

**SEXUAL SIN IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES  
BIBLICAL AND CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES IN NIGERIA.**

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**Abstract**

*Christian ethical standards are breaking down in our nation. Many believe now that individuals have rights, including the right to make their own sexual decisions and that sexual behaviour is an individual's private matter. How then can Christianity or the Church relate to the sexual and marriage problems today? If the bible really has a standard that can safe-guide sexual behaviours, why is sexual sin common even within the Church? Historical-contextual and sociological methods were employed in this paper in order to clearly state the New Testament understanding. The study contextualized Biblical teachings, particularly on sex and marriage to the Africans. Findings revealed that the Bible places sex and sexual activity within the larger context of holiness and faithfulness. In this regard, the Bible presents an honest and often detailed explanation of God's design for sex and its place in human life. The New Testament presents sexual deviance as an intentional rejection of God's authority as Creator and Lord. Invariably, Nigeria is characterized by loose sexual morality, which cannot be divorced from incessant poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, as well as the flood of immigrants to Africa and to Nigeria who brought new forms of family life and new sexual customs. The paper*

*concludes that there is clear evidence that our memories are failing on Jesus' injunctions in this regard, hence, there is need to draw upon the Christian faith for guidance but African context should not be forgotten.*

## **Introduction**

The discussion on sexual acts in Western and non-Western societies fills volumes, with implications not only for social relations but also for the economy, politics, education, and other institutions<sup>1</sup>. In realization of the import of sexual acts the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS) devoted her 2006 conference to discussion on this very sensitive issue<sup>2</sup>. Even then, discussion on sexual acts cannot be a once-and-for-all discussion. It has to be current and contemporary. The debate over sexual acts draws from biology and culture. Sexual behaviour develops out of genetic differences, life experiences, and definition of the specific situation the individual encounters. That is, gender-oriented actions represent a complex process of social and individual interpretation of models and symbols of other people's attitudes and behaviour<sup>3</sup>.

No doubt, human sexual act goes beyond human understanding; it was God's design for the world. In other words, it was part and parcel of the creation. Hence, the paper examines an aspect of sexual acts which is sexual sin from the Bible, especially from the New Testament point of view and in African (Nigerian) context. Human sexual act is a gift of God for the expression of love and the generation of life. In the expression of human sexuality, it is the integrity of our relationships which determines the meaning of our actions. We do not merely have sexual relations; we demonstrate our true humanity in personal relationships, the most intimate of which are sexual acts. To be a person is to be a sexual being. Sexual human life is a gracious gift, a sacred trust, from God. But the biblical view of sexual sin is generally universal; this is then re-examined in the light of contemporary developments in Nigerian society.

## **The Concepts of Sexual Sin**

Several specific sexual relationships are forbidden in the Bible. Among these are homosexuality (having sex with same gender), bestiality (sex with animals), incest (sexual relations with close family members, including ones' mother, sister, niece, aunt, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law), fornication (sexual relations outside of marriage) and adultery

(sexual relations with another person's spouse), and rape (forced sex). To emphasize the seriousness of these kinds of offenses, the penalty was death in the Old Testament<sup>4</sup>.

There are many references to sexual sin in the bible. Starting with the Old Testament, we have in Leviticus 18:1-20 texts dealing with sexual sin. Sexual sin is not called abominable here or anywhere else in the Old Testament. Abomination simply means a ritual offense: goat herders were an abomination to the Egyptians; dead bugs, pork chops and stale sacrificial food were specifically listed as abominations to the Hebrews. Often, an idol is called an abomination. Sexual sin is immoral. Religious irregularities are abominable. There are many other words used in place of sexual sin. For instance, to seduce, especially a virgin is regarded as a sin<sup>5</sup>. In Hebrew culture to be engaged was the same as marriage, except for the consummation of the marriage: sexual intercourse. If a woman was engaged, she was to be treated the same as a married woman. Having sex with someone other than her spouse, the penalty for both consenting parties was death by stoning: The word in the Hebrew for seduce is 'yiphateh meaning "to entice or seduce." the words in Hebrew for virgin are 'b<sup>e</sup>thulah and 'almah. 'yiphateh: to deceive, seduce, entice as in Exodus 22:16. 'b<sup>e</sup>thulah: a virgin meaning: a girl or woman who has never had sexual intercourse. Ken Collins<sup>6</sup> tried to tell us that 'almah is not referring to a virgin but to a maid. This is easily cleared up by Greek Septuagint, These Hebrew scribes translated the word 'almah into the Greek word *parthenos*. This is the same word Matthew uses in Matthew 1:23. The word means: a girl or woman who has never had sexual intercourse, a virgin. The Hebrew translators of the Septuagint and Matthew understood the Hebrew Word *almah* to mean a virgin, a girl or woman who has never had sexual intercourse. To seduce such a woman, the penalty is death.

