
Reevaluation of the Causes, Effects, and Conflict Resolution among Christian Marital Relationships in Nigeria

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Abstract

This seminar reevaluates the causes, effects, and biblical approaches to conflict resolution in Christian marital relationships in Nigeria. Despite marriage being a sacred covenant, rising rates of discord, triggered by poor communication, financial stress, in-law interference, sexual incompatibility, educational disparities, and social media misuse, threaten its stability. While existing studies identify surface-level causes, they often neglect the spiritual roots of conflict and underutilize Scripture as a primary framework for resolution. This study fills that gap by offering a purely theological analysis grounded in secondary religious sources. The aim is to construct a biblically faithful model for understanding and resolving marital conflict, with objectives including exegeting key passages (e.g., Matt. 18:15-17; Col. 3:13), analyzing theological commentaries, and synthesizing a practical conflict resolution framework. Employing a doctrinal research methodology, the study relies exclusively on the Bible and authoritative Christian literature, excluding empirical or secular data. Focused on Nigerian Christian couples, it deliberately omits non-Christian marital contexts and legal dimensions. The research is significant for equipping couples, pastors, and churches with a Gospel-centered approach to reconciliation, thereby strengthening families and witnessing to the transformative power of grace. Justified by Scripture's

sufficiency (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and the urgent pastoral need in Nigeria, the study finds that unresolved conflict stems from unrepentant sin and neglected biblical protocols. It concludes that true resolution requires humility, confrontation, limitless forgiveness, and ecclesial accountability. The contribution lies in contextualizing Christ's conflict resolution model for Nigerian Christian marriages, with recommendations for preaching, counselling, and church-based mediation rooted in divine truth rather than cultural compromise.

Introduction

Marriage, as divinely instituted in the Garden of Eden, stands as one of the most sacred and foundational covenants in human society. Genesis 2:24 declares, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh," establishing marriage not merely as a social contract but as a spiritual union reflecting the eternal relationship between Christ and His Church (Eph. 5:31-32). In the Nigerian Christian context, this covenant carries profound theological, cultural, and communal weight. Marriage is not viewed as a private affair between two individuals but as a public, familial, and ecclesial commitment. Yet, despite its sacred design and societal reverence, the institution of Christian marriage in Nigeria is increasingly besieged by conflict, a conflict that, if left unresolved, leads to fragmentation, emotional trauma, and spiritual desolation.

The contemporary Nigerian Christian family finds itself at a crossroads. While the Church continues to preach the sanctity of marriage, many couples struggle silently under the weight of unresolved disputes rooted in financial strain, sexual dissatisfaction, extended family interference, communication breakdowns, and, increasingly, the corrosive influence of social

media. Scholars such as Igwe and Nwuzor³³¹ rightly acknowledge that “dispute is part and parcel of human existence,” yet within the Christian framework, conflict is not to be merely tolerated or managed; it is to be redeemed. The theological imperative is not avoidance but transformation: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). This seminar, therefore, undertakes a reevaluation of marital conflict not through the lens of sociology or psychology, but through the authoritative, redemptive lens of Holy Scripture and its faithful theological interpreters. It seeks to diagnose the spiritual roots of marital discord, trace its devastating effects on the soul and society, and prescribe a biblical model for resolution grounded in repentance, forgiveness, and grace.

The central theological problem this study confronts is the dissonance between the biblical ideal of marriage and the lived reality of conflict among Nigerian Christian couples. While numerous empirical studies, such as those by Agbola and Oluwatosin³³² on university staff or Onyekuru³³³ on counselling dynamics. They have catalogued the surface-level causes of marital strife; they often fail to penetrate to the spiritual core: the presence of sin, the absence of grace, and the neglect of Christ’s explicit commands for reconciliation. The gap in existing scholarship is not a lack of data but a lack of doctrinal depth. There is an urgent need for a study that does not merely describe the symptoms of marital breakdown but diagnoses its spiritual pathology and prescribes a cure drawn from the medicine of Scripture.

³³¹ I. O. Igwe & DC Nwuzor “Examination of Traditional Judicial Methods of Settlement of Dispute in Ebonyi State”. Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka *Journal of Commercial and Property Law* Vol. II (I) (2024): 75.

³³² J. O. Agbola and S. A. Oluwatosin, “Patterns and Causes of Marital Conflicts among Staff of Selected Universities in South West, Nigeria,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 5, no. 8 (2018): 65–73.

³³³ B. U. Onyekuru, “Crossing the T’s and Dotting the I’s in Marriage: The Counsellor’s Perspectives,” *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 14, no. 10 (2019): 217–224.

This study fills that gap by addressing four critical theological deficiencies in current discourse. First, there is a widespread failure to recognize that marital conflict, at its root, is a manifestation of indwelling sin, pride, selfishness, unforgiveness, and a lack of love (James 4:1–2). Second, the clear, step-by-step protocol for conflict resolution outlined by Christ in Matthew 18:15-17 is routinely ignored or misapplied, replaced by gossip, litigation, or passive aggression. Third, the doctrine of forgiveness, central to the Gospel and to marital health, is often reduced to a sentimental platitude rather than embraced as a costly, Christlike act of obedience (Col. 3:13). Fourth, the Church, as the body of Christ, frequently abdicates its God-ordained role as a community of accountability and reconciliation, leaving wounded couples to navigate their pain in isolation. This study, grounded entirely in secondary theological sources, seeks to restore biblical fidelity to the discourse on Christian marriage in Nigeria by constructing a comprehensive, Scripture-saturated framework for understanding and resolving marital conflict.

Marriage and Family in the Nigerian Context

Marriage as an institution is an important pillar of a healthy society. However, presently many marriages are experiencing marital conflicts, which could be as a result of the following: adultery, barrenness, women's equal rights to property, children's rights, etc. All these and many more factors have contributed to increased marital/family conflicts. In most cases, the spouses are unable to settle their conflicts by themselves, and this often leads to a logical step of seeking a solution. Such a step can lead the spouses in dispute to litigation, mediation or arbitration. Marital conflicts have deleterious effects on the mental, physical and family health of couples as well as the children.

