



Ethical Implications of Spirituality of Couples in Observance of Marital Vows

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the spirituality of couples as it affects the observance of marriage vows by couples in Oyo West Baptist Conference churches. It also assesses the level of observance of five contents of marriage vows, vis : love, faithfulness, togetherness, relationship and interpersonal issues. The population for the study was all couples in Oyo West Baptist Conference churches, and the sample consisted of 511 married men and women drawn from fifty [50] churches within and around Oyo, Ibadan and Ibarapa towns and villages. Each respondent assessed his or her spouse. Questionnaire was used to assess the degree of couples' observance of marital vows and also to give some actions of their spouses that expressed the assessed issues. It was found that the higher the spiritual level of the spouses, the higher their level of observance, conversely, the lower the spirituality, the lower the degree of observance, showing that spirituality is a factor in observance of marital vows. Based on these findings the researcher recommends that youth programmes be reviewed and directed more towards teaching them the importance of keeping vows more at that stage. It is hoped that this will help them more when they are married.

Keywords: Couples, spirituality, observance, marital vows

INTRODUCTION

Studies on stability of marriage in Africa have shown that divorce has been frequent in some parts of Africa like Stanleyville in Zaire, Broken Hill in Zambia and in Ghana among the Tallensi.¹ The reasons for this rate of divorce have been found to be connected to level of marriage responsibilities, income of the couples and their location.² In Nigeria, it has also been observed that stability of marriage are factors of religion, among others.³ Some other factors that have been found to be of importance in marriage stability are employment and economic level of the couple, educational level of the couple, their level of spirituality, the marriage cycle, sex in marriage, temperament, parental influence, child-bearing, location of the couple and so on.⁴ Yet these couples are married either in the church or in the court registries and they took marriage vows. Marriage vows are taken by those who are married in the churches and those who are married in the court registries in order to protect their marriage, cement their love and bind their commitment to one another.

In the light of this incessant threat to marriage today, there is need for a study on the observance or non-observance of marriage vows as it affects stability of families. Observations have shown that institution of marriage vows is meant to be safety valve for marriage stability or a means of keeping intact the marriage. Yet there have not been studies on what helps observance or non-

observance of these vows especially among Christians in the South Western Nigeria. Hence, the desire of this researcher to study the extent that spirituality affects couples' observance of different aspects of marriage vows.

Concept of Spirituality

The term spirituality in Christian sense is best used to mean "living as a Christian." It describes the whole of the lives of those who have responded to God's gracious calls to live in fellowship with him.⁵ Spirituality according to C.J.H. Hingley includes the life of the whole person. It is a response to God. It is a life of dependence on God and being "led by the Spirit" [Rome 8:14].⁶ Christian marriage and observance of the marital vow in essence is hinged on the dependence of the couple on God and it demands spiritual harmony.

Spiritual Harmony

Christian marriage calls for spiritual harmony. Paul undoubtedly includes this in his command to the Corinthians as one of the marriage guidelines – "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor 6:14). The RSV and the NRSV render this as "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers." Paul's point is simple just as two animals of different species, for example, an ox and a goat, are not suited to be yoked together in farm work, so Christian and a non-Christian are not suitable for a close relationship like marriage. Sometimes we hear of religiously mixed marriages, which on the surface seem to be stable and happy. But, in agreement with Shields' thoughts, inevitably, if each holds to a religion different from that of the other, there is some degree of religious compromise and some loss of personal communion and unity.⁷ A good biblical example is Solomon who was led astray by his foreign wives. Actually, the marriage covenant and commitment states it "... your God will be my God ..." This, the bride and groom vow to at wedding. Sharing of some basic religious faith, Shield believes, help the success of a Christian marriage and helps commitment to the great Christian virtues – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, quietness and self-control which are presented in Galatians 5:22.⁸

Biblically, the sacred nature of marriage is highlighted by the way in which scripture uses it as an illustration of the relationship between God and his people. Thus in the Old Testament, the Lord is Israel's faithful husband and Israel is His unfaithful wife (e.g. Hosea 2:2-23). In the New Testament, Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is His bride.

Christian Concept of Marriage Vows

There is an understanding that a Christian marriage has both benefits and burdens or prospects and problems; marriage has both moral obligations or duties, and legal rights and duties. Each married partner is responsible and accountable to the other partner.⁹ Bringing this into the context of marriage being a symbol of Christ's relationship with his church as it is established in Ephesians chapter 5, Verses 23-33, the book of Ephesians presents Christ being the Groom and the church His bride. The couples' physical appearances, intellectual growth, emotional stabilization, harmonization of interests, unifying perception controlling desires, instilling discipline and sustaining unity are learnt through intimate interaction, dialogue and negotiation between the husband and wife. The man and woman constitute the primary society.¹⁰ In the context of this complete, exclusive intimacy between the husband and the wife, Paul tells Christians that "for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Ephesians 5:3). In view of "the two becoming one flesh," Dzurgba wrote that the relationship between husband and wife excludes parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and friends on both sides; they are assistant referees who must remain on the edges of the field to provide minor services to check certain fouls. The referee of the married life is God Himself ably represented by the Holy Spirit and Holy Bible. In this context, even priests are part of assistant referees.

