



# Divorce, Debacle or Panacea: A Rethink from a Biblical Lens

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## Abstract

Marriage is an integral part of man's social life and a covenant and commitment between a man and woman. At a particular stage in life, in some societies, people are questioned if they are not married. Yet, some people see the cure for unhappy marriage as separation (divorce), it is often rather more of a problem than a solution; meanwhile, the society is heavily affected. Divorce remains a severe crisis; it inflicts pain on all people concerned, especially children and the society at large. Many have seen the marriage covenant "till death do us part" as an unrealistic and obsolete phrase. Day by day the majority of homes (especially the Christians) are faced with the threat of divorce in the contemporary society. People no longer take marriage seriously with its needed commitment for life. Divorce is the order of the day and some people even say this with pride and without any form of remorse. In view of this, the research presents a discourse on the subject matter from a Biblical evaluation revealing the true identity of divorce as a problem in Christian homes.

**Keywords:** Divorce, debacle, panacea, Holy Scriptures, social impact.

## Conceptual Clarification of Terms

**Panacea:** this is a combination of two Greek words: '*pan*' meaning '*all*', and '*akos*' meaning '*remedy*'. It is derived from the Greek '*panakes*', which means '*all-healing*'. In Greek mythology, *Panakeia* was the goddess of universal healing; she was believed to have a potion that would cure any sickness or disease. The first known use of the word panacea in English was in 1548.<sup>1</sup> panacea is almost always used to criticize the very idea of a total solution.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, panacea means cure or solution.

**Debacle:** is an event or attempt that is a complete failure <sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Categorically speaking, the first institution established by God was marriage and it brings a man and a woman together as one; husband and wife. It is seldom the case that one will find or see

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/panacea> (Accessed on 8th Jan, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/panacea> (Accessed on 8th Jan, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/debacle> (Accessed on 8th Jan, 2019).



adult males and females unmarried. In other words, God instituted marriage; and He did it for the purpose of procreation and replenishing the earth, to overcome loneliness. However, the subject 'marriage' is an issue that attracts attention because of the question about divorce. Danfulani Kore opines that, "marriage is a serious and lifelong venture in God's sight."<sup>4</sup>

One of the things that man's disobedience in the beginning gave birth to is the trauma of divorce which is deadly to marriages. One cannot be surprised to see many marriages both within and outside the Christian fold hitting the 'rocks' of divorce; it is as a result of the imperfect nature of man after the fall. A Yoruba adage says, "*Agbarakonioun to nile wo, onilenikonigba fun,*" meaning that "erosion will not hesitate to destroy a house, it is the owner of the house that will try to avert it." Divorce will always want to come via marital challenges; there should be mutual agreement by both the husband and the wife to prevent it. According to Abolarin, it is good to clarify the fact that God made nothing like divorce when marriage was instituted.<sup>5</sup>

Many have the notion that marriage is a road without problems; this paints divorce as a solution to slight issues that can be resolved with prayer and understanding. This notion and many similar ones are improper because the coming together of people of different ideas, background, perspectives and worldview cannot be without flaws. Leslie agrees with this assertion, he said; "no marriage is immune to social vice no matter how good it is."<sup>6</sup> It is not possible for divorce to happen without marriage; thus, marriage is a criterion via which divorce takes place. Divorce is a social vice that affects the stability of any married life, yet many Christian couple views it as a panacea (solution). The current trend blatantly reveals that a people desire to get married (Some of which say; "I can't wait", "I want to marry", "I am ripe for marriage") but eventually get divorced.

Yet, the problems divorce has caused and is causing in Christian homes today, is enormous, compared to the so called 'solution' it is said to offer. Therefore, the threat of divorce prompted the research to navigate this discourse to address the identity of divorce bringing up a rethink from the biblical evaluation.