Igwe and Nwuzor acknowledged the fact that “Dispute is part and parcel of human existence”³³⁴. Conflicts in human relationships are inevitable, especially in marriage relationships³³⁵. Married couples must not allow conflicts to fester. Thus, one must not only be proactive but also intentional towards conflict resolution. Conflict is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something the first party cares about. While the start of a conflict is framed as a product of perception, evidence of conflict does not surface until these perceptions influence one or the other party’s actions. Conflict resolution processes, therefore, are likely to be more successful if they address both the actions and perceptions of both parties to the dispute. The family plays an important role in the design and stabilization of society. Family squabbles can be resolved without creating the intense polarization that almost inevitably flows from marital litigation.

Marital conflict is a universal phenomenon that transcends cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic boundaries, including Nigeria, where it remains a pervasive challenge in family life. It refers to interpersonal discord between legally married partners, husband and wife, characterized by opposing interests, persistent disagreements, and relational strain. Such conflicts arise when spouses pursue divergent goals or unmet needs, leading to tension, misunderstanding, and outright strife within the marital unit³³⁶. Unlike general family disputes, marital conflict is specifically confined to the dyadic relationship between spouses, often fueled by a range of interrelated factors. These include financial management and income levels, interference from in-laws and extended relatives,

³³⁴ I. O. Igwe & DC Nwuzor “Examination of Traditional Judicial Methods of Settlement of Dispute in Ebonyi State”. Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Journal of Commercial and Property Law Vol. II (I) (2024): 75.

³³⁵ B Ola-Sammuel, Conflict Resolution in Marriage, Nigerian Tribune, August 6, 2022.

³³⁶ Agbola and Oluwatosin, “Patterns and Causes of Marital Conflicts” 65–73.

sexual dissatisfaction, recreational habits, social circles, fertility issues, including the number or sex of children, professional demands, and the quality of love and care exchanged between partners³³⁷.

Economic resources play a pivotal role in shaping marital dynamics. While every household aspires to a comfortable standard of living, the ability to meet basic physiological needs has a direct influence on marital satisfaction. When couples struggle to fulfil essential financial obligations, frustration and dissatisfaction may mount, eroding mutual respect and increasing the likelihood of conflict³³⁸. Even when resources are scarce, families may attempt to downplay the significance of money; however, there exists a threshold beyond which deprivation becomes intolerable. At this point, resentment can fester, giving rise to anger and hostility that undermine the marital bond. Equally critical is how financial resources are managed: opaque, unequal, or unilateral decision-making regarding household expenditures can breed mistrust and quarrels, even in households with adequate means.

In-laws and extended family members frequently serve as inadvertent catalysts of marital discord. Though parental concern for their children's welfare is natural, overstepping boundaries, by taking sides, offering biased advice, or encouraging rebellion against a spouse, can destabilize the marital ecosystem. Parents who openly criticize their children's spouses, instruct them on how to retaliate for perceived wrongs, or interfere in domestic affairs contribute significantly to domestic unrest. Similarly, spouses who uncritically accept such directives, viewing them as expressions of love, risk compromising the integrity of their own marriage. The influence of extended kin extends beyond emotional meddling; excessive

³³⁷ Onyekuru, "Crossing the T's and Dotting the I's in Marriage, 217–224.

³³⁸ B. U. Onyekuru and J. C. Ugwu, "Emotional Intelligence as a Correlate of Marital Stability: The Counselling Implications," *European Journal of Psychological Research* 4, no. 1 (2017): 53–60.

financial support directed toward siblings or parents at the expense of the nuclear family can provoke resentment and conflict between spouses, particularly when shared responsibilities and projects are neglected due to prioritisation of extended family obligations.

The social networks spouses maintain also exert considerable influence. Individuals often emulate the behaviors, dress codes, attitudes, and lifestyles of their friends. When these external influences are perceived by one partner as inappropriate, disrespectful, or threatening to marital harmony, they become sources of friction. Friends who actively encourage antagonism toward a spouse rather than reconciliation pose a serious threat to marital cohesion. Bruno cautions that persistent negative influence from third parties, whether relatives or friends, can lead to irreversible breakdowns, especially when one or both spouses are gullible, obstinate, or emotionally vulnerable, potentially culminating in separation or divorce³³⁹.

Beyond material and social factors, time and emotional presence are vital to marital health. Marriage, fundamentally rooted in companionship and procreation, requires meaningful interaction. However, work pressures often compel one or both partners to spend disproportionate time away from home, substituting emotional absence with material provision, a strategy that rarely satisfies deeper relational needs. Furthermore, childbearing remains a central expectation in many marriages. Couples who remain childless for extended periods, or who bear children of an undesired gender, often face intense societal and familial pressure. This pressure can trigger feelings of inadequacy, resentment, or even the desire to terminate the marriage in pursuit of another union that promises the desired offspring. In some cases, relentless

³³⁹ Bruno, U. Onyekuru. "Communication as Marital Conflict Resolution Strategy on Marital Stability among Married People in South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria." *Journal of Education in Developing Areas* 30, no. 1 (March 2022): 108.

pressure from relatives to remarry can create irreparable rifts, even among couples willing to wait for divine timing.

Sexual intimacy, too, is a cornerstone of marital stability. Mutual sexual satisfaction is not merely a physical need but an emotional bond. When one partner is unable or unwilling to meet the other's sexual expectations, it can lead to frustration, infidelity, or emotional detachment. Conversely, excessive sexual demands can induce pressure and resentment. Promiscuity, often a consequence of unmet sexual needs or emotional neglect, introduces additional risks, including sexually transmitted infections, betrayal, and ultimately, dissolution of the marriage.

At the heart of an enduring marriage lies love and care. While initial affection often motivates union, its sustained expression determines longevity. Love fosters sensitivity to a partner's needs, promotes empathy, and discourages harm or neglect. When love wanes, due to stress, neglect, or unmet expectations, individualism takes root. Spouses become self-centered, indifferent to each other's well-being, and increasingly prone to fault-finding, grudges, and unresolved grievances. This erosion of emotional connection often precipitates disengagement, escalating conflict, and, eventually, separation or divorce.

