the defective ways in which pastoral leaders are trained are the cause of Africa's problems. To what extent are the Church leaders equipped to be agents

² Cole, V.B. (1999). *Training for the ministry*.

of change and transformation? To what extent can they engage as players to spearhead a reformation? Has this not been the issue of the Church's failure, especially, when today the Great Commission is quoted as the Great Omission?

There must be intentional, targeted, and deliberate training of all levels of society, especially the children. Why wait until three months prior to the wedding when you have had the child's whole life to teach him or her? If marriage is that important to God, are we obeying him when we do not train up our children in the way that they should go so that they can adhere to monogamy when they grow up? Likewise, we should teach the middle-aged how to manage and cope with the challenges of the middle years and their impact to faithfulness in the marriage.

Yes, marriage as God intended it to be - bible based, biblically normative, informed by God and his Word -is the Church's only and main intervention to curb HIV infection and the epidemic. However, if both parties are not monogamous; if we do not address issues regarding worldview that sponsor illicit affairs and unfaithfulness in the marriage; if the Church is not vigilant and willing to be the Church in the spirit of Elijah; if we are not willing to disciple the nations and our communities; if we are not willing to bring a kingdom culture to replace those areas and elements of our culture that are wrong and contrary to the Word of God and the sanctity of marriage; if we are not willing to take God's norms as the normative; if we are not willing to teach and train our young in their development years because values take time to develop; if we are not willing to transform paradigms, then we can forget about the effectiveness of such an intervention as we will be sending our sons and daughters to an HIV grave in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and in holy matrimony.

Africa has lost the previous century. But let us not succumb to Afro-pessimism. Africa can be reborn; it can experience a real renaissance. I have often said, though, that before we can talk about a renaissance, there must be a reformation.