In the New Testament, there are two words in Greek used concerning sexual sin: They are *porneia* meaning *fornication* and *moikeia* meaning *adultery*. *porneia*: *Fornication, whoredom*; any kind of unlawful immoral sexual activity, illicit sexual intercourse which includes adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, sex with animals, sex outside of marriage, sex with relatives, and sex with someone not a partner in marriage. It also refers to worshipping or having communication with unclean spirits or so called gods spiritually other than Jesus Christ, (spiritual fornication), the worship of idols, eating something you know has been sacrificed to an idol<sup>7</sup>.

*Moikeia*: adultery, on the other hand, means married persons having sexual intercourse with others apart from their mates. The Greek word *porneuo* is the word from where we get *pornography*. *Fornication* means two people outside of the bonds of marriage having sexual intercourse. Fornication is clearly condemned in Exodus 22:16. Adultery on the other hand, is married persons having sexual intercourse with opposite sex other than their spouse. Exodus 20:14 quoted above is one of the Ten Commandments and it clearly condemns adultery<sup>8</sup>. The verb in the Greek for *homosexual* is *arsenakoitai*. It is a compound word meaning *Male Sexual-intercourse*. It is two males having sex together.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Bible on Sex**

This aspect of the paper made an attempt to proffer solution to the following questions: What does the Bible really say about sex? Given the controversies over same-sex marriage, homosexuality, and gender-bending now raging in our culture, what is the biblical pattern for human sexual acts?

The Bible addresses human sexual acts from a holistic perspective of God's intention and design. In contrast to both pagan sex rituals and our modern obsession with sex, the Bible places sex within the total context of human nature, happiness, and holiness. Taken out of this context, sexual anarchy reigns as sex is set loose to be an end in itself. The Bible places sex and sexual activity within the larger context of holiness and faithfulness. In this regard, the Bible presents an honest and often detailed explanation of God's design for sex and its place in human life and happiness<sup>10</sup>.

First, the biblical writers affirm the goodness of sexual acts as God's gift. "The Song of Solomon" is an extended love poem with explicit erotic imagery and language. Sex is affirmed as a source of pleasure and shared intimacy between husband and wife. Sexual pleasure is not an accident of human biology--it is one of the Creator's sweetest gifts to human beings. The promise of sexual pleasure and satisfaction is to draw us into the marital covenant, and then shared joy of physical union is a vital part of the marital bond<sup>11</sup>.

Second, the gift of sexual activity as presented in the Bible is consistently located only within the context of the marital covenant. Joined to each other within this monogamous covenant, the man and the woman may be naked, and not ashamed [Gen. 2:25]. The consistent witness of the biblical writers is that sexual relations are limited to this

covenant relationship. All forms of extra-marital sexual activities are condemned, including premarital sex (fornication). Adultery is expressly forbidden as a particularly dangerous and damaging insult to the marriage and to the glory of God. [Ex. 20:14, Deut. 22:22, 1 Cor. 6:9-10]. At the same time, the husband and wife are ordered to fulfill their marital duties to each other, and not to refrain from sexual union [1 Cor. 7:2-5].

Third, though pleasure is one of the goods biblically associated with sexual union, the Bible consistently links procreation with the marital act. Sexual pleasure and procreation are linked in a healthy and natural approach that avoids the denial of either. Modern contraceptive technologies were unknown in the Bible, and the contemporary "contraceptive mentality" that champions sexual pleasure completely severed from procreation is foreign to the biblical worldview<sup>12</sup>.