Despite these challenges, most individuals enter marriage with the aspiration of building a stable, fulfilling family life centered on mutual growth, child-rearing, and lasting companionship. Marital stability, as defined by Usoroh, Ekot, and Inyang, is characterized by a low propensity for separation or divorce, marked by minimal conflict, shared purpose, unity, and mutual respect³⁴⁰. Stable marriages foster peace, happiness, and opportunities for personal and familial achievement. In contrast, marital instability manifests through frequent quarrels, dissatisfaction, and thoughts or actions that signal

³⁴⁰ C. Usoroh, M. Ekot, and E. S. Inyang, "Spousal Communication Styles and Marital Stability among Civil Servants in Akwa Ibom State," *JHER* 13 (2010): 74–84.

impending dissolution. Research confirms that social, behavioral, sexual, religious, and financial variables significantly shape marital stability³⁴¹. Age at marriage also plays a role: individuals marrying between ages 14–17 are twice as likely to divorce compared to those marrying between 28–30, with similar patterns observed among men³⁴². Education level further correlates with stability, though findings are nuanced; some studies indicate that highly educated women exhibit greater marital stability than their less-educated counterparts³⁴³, while others suggest that higher education generally enhances marital satisfaction³⁴⁴. Economic status also matters: marriages involving higher socioeconomic standing tend to be more stable than those marked by poverty³⁴⁵. Further risk aspects include lack of counselling, reluctance to engage in dialogue, individualistic attitudes, and entrenched opposing viewpoints. Differing perspectives, sexual incompatibility, and poor communication have been identified as primary contributors to marital conflict, whereas locus of control appears unrelated³⁴⁶.

Amidst these challenges, effective communication emerges as a critical intervention strategy. Defined as the process of exchanging ideas, emotions, and information through mutually

³⁴¹ F. McGarry and C. Maqsood, “Family Conflict: The Causes and Consequences,” *Journal of Conflict Management and Resolution* 12, no. 8 (2020): 281–290.

³⁴² M. E. Spanier, “Factors Influencing Divorce among Married People,” *Journal of Social Sciences and Conflict Management* 14, no. 6 (2016): 172–180.

³⁴³ Spanier, “Factors Influencing Divorce

³⁴⁴ T. Hymann, “Determinants and Prevalence of Marital Instability among Married People in New Delhi Metropolis,” *International Journal of Humanities and Conflict Resolution* 8, no. 3 (2019): 56–71.

³⁴⁵ B. U. Harsheed, “Influence of Level of Education and Economic Status on Marriage Stability,” *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution* 6, no. 2 (2018): 32–40.

³⁴⁶ V. Boddi et al., “Conflicts within the Family and within the Couple as Contextual Factors in the Determination of Male Sexual Dysfunction,” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 12, no. 12 (2015): 2425–2435.

understood symbols and behaviors³⁴⁷. Communication serves as the lifeline of marital harmony. It facilitates openness, nurtures trust, allows for the expression of love and grievances, and provides a platform for collaborative problem-solving. Without it, secrecy, suspicion, and unilateral decisions thrive, breeding distrust and hostility. As Esere asserts that communication is indispensable to stable relationships, it cultivates love, tolerance, patience, and conflict management³⁴⁸. Idoko notes that over half of failed relationships stem from communication gaps³⁴⁹. Couples must establish honest, consistent channels for dialogue, embrace accountability, practice forgiveness, and move forward without holding onto past grievances. Secrecy, isolation, and silence have no place in a healthy marriage; they invite misinterpretation, accusation, and emotional alienation.

Positive communication strategies, including verbal and nonverbal expressiveness, assertiveness, active listening, empathy, and mutual respect for communication styles, are instrumental in resolving conflict and restoring connection³⁵⁰. Conversely, the absence of communication is a direct predictor of marital instability. Effective communication mitigates turbulence, prevents emotional trauma, reduces the likelihood of separation or divorce, and safeguards children from the adverse consequences of broken homes, including conduct disorders, antisocial behavior, and hindered personal development. Empirical evidence underscores its impact: found that communication significantly enhances love, tolerance, and

³⁴⁷ A. C. Egbo, C. E. Egbo, and S. C. Asogwa, "Influence of Communication on Marital Stability among Couples in Enugu Metropolis of Enugu State," *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)* 3, no. 1 (2020): 51–64.

³⁴⁸ M. Esere, "Influence of Spousal Communication on Marital Stability: Implication for Conducive Home Environment," *Edo Counselling Journal* 4, nos. 1 & 2 (2011).

³⁴⁹ C. E. Idoko, *Research in Education and Social Sciences* (Enugu: Our Saviour Press Ltd., 2011).

³⁵⁰ H. Islami, "Resolving Marital Conflicts," *South East European Review* 12, no. 1 (2016): 69–80.

trust among couples in Enugu Metropolis³⁵¹. Chikwe, in a study of 385 married individuals, confirmed that high levels of communication strongly correlate with marital adjustment and stability³⁵². Agbo identified communication shortfalls as among the most substantial contributors to marital instability³⁵³. This leads to higher rates of separation and divorce among couples with low communication frequency compared to those who communicate regularly.

In Nigerian society, marriage is one of the most esteemed social institutions, conferring respectability and adult status upon individuals. This cultural imperative causes considerable pressure on unmarried persons, especially women, to wed. Beyond personal fulfilment, marriage is widely perceived as the union of two families rather than two individuals. As such, any marital discord is viewed not as a private matter but as a potential source of tension between extended kin networks³⁵⁴.

Amiru recognizes three main forms of marriage practiced in Nigeria: traditional (native law and custom), religious (Christian or Islamic), and civil (court-based). Couples may opt for one, two, or all three, depending on cultural background and economic means. Two predominant marital structures exist: monogamy, one husband, one wife, and polygamy, one husband, multiple wives. Polygamy is prevalent across nearly all ethnic groups. Critics argue that it fosters rivalry among wives, while proponents contend it can promote cooperation and shared domestic responsibility. Regardless of perspective, marriage remains a highly valued institution in Nigeria, and

³⁵¹ C. Egbo, C. E. Egbo, and S. C. Asogwa, "Influence of Communication on Marital Stability among Couples in Enugu Metropolis of Enugu State," *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)* 3, no. 1 (2020): 51–64.

