

**RECONSIDERING DIVORCE AS A PREVENTIVE MEASURE FOR DOMESTIC  
HOMICIDES IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Domestic homicides; the killing of one's spouse in Nigeria is a societal menace that is fast becoming pandemic. There have been reports of cases of husbands killing and maiming their wives in the media. What is disturbing to this writer is that among the victims and the culprits were Christians. Most of the deaths could have been avoided if the warring partners had divorced each other early enough. A couple divorcing for any reason, however, is seen as abomination in Christianity. This paper discusses the severity of domestic violence which results in homicides and suicides, and recommends the reconsideration of divorce by the church as a measure to prevent the incidences of domestic homicides in Christian marriages.*

**Keywords:** Homicide, divorce, Christian Marriage, Domestic abuse,

**Introduction**

Marital crisis is a common phenomenon in marriages. Some families handle it with maturity and manage it well. Some are not so lucky. In some cases it results in domestic violence that leaves either of the partners with bruises. There are some cases where domestic violence has resulted in the killing of either of the spouses. The effects of such extreme crisis on the children and the family at large are often devastating.

The victims and the perpetrators of this fatal violence include Christians, whose marriages are expected to be an ideal marriages guided by the doctrines and principles of Christianity. In light of this, the objective for Christian churches must be to acknowledge that the issue of domestic violence exists in a percentage of the homes represented by the people that worship in their local churches. However, it appears the Church and the Christian parents have not been showing

enough concern in providing support and safety for victims who suffer or are in physical danger due to family violence, as obvious in most cases.

### **What Is Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is a pattern of misuse of power and control used against a household member or intimate partner. It is coercion, intimidation, and control through emotional, verbal, physical, sexual, financial, religious, or other means. Tower (2016) defines domestic violence “as intentional acts of violence imposed on one partner by the other, or between adult partners, usually resulting in harm. Abusers use coercion, deception, manipulation, and humiliation to gain power over their intimate partners” (Tower .2016: 26) Faith Trust Institute (2009) states that “Domestic Violence refers to a pattern of violent and coercive behavior exercised by one adult over another in an intimate relationship. It may consist of repeated, severe beatings or more subtle forms of abuse, including threats and control”. (Faith Trust Institute. 2009: 1)

The definitions given above indicate that there are different types of domestic violence. Faith Trust Institute (2009) identifies four Basic Types of Domestic Violence. They are (1) Physical Assault: This consists of, but not limited to shoving, pushing, restraining, hitting or kicking of one’s spouse. (2) Sexual Assault: this occur any time one partner forces sexual acts that are unwanted or declined by the other partner. (3) Psychological Assault: this Includes isolation from family and friends, forced financial dependence, verbal and emotional abuse, threats, intimidation, and control over where the partner can go and what she can do. And (4) Attacks against Property and Pets: whereby property, which may include household objects, pets or treasured objects belonging to the victim are destroyed. (Faith Trust Institute. 2009: 1)

Sources of domestic violence could be internally generated or externally generated. Conflict can happen when family members have different views or beliefs that clash. The desire of one partner to have his way in anything without thinking about the feelings of the other partner could also trigger conflict. Therefore, when one’s desires grow into demands and the other gets in the way, the one judge and punish the other.

### **Domestic Abuse throughout History**

In the past, violence against women was legalized. According to early Roman law, a man could beat, divorce, or murder his wife for offenses committed by her, which besmirched his honor or threatened his property rights. These were considered private matters and were not publicly scrutinized”. (Violence Against Women Act,1994). Similarly, beating of one’s wife was initially accepted as part of the Christian doctrine. Swisher and Wekesser (1994) states that, “The Catholic Church's endorsement of "The Rules of Marriage", in the 15th century, exhorted the husband to stand as judge of his wife. He was to beat her with a stick upon her commission of an offense. According to the "Rules," beating showed a concern for the wife's soul”. They state further that “The common law in England gave a man the right to beat his wife in the interest of maintaining family discipline. The phrase, "rule of thumb", referred Domestic Abuse to the English common law, which allowed a husband to beat his wife as long as he used a stick that was no bigger than his thumb” (Swisher and Wekesser, 1994:1).

UNICEF (2001) in its study asserted that traditionally in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the beating of wives and children is widely sanctioned as a form of discipline. Therefore, in beating their-children parents believe they are instilling discipline in them, much the same way as in husbands beating their wives, who are regarded like children to be prone to indiscipline which must be curbed.

