



Publication Date: May 20, 2025
<http://ujres.org.ng/index.php/ujres/index>

PAUL'S CONCEPT OF MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR CHRISTIAN MARRIED COUPLES TODAY

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Abstract

This study examines Paul's concept of marriage and sexuality and its implication for Christian married couples today. Using mixed-methods approach, this research reveals the cultural and historical background of Paul's teachings, exploring how his concept of marriage and sexuality was shaped by Jewish and Greco-Roman influences. The findings of this study highlight the importance of love and respect, mutual submission and healthy intimacy in Christian marriage. The study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the nature of Christian marriage and sexuality, promoting a deeper understanding of Paul's teachings and their relevance for contemporary Christian couples. The study concludes that ultimately, Paul's concept of marriage and sexuality as presented in his New Testament writings provide a rich understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage and human sexuality. Through his teachings, Paul emphasizes the importance of mutual submission, love and respect in marriage as well as the need for self-control, purity and healthy communication. Some of the recommendations in the study amongst others include, Christian married couples should prioritize active communication, listening to one another and expressing themselves in a clear and respectful manner.

Keywords: Marriage, Sexuality, Concept, Paul, Married Couples.



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Introduction

Marriage is derived from the Greek word "gamos" γάμος • which can be understood as an ageless contract designed by God for the purpose of unification of man and woman. For this reason, over the years, it has been acclaimed a sacred and vulnerable institution. It is also believed to be the fundamental aspect of the society (Ezeah 20). The value of marriage differs from culture to culture, from ethnic group to ethnic group, depending on the way each group perceives marriage. To some people marriage is a lifelong union, while some see it as a contract which gets broken when spouses get tired. Both the purpose of establishing the institution of marriage is for a lifelong union. This why Jesus told the Pharisees in the book of Mathew 19: 3-5 that God created the male and female and for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (NKJV, Bible). In line with this, Odemenlam, Justin and Igbanusi (20) submitted that most Africans see marriage as a lasting agreement between a man and a woman who have consented to live a life of devotion and sharing with each other for the purpose of promoting the is mutual growth and welfare as persons in their journey through life.

Marriage is a socially legitimized sexual union, a life and death struggle maintained through the forces of law, companionship, friendship and romantic love. It is also maintained by bounding relationship which develop as the couple share day to day routine such as feeding, bathing and taking responsibility of their children (Charlin5). Marriage is like a partnership contract without escape clause. This means that marriage connotes a lifelong arrangement where couple should permanently survive a multitude of demanding situations such as illness and financial constraints among others. The primary aim of this union is to love, protect, cherish, understand, compliment and help each other. According to (Undyaunde and Uga 60) marriage also involves sexual intercourse for procreation, transfer of children born out of the marriage for future companionship. Marriage is a blending of two lives and union of two natures, it is like an egg in the hands of husband and wife which must be carefully cared for and nurtured to avoid breakage. It involves understanding, love, peace, patience, perseverance, trust, cordial relationship, free communications and forgiveness among others. The truth is that when a man and woman come together in marriage, they come from different background and with different mindsets and benefits built up based on their background experience. The expectation is that they would, in the course of living together adjust to each other and grow into deeper love and oneness thereby increasing the stability of their marital relationship.

Sexuality is not about who you have sex with or how often you have it, sexuality is about your sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours, towards other people. You can find other people physically, sexually or emotionally attractive and all those things are apart of your sexuality. Sexuality is diverse and personal, and it is an important part of who you are discovering your sexuality can be a deliberating, exerting and positive experience. Sex is one dimension of the attraction that take place between men and women. It can be a very powerful force of attraction. Probably for some, or many, it



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is the most powerful source of attraction. If two individuals are attracted to each other, it maybe, in a number of ways physical, sexual, ideological, emotional.

Sex, of course is a very essential, dimension of the relationship because it allows the continuation of the human race. And very importantly, it allows us to bring into this world those who would remember God and would contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. The outcome of the union of sperm and ovum is the child that comes to this world. The union of the marriage is to bring a child to this world. Not only do you create unity between the husband and the wife and the marriage comes to this world, but also through this marriage the family is created. so far, the attitude towards sex in different cultures, in different religions, have been basically attitudes commensurate to childhood or adolescence. People's understanding of sexuality is either mixed with a lot of ignorance, a lot of lack of knowledge about sex or a lot of slyness.