### **Marriage: The Inception**

The need for understanding of the concept of marriage in this research stems from the fact that divorce comes through marriage. In other words, divorce is not self-existing, it's an act done by people who are married. The reality of broken marriages is all over the globe and its effects on Christian homes is alarming. The fact that God is the sole creator and pioneer of marriage cannot be denied because marriage was created by God and His Word explain and explores what it means to be married. As early as Genesis 2:24 God establishes the covenant bond of marriage between one man and one woman, each who leave their families of origin and start a new family.<sup>7</sup> The global understanding of marriage reveals it as an important and integral part of man's living. Marriage is an important stage of man's life; thus, divorce might be seen as an intrusion weighing

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<sup>4</sup>Danfulani Kore, *Culture and Christian Home* ( Kaduna: Baraka Press, 1989), 97.

<sup>5</sup>David Abolarin, *10 Steps Towards Choosing a Life Partner* ( Ilorin: Gbemi Press, N.D.), 22.

<sup>6</sup>Leslie Parrot, *When Bad Things Happen to Good Homes* ( Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 17.

<sup>7</sup> *A Biblical View of Divorce: An Old Testament Context*; <https://pastordaveonline.org/2017/08/17/a-biblical-view-of-divorce-part-1-an-old-testament-context/> (Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2019).



its effects, but an evaluation is needed in order to ascertain the true identity of divorce, this brings the Biblical evaluation into limelight (Old and New Testament). This forms the framework of the research work.

### **Divorce: Old Testament Evaluation**

From the beginning, the Bible presents marriage as a permanent, stable, intimate union between a man and a woman.<sup>8</sup> Originally the marriage bond was indivisible. The predestinated plans of God for creating man and woman was for a permanent and lasting union of the two spiritually, naturally and physically because they were made of one flesh.<sup>9</sup> In other words, this is the cogent ideal of God right from the outset but since the 'fall of man', it became otherwise. All sort of anti-social behaviour surfaced. Human beings now began to live on a less than ideal level.

Divorce penetrated man's indissolubility of the 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.

Concerning the issue of divorce in the Old Testament, Woman, among the Hebrews, as among most nations of antiquity, occupied a subordinate position. Though the Hebrew wife and mother was treated with more consideration than her sister in other lands, even in other Semitic countries, her position nevertheless was one of inferiority and subjection. The marriage relation from the standpoint of Hebrew legislation was looked upon very largely as a business affair, a mere question of property. A wife, nevertheless, was, indeed, in most homes in Israel, the husband's "most valued possession." And yet while this is true, the husband was unconditionally and unreservedly the head of the family in all domestic relations. His rights and prerogatives were manifest on every side. Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of divorce. According to the laws of Moses a husband, under certain circumstances, might divorce his wife; on the other hand, if at all possible, it was certainly very difficult for a wife to put away her husband.<sup>10</sup>

However, the permission of divorce in the Mosaic Law was framed only on account of the Israelites' hardness of heart. Consequently, the perspective of the Old Testament on the subject of divorce is that divorce is permissible if any whorly, unchastity or marital unfaithfulness surfaces from either of the party (especially the woman). This is not just done anyhow. It has to be accompanied with "a bill of divorcement and once it is given, the man will send the woman away."<sup>11</sup> In other words, divorce viewed through the lens of the Old Testament was legal and permitted with a 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 extra-marital intercourse. On this note, preferably, the latter is believed to have being the

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<sup>8</sup>David R. Miller, *Counseling Families After Divorce: Wholeness of the Broken Family* ( Dallas: Word Publisher, 1994), 115.