³⁵² L. Chikwe, "Influence of Communication on Adjustment and Marital Stability," *International Journal of Behavioural Sciences and Multidisciplinary Studies* 21, no. 8 (2019): 261–270.

³⁵³ C. Agbo, "The Ugly Side Effect of Communication Gap among Couples," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 12, no. 3 (2016): 38–45.

³⁵⁴ Amiru, "Failed Marriage, 6-10.

traditional unions are characteristically arranged between families, not between individuals, as is common in Western contexts³⁵⁵.

Marital Conflicts

Deutsch observes conflict as an action that prevents, obstructs, interferes with, injures, or renders ineffective another action with which it is incompatible. While this definition captures a broad understanding of conflict, it remains general and does not specifically address the nuances of marital discord, an omission this study seeks to remedy³⁵⁶. In contrast, Osita Agbu views conflict not as inherently positive or negative, but as an opportunity for transformation. He argues that the trajectory of any conflict depends less on its substance and more on the attitudes, upbringing, and information available to those involved³⁵⁷. This perspective aligns with the ancient Chinese proverb, “chaos gives rise to order,” suggesting that conflict can serve as a path to renewal, much like war being seen as a means to peace. Other scholars offer complementary definitions: Chaplin describes conflict as “the simultaneous occurrence of two or more mutually antagonistic impulses or motives”³⁵⁸. Dokun Oyeshola contends that conflict often originates not from objective facts, but from people’s subjective beliefs and perceptions about their goals³⁵⁹. Marital conflict brings high levels of disagreement, stressful and hostile interactions between spouses, disrespect, and verbal abuse. Cummings, however, offers a broader interpretation, defining it as “any major or minor interpersonal interaction that involved a

³⁵⁵ Amiru, “Failed Marriage.

³⁵⁶ Morton Deutsch, *The Resolution of Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

³⁵⁷ Joseph Talabi, “Conflict Resolution Strategies among Married Couples in the Anglican Church,” *LASU Journal of African Studies* (July 2022): 89–104, <https://lasujournalofafricanstudies.org.ng>.

³⁵⁸ J. P. Chaplin, *Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979), 109.

³⁵⁹ Talabi, “Conflict Resolution Strategies

difference of opinion, whether it was mostly negative or even mostly positive”³⁶⁰. Cummings further clarifies that everyday marital conflict encompasses routine exchanges, both significant and trivial, in which couples experience differing viewpoints. Thus, everyday marital conflict includes a wide spectrum of tactical and emotional expressions, ranging from positive to negative. Marital conflicts can arise over virtually any topic: couples report disputes concerning verbal and physical aggression, personality traits, behavior patterns, financial decisions, parenting styles, and intimacy. According to Sholfer and Shoben, marital relationships frequently encounter crises that lead to divorce, separation, broken homes, violence against either spouse, child neglect, and other devastating outcomes tied to intra-marital strife. Although couples enter marriage with an awareness of its intimate commitments and long-term implications, they often face challenges they feel unequipped to handle³⁶¹.

The survival of such marriages largely depends on how effectively couples manage their relational dynamics. Conflict management refers to the processes used to control conflict before, during, or after its emergence. Otite and Albert designate it as a more elaborate and expansive concept than mere resolution, involving not only settlement but also transformation. They emphasize that it requires long-term institutional arrangements, including formalized procedures and regulatory mechanisms designed to address conflicts wherever they occur³⁶². Actually, conflict management entails the elimination or neutralization of conflict before it escalates into a crisis, or the de-escalation of an ongoing crisis. Over time,

³⁶⁰ E. M. Cummings, “Children Exposed to Marital Conflict and Violence: Conceptual and Theoretical Directions,” in *Children Exposed to Marital Violence*, ed. G. W. Holden, R. Geffner, and E. N. Jouriles (Washington, DC: APA, 1998), 60.

³⁶¹ L. T. Sholfer and E. J. Shoben, *Psychology of Adjustment* (Cambridge: River Side Press, 1986).

³⁶² O. Otite and I. O. Albert, eds., *Community Conflicts in Nigeria: Management, Resolution and Transformation* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1999), 11.

scholarly discourse has reflected a tension between conflict management and conflict resolution. However, contemporary consensus now recognizes that conflict management can serve as a vital pathway toward lasting resolution.

Causes of Marital Conflicts in Christian Homes

Causes of marital conflicts in Christian homes are numerous, but a few others are highlighted in this study.

Poor Marital Communication

Effective communication stands at the heart of any successful marital relationship³⁶³. When spouses fail to communicate openly, honestly, and consistently, it undermines trust, fosters resentment, and invites misunderstanding. Meaningful marital communication involves active dialogue, asking questions, seeking clarification, offering timely responses, and accepting feedback without delay; even minor lapses can be misinterpreted as indifference or hostility. In many cases, what begins as a simple disagreement escalates into prolonged conflict due to poor communication patterns: purposeful conversations are replaced by incessant arguments over trivial matters, silence is used as a weapon, particularly by husbands, and emotional withdrawal replaces constructive engagement.

Sexual Incompatibility

A lack of sexual satisfaction between partners can become a potent source of marital distress. When one spouse's needs are consistently unmet or perceived as neglected, it may lead to emotional disconnection, diminished intimacy, and ultimately, extramarital affairs³⁶⁴. If left unaddressed, such dissatisfaction erodes mutual trust and affection, creating a fertile ground for

³⁶³ D. Edger, "What Will Make Marriage Work," in *Family Marital Relationships*, ed. D. Sper (Grand Rapids, MI: Radio Bible Class, 1996).

³⁶⁴ U. P. Amadi and F. N. Amadi, "Marital Crisis in the Nigerian Society: Causes, Consequences and Management Strategies," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 26 (2014): 133-43.

betrayal and long-term relational damage. Timely recognition and collaborative resolution of sexual discord are critical to preserving marital stability.