Fourth, the biblical writers address human sexual acts honestly. Paul acknowledged the reality of sexual passions [I Corinthians 7:9] and admonished those who have not been given the gift of celibacy to marry, rather than to allow their passions to turn into sinful lust. The reality of sexual brokenness is also addressed. The pain and shame of adultery, for example, are demonstrated in the account of David's sin with Bathsheba. Paul's horror in learning of sexual sin among the Corinthians occasioned some of his clearest teachings on sexuality and holiness. At the same time, the Bible points to salvation and the atoning work of Christ as the ground of our sexual healing and the promise of forgiveness. As Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, "such were some of you," listing the sexually immoral, adulterers, and homosexuals [1 Cor. 6:9-11]. The tense of the verb is critically important in this text, for "such were some of you" serves to underline that Christians cannot continue in such sins but at the same time acknowledged the presence of such among the so called Christians.<sup>13</sup>

The New Testament writers affirm sexual act as part of our embodied existence. As human beings we are sexual creatures, and as sexual creatures we are called to honour God with our bodies. Within the context of the marital covenant, the husband and wife are free to express love for each other, experience pleasure, and join in the procreative act of sexual union. This is pleasing to God, and is not to be a source of shame. The biblical writers link holiness to happiness. True human happiness comes in the fulfillment of sexual holiness. The attempt to enjoy sexual happiness without holiness is the root of sexual deviance.<sup>14</sup> Just as the New Testament writers present marital sex as holy and natural, all other forms of sexual activity are presented as condemned and sinful. In addition to

adultery and fornication, the New Testament expressly forbids homosexuality, bestiality, incest, prostitution, rape, pederasty, and all other forms of sexual deviance and perversity.<sup>15</sup>

The New Testament presents sexual deviance as an intentional rejection of God's authority as Creator and Lord [Romans 1:18-25]. As Paul warns, those who practice such sins will not inherit the Kingdom of God [1 Corinthians 6:9-11]. Both Old and New Testament writers warn that the people of God are to remain untainted and uncorrupted by such sins. Interestingly, the sexual practices of the various pagan nations described in the Old Testament and the sexual mores of the Roman empire of the first century are remarkably like the obsessions of our own day.<sup>16</sup>

Sexuality is one of God's good gifts, and the source of much human happiness. At the same time, once expressed outside its intended context of marital fidelity, it can become one of the most destructive forces in human existence, as it is the experience in most Countries of the world now. These principles are of crucial importance as Christians grapple with the sexual confusion of the contemporary society with some denominations debating homosexual clergy and same-sex marriage.

### **Sexual Sin and the Nigerian Society**

Nigeria today is engrossed in the sexual counter culture, characterized by loose sexual morality, including high rates of fornication, adultery, prostitution, gang rapes, incest, bestiality and homosexuality, among others. Universities have become dens of the so-called 'aristocratic' (popularly called aristo); making use of the university settings as grounds to recruit and perpetrate sexual immorality<sup>17</sup>. Allied to the above scenario is the breakdown of the marriage system. Bryson Arthur notes that, "one of the three marriages in Great Britain and one in two marriages in the USA end in divorce."<sup>18</sup> Africa is also witnessing marriage problems that have led to rise in divorce cases, separation, and single parenthood. The scourge of HIV/AIDS which is one of the greatest killers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has created great challenges to sex relations and the institution of marriage in Nigeria and Africa. These cases are worsened by incessant poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, crises and wars, work stress and population explosion<sup>19</sup>.

The obvious questions that arise from the above scenario are diverse: how can Christianity or the church relate to the sexual and marriage problems today? If the bible really has a standard that can safe-

guide sexual behaviours why is sexual sin common even within the church and among church leaders? How do we respond to AIDS theologically and biblically? Can we contextualize Biblical teaching in Leviticus particularly on sex and marriage to the African matrix? These and similar puzzles are worth exploring.

The Christian Church in Nigeria, joining its counterparts all over the world, believes and teaches that Marriage by its nature was meant to achieve among other things:

- Companionship (Gen.2:18; cf. Matt.19:36; Rom. 7:2)
- Sexual pleasure (Eccl, 9:9; Gen.2:24; 1 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).

They believe and teach as well that the Torah regulates sexual activity and establishes sexual roles. Prophetic literature uses sexual metaphors in its announcement of God's judgment on covenant unfaithfulness. Wisdom literature distinguishes wise sexual conduct and uses sexual imagery to characterize wisdom. The Gospels use the memory of Jesus' words and deeds to shape the sexual conduct and disposition of His followers. The Epistles deal with concrete question of sexual conduct. Revelation contains sexual imagery and instruction<sup>20</sup>.