Respite, however, came the way of the women, when, according to Swisher and Wekesser (1994) “the Puritans openly banned family violence. But the laws lacked strict enforcement. It was not until the 1870's that the first state in America banned a man's right to beat his family. The laws were moderately enforced until the feminist movement of the 1960's started bringing the problems of domestic abuse to the attention of the media. By the 1980's most states had adopted legislation regarding domestic violence”. (Swisher and Wekesser ,1994:1).

Similarly in Nigeria, on May 25th 2015 the Nigerian Government, under President GoodluckEbele Jonathan signed into Law the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015. This Act, according to its title, is aimed to eliminate violence in private and public life, prohibit

all forms of violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, domestic, harmful traditional practices; discrimination against persons and to provide maximum protection and effective remedies for victims and punishment of offenders. Violence against women is an offence, and it is punishable under the law.

**Murder in Christian Marriages: samples, analyses, and common pattern.**

We shall examine 3 cases of domestic murder, among many others, which reportedly happened in Christian marriages. First, AkoladeArowolo Male, aged 31, was arrested for killing his wife TitilayoOmozoje at their Lagos residence in June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The marriage was characterized by series of crisis and violent attacks known to their parents and other family members. No one could successfully do anything to stop the crisis until it resulted in the violent murder of the wife and the subsequent death sentence of the husband, living behind, a two years old, daughter, OlamideArowolo. Akolade, the husband was a youth pastor, first with Foursquare Gospel Church, and later with Redeemed Christian Church of God. The wife, Titilayo, was a banker with Skye Bank. (Vanguard, Thursday, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014: 39-41).

Second, Henry OjochunuEkukpe who got married to his 29-year-old in 2014 has been having issues that forced the deceased out of his house for months. However, trouble started on Sunday February 14<sup>th</sup> 2016 when the pastor reportedly invited the deceased for a dialogue pretending that he wanted her back to the house. When the deceased came, her husband was said to have used a hidden knife to stab his wife, Patience, to death in the presence of their six year-old baby. He was a pastor of one of the branches of Mountain of Victory and Fire Deliverance Ministry in Benin City. Police investigations revealed a note containing ten questions the pastor left for his late wife to give answers to. Some of the questions contained in the note were: “Did you come to marry me because of money or for who I am? “In the first place, did you really come out with your own full mind? “Who gave you the order to pack your property away from our home? “Who is your adviser in this marriage that is polluting your mind against me? “Have we ever in life *gone* to beg for food ever since we got married? “Has you mother ever brought food for us to eat one day because of hunger? “Have I not told you at the beginning that I hate someone insulting me? “You always pray that God should help you to eat the fruit of your labor? “So no

man has the power to take one's life but today we are going together. "So how do you feel now?" (Vanguard 18, February 2016)

Third, Pastor, Mark Chukwudi Etiti of Victory Pentecostal Church, Ogbaku, Imo state, murdered his wife, Udoka, in cold blood. Udoka, a banker, built a house for her pastor husband and bought a car for him on bank loan, just within a space of twenty months. But repayments of the loan became a serious challenge and she ultimately lost the bank job. It became a pitiable situation better imagined after she lost her job. Udoka became a punching bag. On many occasions, the mother-in-law will come all the way from the village to order her out of the very house she built. Udoka had sustained various degrees of injuries inflicted on her by the husband. The first brutal cutlass injuries on her were recorded in 2013. This time, her family thought it was indeed enough. The matter was formally taken to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Nigerian Police in Owerri, who documented the evidences, detained the pastor and later released him. The family has actually concluded plans to forcefully relocate her and her children after so many refusals from her before her brutal murder by the same man to whom she gave three beautiful children. (Breaking Times February 29, 2016)

There is a common pattern that emerged in most of the reported cases, and particularly in the 3 cases cited above. There is an issue, it gets out of hand, the husband reacts violently, the violence continues, the wife leaves the house for some period, the husband pretends to regret his action, the wife returns, the violence resumes and gets to climax, and the husband kills the wife. The 3 marriages in this study manifest this pattern, and represent the many Christian marriages that ended in tragedy. The men involved were Christian clergy men from different denominations.