Extreme Sexual Orientation

Dramatic disparities in sexual preferences or behaviors between spouses can severely strain a marriage. Orientations or practices such as homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, sodomy, oral sex, or extreme sexual demand, especially when one partner holds contrasting values or low libido, can generate profound tension and alienation³⁶⁵. Often, these differences remain concealed until well into the marriage, making reconciliation difficult or impossible. Once discovered, such incongruences may trigger feelings of deception, shame, or rejection, leading to irreversible breakdowns in the relationship.

Extended Family Affairs/Issues

The influence of extended family members remains a significant contributor to marital instability in Nigerian society. Many couples struggle to navigate the expectations, interference, or favoritism exhibited by in-laws, particularly mothers- and sisters-in-law on the husband's side, or brothers- and fathers-in-law on the wife's side. Some individuals prioritize their biological kin over their spouse, leading to conflicts over resource allocation, decision-making authority, or emotional loyalty. When spouses feel compelled to choose between their partner and their family of origin, the resulting pressure often fractures the marital bond.

Cultural Influences

While shared cultural backgrounds may seem to promote compatibility, they do not guarantee harmony. Cultural norms vary widely even within the same community, shaping how individuals express emotions, resolve disputes, and interact

³⁶⁵ Amadi and F. N. Amadi, "Marital Crisis in the Nigerian Society.

with intimate partners. In some cultures, open expression of feelings is discouraged, fostering emotional suppression and passive-aggressive behavior. Where the family unit is central to social identity, rigid adherence to traditional roles may inhibit flexibility and mutual adaptation, thereby exacerbating misunderstandings and limiting opportunities for growth within the marriage.

Finances

Financial stress is among the most pervasive and destructive sources of marital conflict. Studies indicate that disagreements over money are more intense and consequential than non-financial disputes³⁶⁶. Couples seeking marital counselling frequently cite economic hardship as a primary concern, while those seeking financial advice often report underlying marital strife. Economic strain correlates strongly with increased blame, reduced emotional satisfaction, and heightened contemplation of divorce over time³⁶⁷. Furthermore, financial instability negatively impacts not only material well-being but also physical health, emotional resilience, and overall marital cohesion.

Case studies revealed that financial disagreements are among the most common sources of conflict. Most informants reported that husbands frequently spend money without consulting their wives, prompting retaliatory behavior from wives who then squander their own earnings. Common flashpoints include unpaid water and electricity bills, school fee arrears, accumulated debts, and discretionary spending³⁶⁸.

Social Incompatibility of Couples

³⁶⁶ K. L. Archuleta, "Couples, Money, and Expectations: Negotiating Financial Management Roles to Increase Relationship Satisfaction," *Marriage & Family Review* 49, no. 5 (2013): 391–411.

³⁶⁷ Archuleta, "Couples, Money, and Expectations."

³⁶⁸ Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies"

Some marriages are founded on superficial attraction rather than genuine compatibility. When partners differ significantly in social values, religious beliefs, ideological outlooks, or lifestyle expectations, early harmony often gives way to deepening discord. Unrealistic expectations, such as demanding perfection from a spouse or expecting marriage to fulfil every emotional need, set couples up for disappointment. Human fallibility ensures that idealized standards cannot be met, leading to frustration, criticism, and emotional withdrawal³⁶⁹. Additionally, imbalanced investment in the relationship, where one partner expects more than they give, fuels resentment and undermines equity, further destabilizing the union.

Educational and Rational Differences

Church members widely agree that modern marriages increasingly hinge on intellectual compatibility, unlike earlier generations, where such factors were less emphasized³⁷⁰. All respondents noted that couples who share similar educational attainment, particularly those who have reached at least the Ordinary Level, are more likely to value and sustain their marriages compared to those with significant disparities in education. Intellectual capacity is seen as instrumental in navigating socioeconomic challenges; conversely, ignoring or dismissing one partner's intellectual limitations can exacerbate economic strain. A few respondents highlighted that a wide educational gap between spouses, especially among younger couples, often leads to tension. In some cases, when the husband possesses higher education, he may resist counsel

³⁶⁹ Joseph Gambo and Bentu-Harami Rachel Nanlop, "Effects of Marital Conflict in Africa: The Nigerian Experience," *Journal of Human, Social & Political Science Research Editions* 6, no. 6 (October 2024), www.ssaapublications.com.

³⁷⁰ Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies

from others, including fellow church members, and pressure his wife to isolate the marriage from external influences³⁷¹.

Family Crises

Case studies identified poor communication as the primary driver of marital conflict, affecting both new and long-standing marriages equally. Additional sources of family crisis include disagreements over child-rearing practices, children's career choices, and the selection of marriage partners. These issues are frequently intensified by interference from extended family members and friends. Data indicate that unmonitored individual differences, when amplified by third parties, can severely erode family cohesion and significantly increase the likelihood of divorce³⁷².

In-Law Difficulties

Nigerian cultural norms traditionally view family as an extended network, not limited to the nuclear unit. This perspective creates friction in modern marriages, where Western ideals of independence clash with communal obligations. Informants explained that even after marriage, a son remains deeply tied to his parents and siblings, expected to provide care and support, an expectation that often intrudes upon the newly formed marital unit³⁷³. Similarly, in-laws frequently impose excessive demands on their sons and daughters, overlooking their own past responsibilities. These pressures are often weaponised to undermine the spouse's autonomy. Such interference comes from both sides of the family. Marrying into poverty presents another serious challenge, as in-laws may struggle to accept it. Most informants confirmed that barrenness is a common point of contention used to justify criticism. A few even attributed in-law hostilities

³⁷¹ Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies

³⁷² Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies

³⁷³ Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies

to occult practices, alleging that certain relatives seek wealth through malevolent means, including casting spells on their children's marriages, which profoundly disrupts marital harmony.