<sup>9</sup> H. Norman Wright, *Communication: Key to Your Marriage* ( California: Regal Books, 1974), 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Divorce in the Old Testament*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/divorce-in-the-old-testament.html> (Accessed on 8th Jan, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> W. Hethy, *Divorce and Remarriage* ( Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1984), 106.



reason for the grant of divorce in the Old Testament. However, God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). This is because divorce destroys God's initial plan for marriage, the family which God expects godly offspring to be raised. Children who see their parents' love turn to hatred and eventually see them divorce are deeply scarred for life. Wilbur argued that bitterness often becomes part of them and negative thought about marriage clouds their perspective.<sup>12</sup> Danfulani Kore as quoted by Waje Kunhiyop opined that, "Divorce is undesirable, psychologically traumatic and socially disruptive."<sup>13</sup> The damage of divorce cannot be repaired. It is one of the worst tragedies in human life. It shatters the hopes and aspirations of many families.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, William also supported the view that divorce is never part of God's plan for holy matrimony.<sup>15</sup> Although God hates divorce, He recognizes that it does happen, yet He will forgive the sin if any has fallen victim and ask for forgiveness, just as He forgives other sins (Ps. 103: 3).

On this note, the research affirms that there is no controversy that God hates divorce. The researcher opines that since this statement is clear and emphatically established in the Old Testament, it suggests that divorce is only tolerated as lesser evil in the Old Testament; it is never however the absolute will of God. Any flimsy or cogent excuse for divorce cannot change God's declaration. In fact, Jesus sees the permission of divorce in the Old Testament as permissive will of God brought about by the hardness of man's heart. All men may go astray but the standard of God remains unchanged. In short, the Old Testament taught that marriage was intended to be a permanent covenantal relationship.<sup>16</sup> Since the Old Testament sees divorce is nothing but trampling on God's ordinance concerning marriage, the research further explores the New Testament in other to balance the Biblical evaluation.

### **Divorce: New Testament Evaluation**

The New Testament has much to say about the issues of divorce. The New Testament evaluation of the subject matter in this part of the research is considered under some headings which includes; Jesus' response to divorce which is explicitly in the gospels and Apostle Paul's response; one of the prominent Christian leaders in the early church.

### **Jesus' Response**

In the New Testament, divorce is strictly forbidden. Jesus affirmed that it was only permitted under Mosaic Law and it was allowed as a concession to the hardness of the human heart (Mat. 19:8).<sup>17</sup> Even the remarriage of widows was frowned upon by some in the apostolic period though 1 Timothy 5:14 seems more lenient on the matter. Although in the early church the husband could

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<sup>12</sup>Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1992), 292.

<sup>13</sup>Samuel WajeKunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Kaduna: Baraka Press and Publishers Ltd., 2004), 308.

<sup>14</sup>John Scott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 320.

<sup>15</sup>William W. Orr, *What the Bible Says about Divorce* (Wheaton: Van K. Press Inc., N.D.), 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Summary of the Old Testament and Teachings on Divorce*; <https://bible.org/seriespage/5-summary-old-testament-teachings-divorce-and-re-marriage> (Accessed on 7th, Jan, 2019).

<sup>17</sup>Earnest White, *Marriage and the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965), 95.



not technically divorce adulterous wife, he could separate from her or put her away. However, Jesus reaffirmed the permanent nature of marriage, pointed out the rationale behind the grant for divorce in the Law of Moses. He taught that the one who divorces except for a sexually unfaithful spouse and marries another commits adultery and vice versa to the second partner.<sup>18</sup>

Although there are debates about the meaning of “unless she has been unfaithful”, this research argues that it means nothing but sex outside of marriage. This is the behaviour that violates the one-flesh concept that is so basic and foundational to Biblical marriage. Even when unfaithfulness is involved, however, divorce is never commanded; it is merely permitted. There are other means to settle amicably the dispute in marriage instead of divorce.

Consequently, Jesus’ submission on the matter of divorce is viewed from Gen. 2:24 in combination with Genesis 1:27. He referred back to the divine ordinance of God concerning marriage as not mere description of what generally is obtainable on earth but as an indissoluble union, union until death parts the two.<sup>19</sup> In view of this, Jesus’ response to divorce is summarily a re-understanding and re-entrenchment of what the Old Testament holds.