All the marriages showed sufficient signal that tragedy was looming; yet the women involved did not decisively end the marriage.

What these women got for their refusal to divorce their husbands was untimely death. Then the question that is begging for answer remains "why do the victims stay in deadly marriages?"

**What make victims stay in an abusive relationship?**

There are many reasons why victims stay in an abusive relationship. According to Makinde (2016), a victim of domestic violence for 11 years, domestic assault does not assume the deadly dimension at the beginning, and so, the victims never suspects that it would grow into a deadly dimension. She writes: “Domestic violence incident is rarely an isolated occurrence. The beatings and attacks often escalate in frequency and intensity over time. So if you take a slap today, the next time you will get three and after that you will be thrown into a wrestling ring for a severe beating bout. As a matter of fact it starts with insults like “you are very stupid” and so on. Then it progresses to loud screams and name-calling. After that, it graduates to a slap and before you know it, the next episode will land the victim in the hospital”. (Guardian Woman: Issues Guardian Newspapers, 14 May 2016, 4:38 am)

Even where a woman knows that this progressive assault clearly indicates that danger is looming she, being Christian, may still not call it a quit because she thinks that such an option is anti-Christianity, anti- church, and may deprive her of good heaven. The Christian doctrine that forbids divorce constitutes the most significant reason why the wives remain in deadly marriages. If a wife later discovers that her husband is ritualistic, an armed robber, a kidnapper, or an assassin, she is forbidden to leave him. Women who leave a marriage relationship suffer stigmatization. They suffer rejection by friends and family, Makinde (2016) rightly observes that they are chastised by the church for violating the religious commitment of “till death do us part”, they are isolated from community and support networks, scorned and ridiculed in their hometown and they become a laughing stock and gossip item among their peers. This has resulted in low self-esteem and self-confidence that some attempt suicide...that is if they survived the domestic attacks”. (Guardian Woman: Issues Guardian Newspapers, 14 May 2016, 4:38 am)

But is Domestic Violence an attribute of Christian marriage? Is there any biblical justification for one to kill his or her spouse? Can there be an exemption to the application of the doctrine of Divorce and Remarriage in Christianity, so as to allow a partner to walk out of the marriage to avoid tragedies? Does the Christian scripture require a wife to remain in an abusive marital

relationship if her life or the lives of her children are at risk? These are difficult questions to answer, given that the Church avoids addressing the issue of domestic abuse. Whereas, the Bible does address the issue of domestic violence, and the church therefore should necessarily respond to it.

### **The Response of the Church to Domestic Violence**

There are no other scriptural passages that best expresses the experience of someone in a violent relationship as Psalm 55.

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and the storm. . . . If an enemy were insulting me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like me, my companion, and my close friend, with whom I enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God. . . . My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. His speech is as smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords (Psalm 55: 4-8; 12-14; 20-21/NIV).

When a Christian woman's experience parallels the fear the psalmist conveys in this Psalm and fear becomes the predominant emotion that drives the marriage relationship, where does she turn for help and protection? She is expected to turn to the church. Her parents, too, would encourage her to turn to the church for help. But what has been the usual response of the church in the events of domestic violence involving her members? The church's response has always been to use the instrument of doctrine to keep the victim perpetually in the stormy relationship. The church has always insisted that marriage is "for better or for worse" This approach of asking the wife to be faithful to a mutual covenant, of which the husband has flagrantly violated of its terms, has actually advanced the incidences of domestic spousal killings.

On using doctrine to chain wives to deadly marriages, National Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (2001) observes that "...Rather than offering resources and alternatives to battered women, church leaders often advised women to return to violent homes and be "better wives." Hence they remained "chained" to their abusive spouse. These church leaders, by so doing, are actually condoning the atrocities of genocide.

It is not helpful, either, for victims to be told by the church that suffering is part of Christianity; therefore, the abused wives must accept their abuse with passive silence, as Christ did on the cross. To this, Steven and Lyle (2006) refer to Luke 22:42; "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*" (NIV) and conclude that Christ accepted abuse with godly resignation because it was the only way he could secure human salvation. . .If there had been a way to save humans other than the abuse of the cross, he would surely have taken it. It will not be out of place for a woman trapped in a deadly marriage to find a way to escape. The bible does not approve Domestic violence in Christian marriage. (Steven and Lyle. 2006:294)

### **Bible and Domestic Violence**

Domestic Violence is not an attribute of Christian marriage. It contradicts God's character, and therefore cannot endorse it. And since marriage is designed to represent Christ, acceptance of domestic abuse contradicts the Word of God. The following biblical passages clearly confirm this:

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in my love." (John 15:9) And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. (Luke 12:42-46 .ESV)*

A marriage that is characterized by incessant death threats cannot be said to be a Christian marriage. Furthermore, the bible commands the husband to love his wife, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. (Ephesians 5: 25-26; 28-31/ESV). Using scripture to entrap and hold wives as physical and emotional hostages in domestic violence is sinful.



