

The Complementarity of man and woman in the African Christian Context

Most Rev. Nicholas D. Okoh, Archbishop, Metropolitan and Primate of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion)

Christian marriage in Africa faces the tension which marriages elsewhere experience. This includes complementarianism, which is the view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family, religious leadership, etc. It is based on the Creation in which God created them “male and female”. Men and women are designed to be different physiologically, emotionally and otherwise with the purpose of bringing different gifts to a relationship. In marriage, the complementarity of husband and wife is expressed very clearly in the act of conjugal love, having children, and fathering and mothering. As William Frey says:

“Today’s controversies are the logical and inevitable outcome of something that began a generation ago, the so-called sexual revolution. That revolution has not been bloodless nor painless. It has left a large number of wounded veterans. Who can count the broken marriages, the countless teen-age pregnancies, and the millions of convenience-motivated abortions?”ⁱ

Patricia Morgan corroborates that with this quotation from her recent book: “...the sexual revolution is to the family what communism is to the market. Both entail ... assaults on core institutions of civil society, leading to human misery that the state is not equipped to put right... in both cases, citizens lose the buffer of an intermediate form of social order... resulting in ... defencelessness in the face of state power”ⁱⁱ The family is, and has always been, this buffer. As God’s spiritual and moral agent in the world, the Church must continue to be the prophetic voice of God’s truth in the World, supporting the family.

The pressure on Christian marriage in Africa does not just replicate the pressures of western secular and postmodern revisionism of Christian tenets; it particularly involves reconciling the competing claims of our African tradition, the Gospel and modernity. It involves issues like the complementarity of a man and woman in love, equality, monogamy, polygamy, indissolubility and mutual responsibility. Craig Blomberg identifies the debate of gender roles as one of the most volatile, not just in the Christian church but also in marriage, and advocates complementarity of man and woman in the home, which is an extension of the Church. On the debate about male headship in the home he argues that “while a few writers entirely separate the issues of home and church, most agree that the [church] was initially modelled on the [home]. If we can learn more about God’s design for husbands and wives, we should be able to make some valid inferences about men’s and women’s roles in the gathered community of believers”ⁱⁱⁱ. Headship of the family is reserved for the man; this applies both to Christian and Traditional marriage and family and is not debatable.

In Africa, Christian (Church) marriage finds, in shared values, convergence with African traditional marriage. Adrian Hasting notes that “almost everywhere the vast majority of

church marriages have been preceded or followed by a customary marriage at least the transference of bride wealth or other gifts”^{iv}. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, the Igba-Nkwu (traditional marriage ceremony) is compulsory for all prospective couples, as this brings the families and communities together to recognise and give their blessings to the union. The bride thence occupies a privileged and honoured complementary status as Oriakwu (she that enjoys the wealth of the husband) and Odoziakwu (She that helps to build up the wealth).

In Africa Marriage is regarded as a God-given institution for the continuation of society and the human race through the family unit^v. Marriage is a covenant between Man and Woman under the witness of God (Malachi 2:14), and the community. It is normally lifelong and indissoluble, even though divorce is on the increase. Marriage goes beyond the married couple; it involves extended families and even their communities. Efforts are made by parents to investigate the compatibility of intending couples in all ramifications before approving of the marriage. Whether it’s in African Traditional marriage or Christian marriage, the complementarity of man and woman has always existed and has been taken very seriously.

According to John Akao, “When Christian marriage made its debut, it was warmly welcomed because it was easy to integrate it into our culture...the integrating of Christianity and culture is one reason the church was not dispossessed when the colonialists left...”^{vi}

Stephen Noll observes that “a society or culture is constituted by the intertwining of customs and traditions, morals and laws”^{vii} and whereas divine law as enshrined in the Holy Bible forms the Christian standard for marriage, traditional African marriage is derived from religious rites, taboos and proverbs. There have been culture clashes especially on the practice of polygamy, but where such a clash occurs between the Gospel and Culture, Culture bows to the Gospel. The Church of Nigeria upholds monogamy as ideal marriage between Man and Woman, although some members of the church are polygamists.