Paul describes the “one flesh” relationship of the couple as a “mystery”. This mysterious union of “one flesh” is difficult to understand or explain because its essence and meaning are beyond human understanding and explanation. The marriage is a combination of two bodies, souls or spirits, minds, hearts, sets of emotions and sexual organs.

Christian marriage vows from religious perspectives established that the husband and the wife live their lives together till death do them part, while African culture do not understand the permanent nature of the commitment to marriage, neither do they admit the commitment to fidelity or exclusiveness. The requirement of a legal marriage is monogamy which can be dissolved at the appropriate court of law. The theological reflections on marriage vows are that they are covenants that are binding, that should be characterized by faithfulness and constancy; and that which seals the commitment to oneness/togetherness, love, comfort, honour, faithfulness and permanence in marriage. The general meaning of marriage, especially in the context of Nigerian Baptist Convention Churches is that it is an exclusively heterosexual covenantal union between one man and one woman. The Christian concept of marriage vows is that marital vows are promises made between husband and wife at marriage and a commitment which announces an intention to attempt a permanent union. Contents of Christian marriage vows and the very important part of the vow is the issue of “for better for worse.”

The biblical basis for marital vows is that God ordained that a man and a woman come together and become one flesh. This involves personal commitment or troth, authorization by the family and/or society, cohabitation, consummation, caring love, exclusive monogamy and spiritual harmony. Some variables that have been found to have significant influence on marriage and marriage vows are couples’ employment and economic level, the marital cycle or age of marriage, gender, childbearing in marriage as well as temperament and sexual relationship of the couple.

Thesis of the Study

Studies have many factors accounting for marriage stability or instability. On marriage stability, such factors include physical and emotional compatibility, economy of the two parties, closeness in educational levels and spiritual levels of the two parties in marriage.¹¹ One of the safety valves that have also been put in place for stability of marriage institution is marriage vows. However, there has not been much study on the level of spirituality of the couple with respect to excellence in observance of these marriage vows, particularly among Christian couples in South Western Nigeria.

The major task of this study therefore is to see the interface between the spirituality of couples and their observance of marital vows. The general purpose of this study is to assess the spiritual level of couples in Oyo West Baptist Conference as it affects their observance of the marriage vows and how this observance of marriage vows could pose challenge to theological education, whether directly from theological educational instructor or from the theological students. Specifically, this study seeks to assess the level of observance of the content of marriage vows which are: love, faithfulness, relationship, togetherness and interpersonal issues.

The pertinent questions that this study is out to answer are:

1. Is there any significant difference in the observance of marriage vows among couples with high, medium and low spiritual levels?
2. What content of marriage vow is observed more according to the spiritual level of couples?

A study of this nature is significant in that it could ultimately promote marital stability in the church. Application of the information from this study could help instructors as well as students of theological institutions to procure excellence in observance of marital vows, thereby affecting the couples in the church to have stable marriages. Also, a study of this

nature would help to produce a healthy body of Christ in that when couples observe marriage vows to the letter, they tend to be satisfied with what marriage has to offer, hence a healthy relationship that reduces crisis in the church. In this sense, a study of this nature is significant to theologians in that the result of the study of this nature makes the work of the pastors easier. Couples that are satisfied maritally have a tendency of flowing with the pastor as well as boosting the work of the pastors.

Following the trend, a study of this kind would promote the well-being of the church and then the society at large as information by this study can be used by pastors, counselors, seminary lecturers, in seminars, workshops and sermons for the benefit of homes. Knowing fully well that healthy families make a healthy church and healthy churches make a healthy society hence, a healthy nation. In essence, the well-being of the society depends on the well-being of families that make up the society and the products of such families.¹² These are dependent on the stability of such families which could also be dependent on the observance of the marital vows by couples, especially Christian couples. This goes a long way in determining the success of the pastor, indirectly determining the success of the theological training which the pastor has received.