### **The Biblical Concepts of Christian Marriage**

From Biblical evidence, God established the institution of marriage from the beginning of creation (Genesis 2:18) Dogara, (2014) states that “it was God’s intention from the beginning that man is not complete alone except with a wife, a suitable helper”. And buttressing this relationship further, God said, for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh “(Genesis 2:24)” He states further that “Marriage by its nature was meant to achieve among other things: companionship (Gen. 2:18; cf. Matt. 19:3-6; Rom. 7:2). Sexual pleasure (Eccl. 9:9; Gen. 2:24; I Cor. 7:3; Deut. 24:5). Procreation (Gen. 1:28; Ex. 23:26; Deut. 7:14; Ps. 128:3). Expression of Love and Security (Song of Solomon 4:10, 7; 11:12; 17:1, 1:13) Marriage was intended to be a voluntary life-long covenant (Dogara. 2014:158).

A research organization called Child Trends (2004) that examined hundreds of studies has come up with some characteristics that define a healthy marriage. They are summarized here as follows: (1) the couple is willing to sacrifice their personal needs for each other. (2) They solve problems in respectful, positive ways. (3) While conflict is a normal part of marriage, they deal with it without criticism, contempt, or defensiveness.(4) Spouses are sexually faithful to each other (5) they trust, care for, and love each other (6) they respect each other and enjoy each other’s company (7) Those who have children, are mutually committed to the development and well-being of all their children.

Christian marriage is between a man and woman, it is indissoluble, man is the head of the family, the wife must obey her husband, even though she is not inferior to the husband, the husband must provide for the welfare and security of the family. And that he will be called to become a leader in the church only if he proves to be a responsible husband. It is only when both partners do what are their mutual responsibilities that their marriage can be classified as ‘ideal’ or ‘healthy’.

At this point, it is important to say that the scriptural directives given to men and women regarding the marriage relationship has always been critical to the success and wellness of the family. But sadly, contrary to the bible, many Christian homes are unsafe and are ravaged by the continual threats of violent behavior. As noted by Saul (2011) the scripture that says “*not be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil*” (Ephesian 4:26-27 ESV) *is* no longer heeded. “hence many rise to a new day with physical wounds and bruises that remind them of the unending cycle of violence in which they are trapped by their mate and life in a home that is not a refuge of love and peace—but just the opposite” (Saul 2011:7). It is when either or both of the partners failed in their responsibilities that there will be marital crisis. The crisis, if not properly and quickly brought under control, will lead to domestic homicide as was the case of the 3 couples in this study.

### **Reconsidering Divorce in relation to Domestic Violence**

Though the Scriptures enjoin that those whom God has put together not be put asunder (Mt 19:6), it is impossible to *know* if indeed God has put any two (the man who married the woman) together. It stands to biblical injunctions that those whom God has put together in holy matrimony will not kill each other. Incessant domestic violence in Christian marriage evidenced the union of man and woman that God has not joined together. Should divorce not be permitted, therefore, when staying together is surely going to end in tragedy? Why must a Christian stick to a violent relationship? Will a Christian go to hell if he divorces in a violent marriage? Let us consider what Jesus Christ said about divorce in Matthew 19:3-8.