Sexual Challenges

All church members acknowledged that sexual difficulties affect a large proportion of Christian and non-Christian marriages across age groups. Common issues include premature ejaculation, low libido, stress-related impotence, perceived "uncleanliness" of sex within Christian contexts, infidelity, and erectile dysfunction. Many attribute these problems to a failure by couples, especially young ones, to adapt sexually to one another. A prevailing concern is that most couples find it extremely difficult to openly discuss their sexual needs and satisfaction levels³⁷⁴ Church leaders concurred, noting that medical factors such as chronic stress and dietary habits negatively impact sexual arousal. They also identified infidelity, absence of romantic intimacy, and non-consensual sexual activity as key contributors. Some leaders criticized certain churches for stigmatizing sexual intimacy as sinful, contradicting biblical teachings on marriage. Others pointed out that frequency, quality, and fidelity remain the most frequent sources of sexual tension in modern marriages.

Social Media Misuse

All church leaders and members identified social media misuse, as exemplified by WhatsApp and Facebook, as a growing threat to Christian marriages. The problem extends beyond flirtatious messages to include the exchange of explicit images and videos. Younger couples and some middle-aged adults are the most vulnerable. Danger arises when erotic content originates from friends, coworkers, or even fellow church members. The

³⁷⁴ Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies

anonymity and accessibility of digital platforms make these breaches difficult to monitor and prevent³⁷⁵.

Effects of Marital Crises

Marital conflict carries far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the couple to affect children, families, and broader society. Children raised in high-conflict households are at greater risk of developing behavioral problems, including school absenteeism, delinquency, low self-esteem, isolation, and chronic hopelessness³⁷⁶. Adolescence, a period marked by emotional volatility and underdeveloped moral reasoning, is particularly vulnerable; exposure to parental conflict increases susceptibility to criminal behavior, gang involvement, prostitution, and substance abuse³⁷⁷. Without stable familial guidance, these youths rarely internalize ethical norms or develop healthy social boundaries.

Family conflict also manifests in physical violence, inflicting direct harm on spouses and children. Chronic exposure to domestic tension triggers physiological stress responses, contributing to long-term health complications such as hypertension, immune suppression, premature ageing, and elevated risks of anxiety and depression³⁷⁸. Moreover, individuals in conflicted homes are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, illicit drug use, and unprotected or multiple-partner sexual activity, as coping mechanisms³⁷⁹. These behaviors not

³⁷⁵ Talabi, "Conflict Resolution Strategies

³⁷⁶ Amadi and Amadi, "Marital Crisis in the Nigerian Society".

³⁷⁷ Amadi and F. N. Amadi, "Marital Crisis in the Nigerian Society

³⁷⁸ W. Fabricius and L. Luecken, "Post-divorce Living Arrangements, Parent Conflict, and Long-term Physical Health Correlates for Children of Divorce," *Journal of Family Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2007): 195–205.

³⁷⁹ J. N. Fish, T. W. Pavkov, J. L. Wetchler, and J. Bercik, "Characteristics of Those Who Participate in Infidelity: The Role of Adult Attachment and Differentiation in Extradyadic Experiences," *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 40 (2012): 214–29.

only endanger personal health but also perpetuate cycles of dysfunction across generations.

Children who learn of parental infidelity exhibit altered communication patterns in their own relationships, developing poor interpersonal boundaries and deficient emotional intelligence³⁸⁰. Research further indicates that offspring of divorced or unfaithful parents are more likely to form insecure attachment styles compared to peers raised in low-conflict environments³⁸¹. Thus, marital instability does not merely disrupt the nuclear family; it reshapes the emotional architecture of future generations.

The Biblical Approach to Conflict Resolution

Many Christians assume that faith in God should eliminate conflict from their lives. However, this belief is misguided and can lead to unnecessary complications. Talitwala emphasizes that, despite our Christian identity, we remain human and bear the marks of a fallen nature. We are created with a deep desire for relationships, even though we are imperfect³⁸². Jesus Himself provided guidance on how to handle conflict. In Matthew 18:15-17, He instructed His followers to address offences directly and privately, rather than escalating the issue. Talitwala further notes that some conflicts are best managed through endurance, while others require diverse solutions. Rushing toward resolution can sometimes hinder true success³⁸³.

³⁸⁰ A. R. Thorson, "Adult Children's Experiences with Their Parent's Infidelity: Communicative Protection and Access Rules in the Absence of Divorce," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 1 (2009): 32–48.

³⁸¹ A. Crowell, D. Treboux, and S. Brockmeyer, "Parental Divorce and Adult Children's Attachment Representations and Marital Status," *Attachment & Human Development* 11, no. 1 (2009): 87–101.

³⁸² Mutheu Talitwala, *Counselling in Conflict* (Nairobi, Kenya: ACME Press (K) Limited, 2008), 48.

³⁸³ Talitwala, *Counselling in Conflict*, 38.

Steps Toward Conflict Resolution

Strauss advises that we begin by examining our own faults. Often, our pride and self-centeredness contribute to the problem. Perhaps we made selfish demands, neglected our partner's needs, or withdrew emotionally due to hurt feelings. These behaviors stem from pride, which intensifies conflict. Recognizing and admitting our pride opens the door for God's forgiveness and renewed harmony in relationships³⁸⁴. It is noted that God does not call us to be passive in conflict. Instead, He encourages respectful disagreement. Proverbs 27:17 illustrates this by comparing friends to iron sharpening iron, challenging each other's ideas through the lens of Scripture. When tensions arise, God instructs us to first examine ourselves for pride or hypocrisy before addressing others' faults (Matt. 7:1-5).

Strauss also observes that during marital crises, we often believe the solution lies in our partner changing³⁸⁵. However, criticizing or complaining rarely leads to positive change. Instead, we should focus on what we can change, ourselves, through God's grace. God expects us to meet our partner's needs, not to fix them. As we grow personally, our marriages will naturally improve.

Biblical Principles for Resolving Conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of human relationships, but how we respond to it matters deeply, especially for those seeking to live by biblical values. Scripture offers timeless wisdom on handling disagreements with humility, grace, and a commitment to reconciliation. Rooted in love, truth, and the example of Christ, biblical principles provide a roadmap for resolving conflict in ways that honor God and restore relationships.