Paul's concept of marriage

Marriage, which is essential to God's plan of happiness, was instituted among our first parents, Adam and Eve, even before the fall. In every dispensation since, prophets bearing the holy priesthood have taught God's eternal plan and have been witnesses to the central nature of marriage and the family in that plan. One of those prophets was Paul. During his ministry in the meridian of times, Paul encountered a Church membership that was changing with the influx of Gentile converts. These converts, many of whom were Greek, had been reared in a morally corrupt society and were often undisciplined and self-conceited. At times, their background created disorder within their branches and prompted numerous questions as they struggled to understand what true discipleship entailed. Questions arose regarding marriage. Paul responded with sensitivity yet directness as he clarified the relevant doctrines. This paper addresses some of his inspired teachings on marriage.

First, Paul came from a Judaic background (Acts 21:39; Romans 11:1) wherein marriage was viewed, traditionally, as a religious duty of utmost importance. According to an early delineation of the 613 precepts contained in the law of Moses, marriage was listed as the first. Customarily, Jewish men and women married between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, although some were as young as fourteen. It is likely that Paul would have wanted to comply with the traditional religious expectation of marriage.

Second, Paul was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5), one of the strictest bodies of Judaism (Acts 26:5), and prided himself in being a devout adherent to all of Jewish law. Tutored "at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers," Paul became, by his own admission, "zealous toward God" (Acts 22:3). In fact, Paul described himself as even "more exceedingly zealous" in fulfilling the requirements of the law than were his peers (Galatians 1:14). It seems plausible that Paul's zealous determination to strictly obey the totality of the law would have extended to marriage. If Paul "lived unmarried as a Jerusalem Pharisee," noted Frederic Farrar, "his case was entirely exceptional."

Third, evidence suggests that Paul was either a member or an official representative of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish senate. As either member or representative of the Sanhedrin, Paul would have



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been obligated to live in harmony with Jewish customs. The Sanhedrin, comprising chief priests, scribes, and elders, served as the supreme legislative council and court of justice in Judea. Members of the Sanhedrin were required to be married and to be fathers, both considered requirements to the development of wisdom and trustworthiness. As a representative of the Sanhedrin, Paul said, “Many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them” (Acts 26:10). Paul’s presence as a witness to the stoning of Stephen is further evidence of his association with the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:58).

Fourth, Paul’s teachings on marriage are, themselves, indicative of his conviction to the importance of marriage in God’s eternal plan. “Marriage is honourable in all,” (Hebrews 13:4) Paul wrote, and “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11). Priesthood leaders, Paul counseled, such as bishops, were to be married. In his instructions to Timothy, Paul wrote: “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Similar counsel was given to Titus (Titus 1:6). Prophesying of the apostasy of the last days, Paul warned, “In the latter times some shall depart from the faith, . . . forbidding to marry” (1 Timothy 4:1, 3). It would be inconsistent for Paul to characterize those who would forbid or counsel against marriage as having departed from the faith if he were himself anti-marriage. So these teachings, as well as others Paul gave during his apostolic ministry, are testaments to the favorable feelings he had toward marriage.

Paul was qualified to speak on marriage because of his personal experience as he taught Church members about marriage. Since experience and credibility are so closely intertwined in the minds of most people, the Saints of that day would have been more likely to listen to Paul’s counsel if they believed he had learned, by his own experience, what a marital relationship was really like. But even more important, Paul was an Apostle, a special witness of Christ. Living and knowing well the doctrine of the Church, he would have been able to teach that doctrine in the authority of his divine calling. Subject to the overall power and authority of Peter, the President of the Church at that time, Paul possessed the right, the power, and the authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people. Paul knew that salvation was not to be found in the tenets of the law, but rather in Christ. His example of discipleship was described by his declaration:

“I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, “And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:8–9).

Convert, disciple, Apostle—Paul was a great advocate and defender of the faith. His teachings, including those on marriage, reflect his discernment of the unique needs and concerns of a disparate, changing Church membership and his inspiration regarding the doctrines that should be taught. Paul’s most pivotal teachings on the subject of marriage are found in 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 11, and Ephesians 5.



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Paul's Concept of Sexuality

Paul's views about sexuality were influenced by prevailing views about sexuality in the Roman Empire and in dialogue with queer people in his audiences. Paul talks about sex a lot, because most Romans talked about sex. People in the Roman world had sex, with and without consent, in a variety of ways and with a variety of partners, and those experiences influenced their writings. Paul was part of this society, and his positions were shaped by it. Paul talks about sex in a number of different ways across his letters. Sometimes he discusses sexual practices in detail. Sometimes he just alludes to specific sexual practices or sexual immorality generally. Paul also includes Greek terms connected to sex in vice lists that describe the immoral behavior of those who do not display faith in God. It is often difficult—if not impossible!—to determine exactly what sexual practices Paul refers to. When Paul talks about “flesh” or “desire,” for instance, his use of these ideas tend to suggest uncontrolled sexuality. When Paul says to avoid *porneia* (frequently translated “sexual immorality”), he could be referring specifically to sex work (see 1Cor 6:9). However, in the first century CE, Romans like Paul used *porneia* to refer to all sorts of sexual practices they deemed abnormal and un-Roman—much like some people do with terms like “slut” today. Other terms—like *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in 1Cor 6:9 or *paraphusin* in Rom 1:26–27—seem to refer to specific sexual practices or preferences, but scholars disagree on exactly what those are. Translation frequently obscures what Paul says or doesn't say about sex and creates anti-LGBTQ+ interpretations.