In fact, of the three life cycle events among the Jews (birth, marriage and death), marriage was the most important. Even among some Christian denominations in Nigeria, the believe is that if God helps you to cross the huddle of marriage without being hurt, you are closer to heaven than to hell<sup>21</sup>. It must be acknowledged however that the Nigerian Church is trying its best to reduce the occurrences of sexual sin in the church and the society through its teachings and preaching, yet, Nigerian problems are multifaceted.<sup>22</sup>

Some of the ambivalence and confusion we feel in talking about sexuality stems from the conflicting messages that have come to us from the church and from society as a result of the cultural contact. At times sexual desire has been viewed as a dangerous force to be controlled, suppressed, or denied; at other times it has been affirmed if not celebrated. In most cases, women have been associated in negative ways with sexuality, and seen as sexual tempters. This made some Christian denominations to teach and enforce their women to always wear long skirt and long sleeve tops in order not to tempt the 'brothers' in the church. Even then a lot of atrocities are still being committed among these group

of people<sup>23</sup>. Men on the other hand were viewed as animal-like in their sexual desires. Euphemisms were used to talk about sexual matters, which were thought to be sinful. Many of these tendencies continue to the present day and instead of ameliorating the problems they compounded it.

Many 20th century developments – especially greater freedom of sexual expression – were reactions to Victorian sexual attitudes. The flood of immigrants to Africa and to Nigeria brought new forms of family life and new sexual customs. The use of sexual acts in advertising gives more explicit opportunities for sexual activity outside of marriage to become more common. Sexual acts became more public, and tied to the increasingly pervasive values of consumption, pleasure, and immediate gratification. The questioning of sexual prohibitions and inhibitions was evident, especially in the “roaring twenties” and the so-called “sexual revolution” of the 1960s. All these new developments had direct influence on both the Church and the society<sup>24</sup>.

The argument that is holding sway both within and outside of the church now is that God created us to enjoy our sexuality. Whatever its negative effects may be, sexually explicit material can help people ‘get in touch’ with their sexuality and develop healthier sexual relationships with others. Individuals have rights, including the right to make their own sexual decisions. Sexual behaviour is an individual's private matter. If you are not hurting another person, what is wrong with having sexual intercourse outside of marriage with someone you genuinely love? To them, it is not right to insist that two people stay married when they are making each other miserable.<sup>25</sup>

No doubt, Christian ethical standards are breaking down in our nation. We need to return to clear teachings about what is right and wrong. There is a clear evidence that our memories are failing on Jesus’ injunctions. There is need to draw upon the Christian faith for guidance on matters of sexuality, but that is not a simple task. Social and economic factors beyond our personal control or our private morality contribute to the problem of sexual sin.

### **Sex and Marriage in Africa**

From our discussion so far, certain concerns have arisen. How can we contextualize sex and marriage in African context? This question is very pertinent if we must make sense and apply the biblical standards to our situation in a more practical way. Contextualization provides the necessary grounds for effective biblical transposition of its message to the



Africans in a more concrete fashion. For us to delve into this in full, it is also necessary that we provide African view of marriage and sex before we draw some parallels from the Biblical material. This necessity is imperative as Andrew Kyomo (et al) note,<sup>26</sup>.

The crisis in the African family presents itself to theology in Africa as an opportunity for adventure to reconstruct it according to the best that the Christian Biblical anthropological vision and African religiosity have to offer.

They go further to observe that,

Constructing a theology needs a lot of knowledge on both traditions. The relevance of Biblical hermeneutics can provide enriching insights and tools for application in Africa if it takes African heritage and experience of marriage and sex seriously.

It has been noted that marriage in typical African societies was not only a social institution, but a religious one. Bryson Arthur notes that, “for Africans, marriage was not just the affair of the couple who were to be married as in most Western societies. It was a family affair.” The wife was regarded as “our wife” in the sense that she had responsibility to the entire family excluding sexual relations, though levirate marriage was known in some African societies.<sup>27</sup> Sexual purity was enforced as adultery or sex outside marriage was abhorred. The marriage institution provided the basis for ensuring strict moral standards and moral discipline and purity.