³⁸⁴ Richard L. Strauss, "Solving Marital Conflicts," *Bible.org* (2006), accessed June 11, 2013, <https://bible.org>.

³⁸⁵ Strauss, *Solving Marital Conflicts*, 3.

Forgive Completely and Freely

Strauss acknowledges that forgiving a partner who hasn't apologized can be difficult. Yet, the only way to release resentment is to forgive completely. Jesus taught Peter to forgive not just seven times, but seventy times seven, symbolizing limitless forgiveness. Matthew 6:16 reinforces this by stating that God's forgiveness is linked to our willingness to forgive others. When we forgive, bitterness fades, and love and compassion take its place³⁸⁶.

Strauss encourages men to sincerely apologize for their own faults. Apologizing without first acknowledging personal guilt and extending forgiveness is ineffective. A genuine apology can be a powerful step toward healing. While some view admitting guilt as weakness, it is actually a sign of emotional and spiritual maturity. Others may hesitate to apologize, fearing they'll repeat the offence. However, Scripture commands us to confess our faults to one another; refusing to do so is disobedience. Even if the offence seems minor, we should take responsibility and apologize sincerely. This selfless act can inspire our partners to do the same, allowing God to work through our humility to restore peace in our relationships³⁸⁷.

Confront Lovingly

According to *Church Conflicts*, when a fellow believer wrongs us, we are instructed to approach that person directly. While some Christians may doubt the effectiveness of this approach, it often resolves the issue. A private, humble, and loving conversation can lead the offender to repentance and confession, preventing a minor issue from escalating into a major conflict. Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15, "If another believer sins against you,

³⁸⁶ Strauss, *Solving Marital Conflicts*, 3-4.

³⁸⁷ Strauss, *Solving Marital Conflicts*, 4-5.

go privately and point out the fault” (v. 15a). This emphasizes the importance of personal dialogue in resolving disputes³⁸⁸.

Gabriel explains that such dialogue involves clearly identifying the sin so the offender becomes aware and is called to repentance. If the individual responds positively, forgiveness is granted, and the relationship is restored. The Greek word translated as “won” in Matthew 18:15 originally referred to acquiring wealth. In this context, it signifies regaining something precious, namely, a fellow believer. When conflict arises between brethren, the love that once bound them is lost, and the church should not rest until reconciliation is achieved³⁸⁹.

The offended party should approach the offender directly, avoiding gossip or attempts to rally support. Instead, efforts should be made to contain the issue and minimize its spread. Reconciliation must precede worship, according to a reference in Matthew 5:23-24. The first step is a personal commitment to mend the relationship before offering gifts to God.

Bring One or Two Witnesses

If a private meeting fails to resolve the conflict, *Church Conflicts* recommends bringing along two or three respected believers. Including a lay leader experienced in conflict resolution can be beneficial. The presence of godly individuals often leads to repentance and forgiveness, effectively resolving the issue³⁹⁰.

Matthew 18:16 supports this approach and explains that witnesses serve not only to confirm the facts but also to mediate the dispute. Gabriel underscores that these witnesses should be neutral, credible, and respected by both parties. Their role is

³⁸⁸ Church Conflicts: How Do You Settle a Church Dispute? (Grand Rapids, MI: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 16-17.

³⁸⁹ Oladele Olutola Gabriel, *Christianity and African Society* (Ibadan, Nigeria: BW Book Wright Publishers, 2013), 482.

³⁹⁰ Church Conflicts, 17.

to moderate discussions, identify root causes, and assist in finding a resolution. At this stage, it is expected that their involvement will help restore the broken relationship³⁹¹.

The purpose of involving witnesses is to hear both sides and increase accountability. If the offender remains unresponsive and the witnesses agree that a serious wrong has occurred, further action may be necessary.

Go Before the Church

If the first two steps fail, *Church Conflicts* outlines a third step: bringing the matter before the church. At this point, church leaders must intervene. In some cases, they may need to recommend the removal of an unrepentant member. However, the ultimate goal remains forgiveness and restoration, pursued through prayer and humility³⁹². Gabriel interprets Matthew 18:17a as an invitation for the church to mediate the conflict according to God's standards. Both parties present their grievances and the steps already taken toward resolution. The church then makes a final decision, which is binding on all involved³⁹³.

Follow-Up with Compassion

Gabriel further explains Matthew 18:17b, where Jesus instructs that if the offender refuses to accept the church's decision, they should be treated as a pagan or corrupt tax collector. This does not imply mistreatment but rather exclusion from the fellowship. Such individuals are no longer permitted to enjoy the blessings and benefits of the Christian community³⁹⁴.

³⁹¹ Oladele Olutola Gabriel, *Christianity and African Society* (Ibadan, Nigeria: BW Book Wright Publishers, 2013), 483.

³⁹² Church Conflicts, 17-18.

³⁹³ Gabriel, Christianity, 483.

³⁹⁴ Gabriel, Christianity, 483.

Church Conflicts strongly advises that the entire process be immersed in prayer and carried out with Christian love. Compassionate follow-up is essential, as those involved may feel wounded or alienated. A tender and caring ministry is needed to provide healing and restore a sense of belonging³⁹⁵.

Jesus as the Model of Forgiveness

David affirms that Jesus Christ exemplified everything He taught. Whether it was bearing the cross, loving others, showing mercy, caring for the poor and sick, or welcoming sinners, Jesus lived out His teachings perfectly³⁹⁶. He is the ultimate model of forgiveness. This is noticed in His interactions with the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11), His call to sinners like Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13), and His acceptance of the sinful woman who kissed His feet and wiped them with her hair (Luke 7:36-50). Most profoundly, Jesus forgave those who crucified Him, saying, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). He also extended grace to the repentant thief on the cross, promising, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43), in response to the thief’s plea (Luke 23:42).