METHODOLOGY

The contextual scope of this study is the assessment of different contents drawn from the marriage vows that Baptist Churches in Oyo West Baptist Conference use at wedding service. The population for the study was all couples with church and court marriage in Oyo West Baptist Conference churches. The Conference has 25 associations with about 323 churches of various sizes and membership. Oyo West Baptist churches cover churches within Ibadan, Oyo and Ibarapa towns and villages around them.¹³

The sample for the study is about 50 percent of the Associations within the Oyo West Baptist Conference and 20 percent of the churches within the sampled associations. In essence, the sample for this study was 50 churches covering 13 associations within the Conference purposively sampled to include churches within the rural and urban areas, and churches of various sizes, namely: small, medium and large sizes. Couples from these sampled churches were also purposively sampled to cut across couples that were wedded in church and court registry, couples across various occupational strata, income and educational levels. Couples were also proportionately sampled to have a proportionate representation of couples of various marriage cycles. The sampling of subjects was also done in proportion to the sizes of the churches. In other words, two married men and three women (or vice versa) were sampled from churches with 250 and below membership, five married men and married women were sampled from churches with 251-500 memberships, seven married men and eight married women or vice versa were sampled from the churches with 501-750 membership, ten men and ten married women from churches with 751 and above membership. The total sample was 511 married men and women.

The instrument for the study is a questionnaire designed by the researcher. It has three sections, section A demands general information about the respondents while items 13 and 14 demand that each respondent rate his or her own spiritual life and that of the spouse on the scale of high, average or low. Part of section B also tests their level of spirituality. It has 4 items that assess their love for church programmes; time spent on prayers; time spent on bible study and meditations; and their cravings for fasting, retreats and other spiritual exercises. These were also rated on the scale of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 as very high – 5, high – 4, average – 3, low – 2 and very low – 1. Section C elicited information on other things that aid non-observance of marital vows. Cronbach Alpha of the instrument is 0.8865. The methods used in data analysis were both descriptive and inferential statistics. By descriptive the

researcher means standard deviations, mean scores, simple percentages; and by inferential statistics t-test and Analysis of Variance

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Difference in the Observance of Marriage Vows among Couples Based on Spiritual Levels

Findings from descriptive statistics show that the higher the spouses’ level of spirituality, the higher their level of observance. The same pattern was observed in the observance of all the contents of vow studied. Table 1 presents this.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Observance of Marriage Vows Based on Spiritual Level

Contents of Marriage Vows	Spiritual Level	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Love	High	202	17.74	4.817
	Average	279	16.57	4.876
	Low	29	14.17	5.726
Faithfulness	High	202	21.09	3.584
	Average	279	16.54	4.014
	Low	29	17.03	4.162
Togetherness	High	202	21.76	3.182
	Average	279	20.46	4.193
	Low	29	16.97	5.308
Relationship	High	202	18.08	3.962
	Average	279	17.76	4.393
	Low	29	14.59	5.925
Interpersonal	High	202	21.77	3.497
	Average	279	20.07	4.329
	Low	29	16.10	6.667

On marital vows relating to love, couples with high level of spirituality performed slightly higher than those with average level of spirituality. Similarly, couples with average level performed higher than those with low level of spirituality. But on faithfulness, couples with low level performed higher than average level. In all other contents, couples with high level of spirituality topped the other two groups. Among the five contents of marriage vows tested, observance is highest for all the three categories of level of spirituality in interpersonal vows. The high level spirituality group scored 21.77, and the low level group even scored 16.10. Togetherness is another area of high performance. Performance is lowest in love content.

Table 2: ANOVA of Observance of Marriage Vows Based on Spiritual Level

Contents of Marriage Vows		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Love	Between Groups	388.904	2	194.452	8.087	0.000 (S)
	Within Groups	2190.996		24.045		
	Total	2579.900				
Faithfulness	Between Groups	556.396	2	278.198	18.693	0.000 (S)
	Within Groups	7545.533		14.883		
	Total	8101.929				
Togetherness	Between Groups	645.682	2	322.841	21.227	0.000 (S)
	Within Groups	7710.836		15.209		
	Total	8356.518				
Relationship	Between Groups	311.314	2	155.657	8.305	0.000 (S)
	Within Groups	9502.154		18.742		
	Total	9813.469				
Interpersonal	Between Groups	936.914	2	468.457	26.649	0.000 (S)
	Within Groups	8912.460		17.579		
	Total	9849.35				
Total	Between Groups	3218.641	2	6609.32	29.031	0.000 (S)
	Within Groups	115424.4		227.662		
	Total	128643.0				

Table 2 presents a comparative study of observance of marriage vows between and within the three different levels of spiritual attainment of the subjects (i.e. high, average, and low) content by content. It was found that there are significant differences in the observance of love, togetherness, faithfulness, relationship and interpersonal issues based on spiritual differences.

A pair-wise comparison of spiritual levels according to contents of the marital vows was carried out to show where the differences lie, and the result is seen in table 3.