African Christianity frowns at subjugating the Gospel to the culture of any given people and identifies such action as a blight caused by the revisionist actions of western churches who strive to reinterpret Marriage in a manner incompatible with the authority of Scripture. In this vein, the Church of Nigeria has been vocal in resisting the advocacy and export of homosexual practice and same sex marriage as an acceptable lifestyle by western Churches. We have solidly supported the traditional Anglican position on the issue of sexuality in marriage set out in the 1998 Lambeth Resolution 1.10 and the GAFCON Jerusalem Declaration.

In our African culture, homosexuality is a taboo. Steven Noll rightly observes that “the difference in the challenges to marriage in Africa and the West cannot be more strikingly portrayed than by the fact that in the same year the British parliament legalized same-sex marriage, its former colonies, Nigeria and Uganda, passed stronger laws against homosexuality and same-sex marriage.”^{viii}

Marriage is for the bringing up of children in the knowledge and fear of God; and the Bible is clear that one reason God instituted marriage is for the production of Godly children (Malachi 2: 15). We see that, the emotional nature of Man (as the disciplinarian and leader) and

Woman (the more compassionate and care-giver) complement each other in the discipline and nurture of children in the family.

Marriage is for mutual support and lifelong fidelity; vows made by the man and woman in the name of God commit them to ‘love, comfort, honour and to protect each other in sickness and in health, poverty and prosperity, forsaking all others, and being faithful to each other as long as both shall live’.

Finally, marriage itself is presented as symbolizing and expressing the sacramental, graceful and sacrificial relationship between Christ and His church; couples are urged to live sacrificially for each other in mutual respect, the man is to love his wife and give his life for her as Christ did for the church, while the woman is to submit to the husband as the head of the home as Christ is head of the church.

Our recommendation is that, in order to save marriage in the postmodern world, there is a need to rediscover the complementarity of man and woman. This means consciously reversing philosophies and actions introduced by church and state through legislation, biblical revisionism and unguarded social liberty camouflaging under the banner of human rights. The Church must lead societies in returning to the Biblical pattern of marriage contracted under God, patterned after His ordinance; a union of man and woman who complement each other in shared but defined roles, developed as a unit of family for procreation of children which is necessary for the sustenance of human society. By contrast, even in the revisionist west, it is no longer generally agreed that children adopted by homosexual partners come out un-impacted^{ix,x}.

In conclusion, we believe Christian marriage should be a model and means for ministry of the Church and for the advancement of the kingdom of God on earth. We note that Scripture is the Word of God, it challenges, rebukes and shapes all cultures, including African culture; and yet we also find that at the deepest level there is a convergence of our African cultural experience and the teaching of the Bible – that men and women are not mere individuals, but complementary in Marriage, family and church.

Posted December 24, 2014

ⁱ William C. Frey, ‘Foreword’ to Stephen Noll, “*The Contemporary Challenges to Marriage in Africa and the West*” GAFCON Publications, June 2014.

ⁱⁱ S. Sugrue, *Soft Despotism*, cited in Patricia Morgan, *The Marriage Files*, (London: Wilberforce Publications Ltd., 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ Craig Blomberg, “*Women in Ministry: A Complementarian perspective*” in Stanley N. Gundry et.al. Eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), p. 173.

^{iv} Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1974), p. 46.

^v John Akao, “Marriage under contemporary challenges in Africa”, paper presented to House of Bishops, Church of Nigeria, 10th January 2014.

^{vi} Akao.

^{vii} Stephen Noll, “The Contemporary Challenges to marriage in Africa and the West” GAFCON Publications, June 2014.

^{viii} Noll, “The Contemporary Challenges to marriage in Africa and the West”.

^{ix} Mark Regnerus, “How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study”, *Social Science Research* Vol 41, Issue 4 (July 2012), pp. 752-770; online at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610> (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610>)

^x Loren Marks, “Same-sex parenting and children’s outcomes: A closer examination of the American Psychological Association’s brief on lesbian and gay parenting”, *Social Science Research* Vol 41, Issue 4 (July 2012), pp. 735-751; online at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610> (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610>)