Similarly, Africans had sex standards. Arthur Bryson states that:

To African people sex was more than sexual intercourse. Apart from procreation, it was the means of sustaining, maintaining and extending the clan and society. Sexual intercourse took place only within marriage. It legitimized men and women’s engagement in sexual activity for the production of children.<sup>28</sup>

Talking openly about sex and naming sexual organs was a taboo as was bestiality. Homosexuality was rare as incest and gang rape were discouraged. Sexual standards that governed the entire mode of life were quite high. Virginity was highly upheld as sexual promiscuity was an abomination. Unwanted pregnancies and bastards were not accepted in most African societies. Betrothal did not allow for “trial marriage” or sex which has now become a norm in some African societies. Thus, Africans had many taboos related to sexual relations. For example, among the

Gikuyu and the Gbaya, sex before marriage leading to pregnancy was a disgrace and had to be punished and cleansed.

However, “social sex” which was a kind of “permitted sex” out of the strict matrimonial home was allowed in some societies, such as the Kikuyu, Rukuba, Berom (njem), Buji (u-nya-anah), Aten, Tiv, Luo and the Massia. These were however exceptions of the general rule in African marriage and sexual standards varied. But can we draw parallels between the biblical and African standards on marriage and sex?

The premise upon which any attempt could be built to draw parallels between the biblical and African standards in respect of marriage and sex hinged on the fact that Biblical data share some common traits as well as divergences that need to be taken care of in contextualizing same in the African Christian matrix. While the presupposition that African worldview comes close to the Biblical world especially of the Old Testament is a fact, it is to be noted however that there are certain incongruencies between the two.<sup>29</sup>

Matthews Ojo puts it this way:

Many marriage regulations have been easily enforceable because there are similarities between the Christian moral codes as expressed in the Bible and traditional religious values. Fornication, adultery, and other sexual violations that are not allowed in traditional religion are equally condemned in the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

The Bible set out standards in which marriage is to be held sacred and of religious force. It is to be kept pure and free from other extraneous engagements. For both the Bible Leviticus and African traditional system, incest, homosexuality, adultery and bestiality were “abominations”. Marriage also in Africa was held in high esteem and was to be safeguarded, but the requirements allowed for some abuses in some cases. Virginity was upheld in both Old Testament and in Africa, though the Old Testament standards seemed to be stricter and found force in the covenant relationship with God. In the Old Testament the man was allowed some freedom in adultery cases while the woman was more vulnerable as Igenzo had observed.<sup>31</sup> This was also typical of the African societies which shared the same patriarchal status with the Old Testament.

Marriage in the Bible and in Africa was both a social and religious institutions. It was a family, clan and a community affair. That explains why transgression of marriage laws affected the entire family, clan or community. Marriage was for procreation, spiritual protection, pleasure

and security. John S.Pobee adds that in Africa, marriage was also an investment.<sup>32</sup> The Old Testament enjoined the indissolubility of the marriage contract, but this was against African tradition.

The Bible and African tradition had laws and sanctions specifically related to marriage and sex. While God provided the standards and punishment for marriage and sex, African tradition drew taboos and sanctions related to marriage and sex from gods, goddesses, some commonalities such as death, hunger, excommunication, social stigma and cutting off of such families from the people. Caution must be taken however... There is no district pattern of marriage in the Bible on which any “Christian marriage” could be modeled.

### **Conclusion**

Sexuality requires careful stewardship because of the sinful tendencies which can distort and exploit it and because it expresses a most sensitive relationship between God and creation, and between God’s creatures. In its fullest and most beautiful expression, sexual act embodies a communion and commitment that reflects the covenant between God and His people.

Our sinful condition results in attitudes and practices that either make too much or too little of what God has created. We become obsessed with sexuality as if it were our god, or we demean it as if it were not truly God’s creation. In either case, we do not rightly value what is created. This results in different symptoms of the same sickness. We know of sexuality’s power to bring joy and delight. People yearn for fulfilling sexual relationships, causing them to search desperately for them. But in searching for ever “better sex,” that illusive joy and delight can become even more remote. By seeking to gain happiness or meaning through sexual activity, we can easily destroy the vulnerability that is at the heart of our sexuality. We can also become obsessed with trying to limit certain sexual expressions in order to “protect” sexuality, but in the process demean sexuality by reducing it to certain genital acts. Giving too much attention to sexuality in our lives and in society does not result in a greater cherishing of this gift of God. Instead it is de-valued. When sexuality is devalued, it is trivialized or treated as “nothing special.”

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