*They say unto him, why did Moses them command that a man give his wife certificate of divorce and send her away? Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.*

In commenting on this passage, Bohlin (2011) states that, “God’s intention for Christian marriages is to be forever. However, because God is good and because He understands the wickedness of the human heart, he allows for divorce; note His reason: “*because your hearts*

*were hard*” He knows that being married to a person with hard heart is like a prison sentence, and He provides a way out. She states further that the concerns of Jesus appear to be on “remarriage, rather than divorce. Therefore when nothing has broken the marriage covenant, then when a divorced person remarries, he or she commits adultery. She counsels that if your spouse’s heart is unrepentantly hard, then divorce is God’s grace in that situation. (Bohlin 2011:6)

Denison (2009) in discussing what could lead to a biblical divorce, states that “physical, emotional, verbal and substance abuse are epidemic in marriages today. While the Bible nowhere addresses abuse specifically with regard to divorce, we can draw two conclusions from biblical truth. First, abuse is wrong... (Eph. 5:25). Second, life must be protected... (Exodus 20:13) ...so biblical counselors recommend that an abused person separate from the spouse immediately.(Denison 2009:6)

This is not to say that divorce is being recommended for every marital crisis or every Domestic challenge. But divorce should be viewed in the context of the marital situation. This is the position of some notable theologians in Reformed Thought. “Both Calvin and Barth assume marriage to be a lifetime partnership admitting of no divorce. Yet they leave room for the freedom to interpret Scripture for the particular context and situation”. (Acolatse.2011:7)

New Testament theologian Richard Hays (as cited in Acolatse. 2011) points to the Pauline text in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, and argues that Paul’s advice on the issues of divorce and remarriage involves a pastoral approach that takes the context into consideration and enjoins the seeking community / individuals to engage in discernment. He writes further:

“The litmus test for knowing that they have properly discerned God’s will is whether the decision allows them to live at peace with all humanity. This is their reason for being, their vocation: to participate in “that eschatological peace” to which God has called the church and all who belong in it. Considerations for divorce, like marriage, are taken out of the individual sphere and placed back into the community where they belong. Hays states further that “ It has been Church practice since (Roman Catholic and Protestant) to uphold the New Testament injunction against

divorce while at the same time expanding “the range of situations considered as exceptions to the rule and thus extending the hermeneutical trajectory demonstrated by the New Testament texts themselves” (Acolatse. 2011:8)

God can heal any marriage if both partners will surrender fully to him. But divorce must be allowed where it is considered necessary as the only life-saving option in a violent ridden home. Denison (2009) recommends that divorce must be considered only as the lesser of two evils, in order to protect the abused, and only if there are no options. He concluded by saying that the Bible does not prescribe divorce even in these painful circumstances, but only permits it. And when divorce becomes absolutely necessary, the affected must not think he or she will miss heaven, if he or she truly believed Christ for salvation. (Denison 2009:6) Bohlin (2011) has rightly states that regardless of what happen; divorce will not send anyone to hell. But rather, refusing to be reconciled to God through Jesus is the only thing that sends anyone to hell

### **Conclusion**

Marital crisis are bound to occur in marriages. It must not be allowed to develop into violence. The church could minimize marital crisis by giving comprehensive and extensive premarital counseling to intending couples on how to manage their marital relationship. The church leaders should vigorously teach against marital violence in their places of worship. Youths should be encouraged and taught to detest domestic violence and not imitate brutish treatment of wives around them.

Incessant domestic violence is a sure sign of impending tragedy, and could best be avoided by separation, temporarily or permanently, depending on the intensity of the domestic violence. Many family tragedies would have been averted if divorce had been permitted in marriages that were characterized by unresolved crises that led to incessant domestic violence. The legal system, unlike the Christian doctrine, protects lives of the couple, and guarantees a fairly better future for the children by allowing the couple to separate when staying together smells grave danger. In so doing both partners will be alive to play their respective parental role.

The typical African partner of religions other than Christianity will not insist in staying in a marriage that threatens life. The African parents in other religions too, will be quick to ask their daughter or son to end the dangerous marriage and save his or her life. but the majority of Christians, anchoring on their interpretation or understanding of the biblical injunction “what God has joined together, let no man put asunder” will voluntarily, or be encouraged, or even forced to remain in the violence and deadly marriage. Perhaps, this accounts for the growing number of cases of killer husbands or killer wives among the Christian couples.

It is time for the Christian leaders to think and act like Jesus, who by words and deeds demonstrates that life is worth than laws. They should allow for separation when the staying together of two people becomes dangerous and life threatening. God will not be glorified if, in keeping a code which is not in any way essential to salvation, the Christian husband or wife becomes a murderer and lives are wasted, and their children are thrown into a bleak future. In any dangerous and violent-full marriages like those in this study, divorce is not the unpardonable sin, but a lifesaving option.

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