Table 3: Pair-wise Comparison of Spiritual Levels According to Contents of Marriage Vows

Content of Marriage	Spiritual (I)	Spiritual (J)	Mean Difference (I – J)	Std. Error	Significance
Love	High	Average	1.17*	0.453	0.037
		Low	3.57*	0.974	0.001
	Average	High	-1.17*	0.453	0.037
		Low	2.40*	0.957	0.044
	Low	High	- 3.57*	0.974	0.001
		Average	- 2.49*	0.957	0.044
Faithfulness	High	Average	1.56*	0.356	0.000
		Low	4.06*	0.766	0.000
	Average	High	- 1.56*	0.356	0.000
		Low	2.50*	0.753	0.004
	Low	High	-4.06*	0.766	0.000
		Average	- 2.50*	0.753	0.004
Togetherness	High	Average	1.30*	0.360	0.002
		Low	4.80*	0.774	0.000
	Average	High	- 1.30*	0.360	0.002
		Low	3.49*	0.761	0.000
	Low	High	- 4.80*	0.774	0.000
		Average	3.49*	0.761	0.000
Relationship	High	Average	0.32	0.400	0.732
		Low	3.49*	0.860	0.000
	Average	High	-0.32	0.400	0.732
		Low	3.18*	0.845	0.001
	Low	High	-3.49*	0.860	0.000
		Average	-3.18*	0.845	0.001
Interpersonal Issues	High	Average	1.17*	0.387	0.000
		Low	5.66*	0.833	0.000
	Average	High	- 1.70*	0.387	0.000
		Low	3.96*	0.818	0.000
	Low	High	-5.66*	0.833	0.000
		Average	-3.96*	0.818	0.000
Total	High	Average	6.04*	1.394	0.000
		Low	21.58*	2.996	0.000
	Average	High	- 6.04*	1.394	0.000
		Low	15.54*	2.944	0.000
	Low	High	-21.58*	2.996	0.000
		Average	-15.54*	2.944	0.000

“I” and “J” in the above table is pointing at the items for comparison as listed under them e.g. “I” points at either high or average or low spirituality while “J” points at the variables used for comparison of responding couples’ spirituality as listed under “J”. I - J (I minus J) is the mean difference in comparison i.e. the mean of subtraction of an item under “J” from a particular item under “I”

Where the mean difference carries asterisk, it shows the difference between the pairs is significant. Where the level of significance is 0.05 and below, it also shows significant

difference. This shows there is significant difference in the observance of love, faithfulness, togetherness, relationship, interpersonal issues and even overall by spiritual. The higher the level of spirituality, the higher their degree of observance and conversely, the lower the spirituality the lower their observance. The only difference is observed between the highly spiritual and averagely spiritual on relationship vows as it is revealed that there is no significant difference at the rate of their observance. Overall, it could be said that spirituality is a factor in observance of marriage vows as low spirituality has corresponding low observance while high and average spirituality has high and average corresponding observance respectively. This may be in agreement with Song's saying that "for Christians, the setting of human promising is fixed by biblical understanding of a steadfast God whose righteousness is expressed in his faithfulness to his promises."¹⁴ This understanding about God and how he holds His promises must have been inculcated in the Christians. The deeper they are in Christian life, the greater their understanding about marriage and its covenantal nature, having understood the nature of God Himself who is a covenant keeping God even when sometimes the human counterpart in the covenant with God does not keep his own part of the covenant.¹⁵ Little wonder, the bible says "as a man is, so his son shall be". Thus, children of God who are grounded in him would remember that they swore to "for better for worse" and this can keep the two to practically and faithfully keep to the vows without nursing the idea of divorce marital troubles notwithstanding.¹⁶

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was found that the higher the level of spirituality of the spouse, the higher their level of observance, and conversely, the lower the level of spirituality, the lower the degree of observance, even across all the contents of vows that are tested - love, faithfulness, togetherness, relationships and interpersonal issues. This is a pointer that God is a major force that can help couples to enjoy marriage to the fullest. In other words, the more one releases oneself to God, the more He is able to help one in marital relationships, especially in building suitable and lasting relationships. Hence, the researcher recommends that youth programmes (GA, Lydia, RA and students' fellowship) be reviewed and directed more towards teaching them the importance of keeping vows right from that stage, so that when they are married it would not be difficult to keep marriage vows. Also, she recommends that Christian women take it upon themselves to model the girls and watch them as they grow up spiritually. By this, they would be able to have impact on them as they make decisions about marriage. The parents should also insist on church wedding as well as high level of spirituality of the spouse-to-be, since that is seen to affect observance of marital vows more.

ENDNOTES

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