### **Apostle Paul’s Response**

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul shed some light to the subject of the discourse. The Apostle Paul responded to the Corinthian Christians when they wrote him a letter on the problems faced in marriage (I Cor. 7:1-15). However, they were aware of the biblical and pragmatic application of Jesus’ teaching as a direct solution concerning their marital issue (Mat. 19:1-12). But it seems the Corinthian Christians in the problem they were facing did not know what to do relating to Christ’s teaching as a direct solution to the problem. Therefore, the Apostle Paul was consulted for clarification. The Apostle Paul saw the matter of divorce as a very fragile and delicate issue to be handled merely using teachings, hence, he instantly referred back to the teaching of Christ as the authentic and final prospect to the question. He (Paul) stands also on the exceptional ground for adultery. As in the case of the reconciliation which had to do with the unbelieving party, Paul was still on the initial divine ordinance concerning marriage, which is for life. In other words, amicable resolution is better and preferable to divorce.

In other words, Paul bluntly emphasized on Christ’s teaching, and then added a second permissible cause for divorce: desertion by an unbelieving mate. The emphasis is on religious incompatibility. These theological mixed marriages are not to be ended in divorce, (except when the unbeliever deserts), even differences of religion may create tension in the home.<sup>20</sup> By staying, Paul opines that the believing mate sanctifies the marriage and in time the unbelieving mate may be brought to Christ; in essence, no provision for divorce.

Invariably, there are three available positions: “No divorce at all, divorce but no remarriage and divorce and remarriage.” The researcher opined that they are three different concepts, but by God’s original standard, ‘no divorce at all’ should be given preference above others. Come what

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<sup>18</sup>Murray John, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Reformed Publishing, 1976), 17.

<sup>19</sup>William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 715.

<sup>20</sup>William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 715.



may, divorce is not divinely approved. It was invented by Moses as a result of the situation then. To the later, the two divinely given principles of marriage should be followed:

- The principle of “a man and a woman (monogamy), and
- The principle of “till death do them apart” (Gen. 2:24; Mat. 19: 3-11).

### **A Lucid Summary: An Engagement**

The Bible is explicit about divorce and remarriage.<sup>21</sup> The discovered premise established in the previous part of the research affirms this. It is clear in the Old Testament that Moses permitted a man to obtain a divorce on just about any grounds. “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Also in the New Testament, when Jesus was asked about divorce, He replied with reference to Moses who gave permission to divorce because of the “...hardness of their hearts”. “Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?" So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:4-6).

Marriage is a lifetime relationship that should never be severed by human actions. In the book of Malachi, God says that He “hates divorce” (Malachi 2:16). God's perfect will is the preservation of society and future generations by the preservation of marriages. God will give anyone great help in sustaining a marriage relationship or in the reconciliation of estranged marriage partners. In extreme cases, there are only two grounds for divorce and remarriage. When adultery has taken place, a divorce can be obtained, because adultery has already severed the marriage relationship and divorce is a formal acknowledgment of what has already taken place.

In view of this, the researcher posits that the emphatic statement of God in Mal. 2:16 and the New Testament teachings of Jesus, among others, explicitly negates divorce. It is abominable, detestable, disruptive, traumatic and suicidal. Divorce should not be found in Christendom; God is expectant of Christian homes being an agent of change in the society, correcting the wrong notions about divorce. But if divorce ravages the Christian homes, what is the hope of God's purpose for establishing it?

### **Conclusion**

The fact that God instituted marriage without the consent of any mortal being cannot be overemphasized. God was and still is very much interested in the holy union of a man and a woman becoming one flesh by marital covenantal terms. God's original plan is explicitly seen in

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<sup>21</sup> The Christian Broadcasting Network, *What Does the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* [http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/cbnteachingsheets/faq\\_divorce\\_remarriage.aspx?mobile=false](http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/cbnteachingsheets/faq_divorce_remarriage.aspx?mobile=false) (Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2019).



the course of this research; wherefore He seeks Christian homes as heaven on earth. Thus, divorce is never a panacea for any discord which may arise. There is a need for Christians to see marriage from God's perspective and thus as a holy covenant and mystery that can and should not be broken unless scripturally permissible.

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