Whatever the terms mean, Paul's discussions of sexuality respond to specific situations happening among his audiences. For instance, Paul harshly condemns the Corinthians for including in their assembly a man who takes his father's wife and tells his audience they should “hand him over to Satan for his flesh's ruin” (1Cor 5:1–5). In 1Cor 7:1–16 and 1Cor 7:25–40, Paul argues that people should remain celibate and single if possible. However, if anyone cannot control their sexual desires, then they should get married in order to have sex. Paul tells married folks that they should not remain celibate if either partner desires sex. This sexual advice is rooted in the apocalyptic orientation of his broader theology. Paul believes that God's justice will arrive on earth during his lifetime. He considers his theology and sexual ethics as temporary measures during this delay. Romans thought good sexual behavior was characteristic of elite, freeborn, Roman men. Women, enslaved persons, the poor, or foreigners were incapable of good sexual behavior.

Paul largely follows this Roman sexual hierarchy. In doing so, he connects sex and sexuality to ethnicity. Paul's ideas about marriage and celibacy align with the Roman idea of controlling desire. When Paul refers to sex practices that are “unnatural” in Rom 1:26–27, for instance, he uses the same phrase Roman writers used to associate these practices with foreign deviance. In 1Thess 4:1–8, Paul instructs his audience to control their bodies—unlike the *ethnē* (nations) who don't know God. In 1Cor 5:1, Paul says that the “sexual immorality” in Corinth's Christ-assembly is so bad that even the *ethnē* don't do it. The term *ethnē* (the root of the English ethnicity) is same term the Romans used to describe the foreign nations it conquered. For Paul, as for Rome, immoral sexuality is whatever foreigners do.



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These ideas about sexuality infuse Paul's letters, even when a passage does not seem to be talking about sex. For instance, the main focus of Rom 13:1–7 is how Christ-followers should relate to the ruling authorities—that is, the Roman Empire. However, later in the same chapter (Rom 13:11–14), Paul urges his audience to avoid revelry, drunkenness, quarrelling, jealousy ... and “illicit sex and licentiousness.” This list replicates Roman vices that were associated with the lack of (sexual) self-control associated with foreigners. Morally good subjects submit to Rome's peace and control their sexual desires; morally corrupt subjects resist authority and lack self-control. The entire passage, then, participates in the Roman Empire's practice of using sexual practices to portray non-Roman ethnicities as deviant.

When readers come to Paul's letters looking for his singular “view” on sexuality, we assume that his perspective was and is the authority—both for ourselves and in the ancient world. But Paul was not the only authoritative voice among first-century Christ-followers. Paul was one among many apostles—one of many different genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and social statuses—who were proclaiming what it meant to follow Christ in a world ruled by Rome. We see Paul arguing with his audiences, which means they argued back. We even see Paul arguing with queer folks, those who challenged Roman notions of “good” gender and sexuality, when he offers his own opinions about hair length and women's roles in the assembly (1Cor 11, 14). Listening to these voices provides an important entry point to explore the fullness of sexuality in Paul's letters and the people around them. Sexuality is everywhere in Paul's letters, not only in the few places where it is explicitly discussed. Sexuality was and is always connected to ethnicity and race, including in Paul's letters. Paul's perspectives come in response to other followers of Christ, who bring up their own theological ideas about sexuality. Amos Jibrin was interviewed and was of the view that marriage is a union between a man and a woman and not between a man and a fellow man or woman and fellow woman. He went further to say that according to Paul, sex is supposed to be enjoyed by both couples aside engaging it for procreation. Couple should not use sex as a means of punishment for each other and when abstaining from sex it should be done on mutual agreement in times of fasting.