David further notes that Stephen, the first Christian martyr, followed Christ’s example by forgiving those who stoned him: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Forgiveness can be difficult, and that struggle is understandable. Yet, Jesus endured far worse and still forgave. Therefore, we should pray for the grace to forgive³⁹⁷. When we intentionally refuse to forgive, it becomes harder to receive that grace. Unforgiveness binds us emotionally and spiritually, keeping the pain alive within us. Scripture urges us to forgive as Christ forgave: “Bear with one another, forgive each other if

³⁹⁵ *Church Conflicts*, 22.

³⁹⁶ David Augsburger, *The Freedom of Forgiveness 70 × 7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970) 19.

³⁹⁷ Augsburger, *The Freedom*, 19.

one of you has a complaint against another. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same” (Col. 3:13). “Be generous to one another, sympathetic, forgiving each other as readily as God forgave you in Christ” (Eph. 4:32).

McDowell & Lewis eds. echo David’s view, referencing Matthew 18:21-22, where Peter asks how often he should forgive. Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” The number 490 is symbolic; the principle is to forgive endlessly. Holding onto unforgiveness breeds bitterness, which grows deeper over time and can ultimately consume us, damaging our relationships. Scripture never says to forgive only if the offender apologizes. Forgiveness benefits the forgiver most; it releases them from bitterness and opens the door to God’s abundant life³⁹⁸.

The *Billy Graham Worker’s Handbook* also stresses the importance of forgiveness, even when it’s difficult. God commands us to forgive: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:13)³⁹⁹. Sometimes, those least deserving of forgiveness need it the most. Forgiving as Christ did includes forgetting, not in the literal sense, but in choosing not to hold the offence against the person. This may take time, but God can transform our hearts. Jesus’ response to Peter in Matthew 18:21-35 shows that Christians must be willing and eager to forgive.

LaHaye & Philips quote Henry Ward Beecher, who said, “I can forgive, but I cannot forget’ is only another way of saying, ‘I will not forgive.’” True forgiveness should be like a cancelled debt,

³⁹⁸ Josh McDowell and Paul Lewis, *Sex: Givers, Takers and Other Kinds of Lovers* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981), 80-81.

³⁹⁹ The Billy Graham Christian Worker’s Handbook: A Topical Guide with Biblical Answers to the Urgent Concerns of Our Day (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 2002), 124.

destroyed and never brought up again⁴⁰⁰. This idea was later expanded to suggest that if you haven't truly forgotten, you haven't truly forgiven. Jeremiah 31:34 supports this: "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." This doesn't mean the offence is erased from memory, but that God no longer holds it in judgment.

Forgiveness is challenging because it requires the offended party, not the offender, to take the initiative. Augsburgs David, as cited by LaHaye & Philips, explains that forgiveness demands a high price. The one who forgives must bear the emotional weight of the offence and choose to resolve it in love⁴⁰¹. Myron Augsburgs adds that forgiveness is costly because it involves absorbing the pain caused by another. The guilty party is released, while the offended person bears the burden and chooses love over resentment. God models this by absorbing our guilt and offering us freedom.

LaHaye & Philips stress that all forgiveness, human and divine, is inherently substitutional. No one truly forgives without bearing the cost of the offence. Jesus Christ embodied this principle by taking on our guilt and wrath, offering Himself as a substitute. Forgiveness is not cheap; it costs the forgiver, not the forgiven. The church is reminded that forgiveness does not rebuild what has been destroyed by careless actions, like a house burned down by someone playing with matches⁴⁰².

Conclusion

While this seminar presents a research proposal rather than completed findings, the theological trajectory of the study points toward several key conclusions. First, the primary cause of marital conflict is not external circumstance but internal sin,

⁴⁰⁰ Tim LaHaye and Bob Phillips, *Anger Is a Choice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 109-110.

⁴⁰¹ LaHaye and Bob Phillips, *Anger Is a Choice*, 110-111; David Augsburgs, *The Freedom of Forgiveness 70 × 7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970).

⁴⁰² LaHaye and Phillips, *Anger Is a Choice*, 111-112.

pride that refuses to humble itself, selfishness that demands its own way, and unforgiveness that clings to grievances like a cancer. Second, the Matthew 18:15-17 model is not an optional church discipline procedure but God's ordained pathway for all interpersonal reconciliation, including marriage. Its neglect is a primary reason conflicts escalate into irreparable breakdowns. Third, biblical forgiveness is not a feeling but a decision, an act of obedience that releases the offender and frees the forgiver, mirroring Christ's own sacrifice on the cross. Fourth, the Church is not a passive bystander in marital conflict but an active agent of reconciliation, called to shepherd, mediate, and restore with Gospel-centered love.

The contribution of this study to theological knowledge is both original and vital. It provides the first comprehensive, purely theological framework for understanding and resolving marital conflict, specifically within the Nigerian Christian context. It demonstrates the practical applicability of the Matthew 18 protocol to marriage, a connection often overlooked in pastoral practice. It elevates the doctrine of forgiveness from a sentimental ideal to a costly, Christlike act of spiritual warfare. And perhaps most importantly, it reaffirms the sufficiency of Scripture as the sole, all-sufficient source for healing the deepest wounds of human relationships.

In light of these projected findings, several recommendations emerge. For couples, the call is to humility: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God" (1 Peter 5:6). Begin conflict resolution by examining your own heart, confessing your sin, and extending forgiveness freely. For church leaders, the mandate is to teach and model biblical conflict resolution, creating communities where Matthew 18 is practiced not as a last resort but as a first response. For theological institutions, the challenge is to integrate practical theology into the core curriculum, training future pastors to apply Scripture to the messy realities of marital life. And for the broader Church, the invitation is to become a sanctuary of

grace, a place where broken marriages are not shamed but shepherded, not condemned but restored.

In conclusion, the crisis of Christian marriage in Nigeria is not a problem to be solved by sociology, psychology, or cultural adaptation. It is a wound to be healed by the Word of God. This study stands as a call to return to Scripture not as a textbook of rules but as a wellspring of grace, where the broken find healing, the guilty find forgiveness, and the weary find rest. In the end, the stability of the Christian home does not depend on human wisdom but on divine truth. And it is to that truth, ancient, unchanging, and eternally sufficient, that this research humbly points.

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