Unbending Attitude of couples

An unbending attitude in a couple can be a significant obstacle to a healthy and fulfilling relationship. When one or both partners refuse to yield or compromise, it can create a stalemate, leading to feelings of frustration, resentment, and anger. This inflexibility can manifest in various ways, such as an unwillingness to listen to each other's perspectives, a refusal to apologize or forgive, or an insistence on having one's own way, regardless of the consequences. The causes of an unbending attitude in a couple can be complex. Past experiences, such as trauma or betrayal, can lead to a deep-seated need for control and a reluctance to yield. Cultural or societal expectations can also play a role, particularly if one or both partners have been socialized to prioritize independence and self-reliance over interdependence and mutual support. Additionally, personality traits, such as pride or stubbornness, can contribute to an unbending attitude. The effects of an unbending attitude on a relationship can be far-reaching and devastating. When couples are unable to find common ground or compromise, it can lead to a



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breakdown in communication, intimacy, and trust. Conflicts can escalate, and resentments can build, creating a toxic and hostile environment. In extreme cases, an unbending attitude can even lead to the demise of the relationship. To overcome an unbending attitude, couples must be willing to engage in open and honest communication, active listening, and empathy. They must be willing to yield, compromise, and find common ground. This requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to take risks, and to trust each other. Couples can also benefit from seeking the help of a therapist or counselor, who can provide guidance and support in navigating conflicts and developing healthier communication patterns. Ultimately, a healthy and fulfilling relationship requires a willingness to be flexible, adaptable, and open to growth and change. By letting go of an unbending attitude and embracing a more flexible and compromising approach, couples can build a stronger, more resilient relationship that is better equipped to navigate life's challenges.

The role of communication and conflict resolution

At the heart of conflict resolution is open communication. When couples communicate effectively, they create a safe space to express their feelings, needs, and concerns without fear of judgment. This openness fosters trust, which is essential for a strong marriage. There are a multitude of reasons why we should aim to communicate and resolve conflict well.

1. It can decrease stress level.

When we don't communicate and resolve conflicts, we will experience a higher level of stress in our lives. Negative feelings, negative reactions, hurt and resentment build up and accumulate. If they are not expressed, the experience of holding them back can produce stress in our lives.

Furthermore, this accumulation of negative emotions adversely affects our relationships, and these distressed relationships in turn add to our stress level. If you have unresolved conflict with your spouse in the morning, you have a nagging awareness that things are not right and need to be taken care of for the rest of the day. You know at the end of the day that you must go home and encounter your spouse, whether you talk about the conflict or not. Trying to function well at work while having this unresolved conflict also increases our stress. Stress adversely affects our health in various ways, including wear and tear on our bodies, cardiovascular effects, and digestive problems. Dr. Amit Sood, a medical doctor at the Mayo Clinic, says that stress worsens most medical conditions. In *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living* (13), he mentions that one of the primary buffers against stress is cultivating and nurturing our social support network, including our spouse, family, and close friends. It involves caring for our relationships! And how do we cultivate and nurture those relationships? Dr. Sood states, "Sharing what you're feeling dilutes your fears, takes a burden off you and invites useful ideas. Suppressed fears often bubble up as anger and violence. The less need you have to suppress your thoughts and emotions, the more authentic you'll be and the better you'll feel." Sharing what you are feeling is a primary part of communication and is part of conflict resolution!



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2. It prevents depression.

Depression can result from not communicating or resolving conflict. When we avoid sharing our feelings, and/or we have chronic unresolved conflict, we can feel stuck, alone, misunderstood, unknown, unimportant, insignificant, and not cared for. It is important to note that depression is not only experienced psychologically, but also physically. Depression has implications for quality of sleep, including issues such as fatigue, insomnia, oversleeping, and restlessness. Depression also has implications for eating and drinking issues, such as weight gain, weight loss, loss of appetite, eating unhealthy, and alcohol abuse. One way to address these physical results of depression is to make sure that we are communicating and sufficiently working through any unresolved conflict.

Conclusion

Paul's concept of marriage and sexuality, as presented in his New Testament writings, provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage and human sexuality. Through his teachings, Paul emphasizes the importance of mutual submission, love, and respect in marriage, as well as the need for self-control, purity, and healthy communication. The implications of Paul's teaching for Christian married couples today are significant. In a world where marriage and sexuality are increasingly viewed as mere social constructs, Paul's concept of marriage and sexuality offers a refreshing and counter-cultural vision of the nature and purpose of human relationships. By embracing Paul's concept of marriage and sexuality, Christian married couples can build strong and healthy marriages that are grounded in mutual submission, love, and respect. They can also cultivate a deeper understanding of the nature and purpose of human sexuality, and live out their marriages in a way that honors God and reflects the love and unity of Christ.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that Paul's concept of marriage and sexuality remains highly relevant for Christian married couples today. By exploring the biblical foundations of marriage and sexuality, and by applying Paul's teachings to contemporary issues and challenges, Christian married couples can build strong and healthy marriages that reflect the love and unity of Christ.

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