

COURTSHIP IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: A BIBLICAL INSIGHT

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Abstract

This paper observes that courtship and dating are some of the least discussed topics in the churches today. This may be partly because of fears among some Christians that courtship encourages promiscuity, though some believe that it is a necessity. The findings of this research are that courtship (period of acquaintance) allows for the proof of the genuineness of the relationship between a young man and a woman; and provides an opportunity for determining whether the companionship is sustainable. Evidences avail that courtship is not unbiblical. This paper agrees that if the limited attraction of a young man to a young lady is determined by, and dependent on only romance and sentiment, the friendship may not endure a period of courtship in which emphasis is placed on the practical nature of life. Conclusively, therefore, this research submits that courtship has important place in Christian marriage. Not only does the period of courtship leads to a better chance of happy marriage; it also allows for a better understanding of each other.

Key Words: Marriage, Courtship, betroth, Christian

Introduction

There is no denying the fact that many church youth groups today have become havens for dating and premarital sex and, like other such aberrations, poses ethical threat to the society (Onimhawo & Ottuh, 2006). Yet courtship and dating are some of the least discussed topics in the church. Meanwhile, dating is causing havocs, destroyed countless lives, resulted in unwanted pregnancies and abortions, and even split churches apart (Wood, 2014). Since most of the churches do not teach on this subject, a vacuum exists resulting in our teenagers adopting the worldview of popular culture (Blood, 2009).

No doubt, there are fears among some Christians that courtship (or even dating) leads to promiscuity (Mbachu, 1996); others believe that it is a necessity and that if well handled, leads to the best type of marriage - Christian marriage (Blood, 2009). But what is courtship? What should be the place of courtship in the Christian marriage? Why is it a necessity (if it is)? Is it biblical? What should Christians watch out for in courtship? What are its benefits and dangers? These are some of the questions and many more that this paper has provided answers to.

Marriage

Marriage, also referred to as matrimony in some circles (Agbikimi, 2015), has been given many descriptions by Authors and Scholars. Its definition varies according to different

cultures, but it is principally an institution in which sexual, interpersonal relationships are recognized (Agbikimi, 2015). Agbikimi (2015) posits that marriage is a gift from God and beyond human origin. He defines it as the *“socially and ritually recognized union or legal contract between spouses that establish rights and obligations between them and their in-laws”* (p.128). In other words, the above definitions recognize marriage as “a union”, yet some view marriage as a “contract” between the man and the woman. Mbachu (1996:45) posits that marriage is a *“partnership contract without an escape clause”* (p.3), while Nwobi (1997) argues that marriage is *“a social recognition of who may legitimately mate with whom”* (p.3). Hence any child raised from such union is regarded as legitimate. Whatever definition is given, the fact is that marriage is not a mere love or fun seeking affair (Ebhomienlen, 2014). Therefore, marriage could be said to be a union between one man and one woman in a relationship: that is culturally approved; in which obligation to the community is assumed, like the expectation of bearing and raising children; in which there is sexual commitments between spouses exclusive of other males and females; in which there is prescribed mode of behaviour; and it is expected to be a permanent contract.

Christian Marriage

In the Christian context, marriage is not only seen as a “union” but a “covenant.” The emphasis is on a man and a woman on one hand, and the couple and God on the other hand (Gen. 2:21-22). The man and the woman are seen as *“becoming one flesh”* (Gen.2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; I Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31). The Christian marriage has therefore been described as *“A holy estate..., entered into voluntarily by one man and one woman for life, to the exclusion of all others, for the fulfillment of the purpose of their Creation”* (Mbachu, 1996 p.21).

Courtship

Courtship has been defined as a *“special behaviour by animals and birds to attract a mate”* (Hornby, 2008 p. 268). The courtship ritual of peacocks is a good example of such definition. Blood (2009:15) defines it as *“the entire process that leads to marriage.”* It is generally agreed, however, that courtship actually springs from the same drive and is directed at the same goal as in animals and birds-*“to attract a mate”*-and eventually results in reproduction. But among humans, courtship has been so molded by varying cultures that it is commonly thought of in terms of custom rather than instinct.

In other words, courtship is now regarded as a cultural norm and is used to refer to the entire process that leads to the actual marriage. It is a period in which the unmarried couple *“becomes personally and intimately acquainted with themselves”* (Shryock, 1968 p.30). Courtship as a term is different from engagement. Engagement represents a point in courtship when a solemn promise is made between a young man and a young woman as evidence to their social group that the choice of a life’s partner is made and that marriage is awaiting the further development of their friendship. It must be noted however, that the vows made in our

engagement promise is not as irrevocable as that made during the wedding ceremonies (Shryock, 2008).

The Necessity for Courtship:

Studies by experts on marriage counseling show that *short acquaintances and hasty marriages tend to go with the unhappiness in marriages or hasty divorces*. The same study also revealed that “*the longer people are acquainted, the better are their chances for happiness after marriage*” (Kore, 1970). Therefore, we may safely say that courtship is necessary. But how long courtship should take is another question entirely. The answer certainly cannot be definite. Many believe that the prevalent circumstances should determine how long courtship may last (Shryock, 2008). While some also reason that since statistical surveys prove that couples with longer courtship tend to be happier in marriage, we may recommend longer courtship. This, however, does not justify a conclusion that all must have a long time courtship. In other words, it may not be safe to say that if the one year engagement is good, the two year engagement would ensure an even happier union. But it does serve to condemn hasty marriages and spur of the moment elopements among many youths.

During courtship, a young man and a woman are expected to reserve their special attentions for each other. Some call it the “monopoly” of each other’s affections. But it is a fundamental premise of courtship. In other words, courtship allows a demonstration of whether or not the young man and the young woman find it mutually agreeable to leave out the friendship each has with other persons before them.

Courtship provides an opportunity for determining whether the companionship may be sustained over a long period of time without it becoming repulsive or boring. If the limited attraction of a young man to a young lady is determined by, and dependent on only romance and sentiment, the friendship may not endure a period of courtship in which emphasis is placed on the practical nature of life (Kore, 1970). In other words, courtship period allows for the proof of the genuineness of the relationship. Courtships allow also, the opportunities for the parents of both the young man and the young woman to become acquainted with their prospective children-in-law. This again makes room for future happiness and a minimized misunderstanding that may arise later in marriage.

Old Testament Insight on Courtship

The word, courtship, is not pronounced in the Bible except in Song of Solomon (8:8) where the Hebrew word “שִׁידוּרָה (Sheyitobar)” was used. This term has been translated by some English versions as “*comes courting*”, but many do not agree with these translations. Most English versions, including KJV and RSV translate the term as “*Spoken for*”. However, the Bible in Basic English translates it as “*given to a man*”. In other words, a process that leads to marriage or an introduction into intimate acquaintance is implied here. However, the word “*betroth*” or “*betrothed*” (Hebrew, “אַרָּשׁ (aras)”, meaning “*to be espoused*” or “*be engaged but not yet married*”) is widely used in the Bible - both in the Old and New Testaments.

Furthermore, the Bible in Deuteronomy 22:23-28 differentiates clearly the “*betrothed young woman*” from the non-betrothed. In today’s terms, we would say that the betrothed is engaged and in courtship, or is somebody’s fiancée or has a fiancé. The bible recommends death by stoning for any man who rapes a betrothed young woman “*in the field*” where no one can hear her cry for help (Deuteronomy 22:25). In other words, the bible recognizes the betrothed young woman, a lady in courtship, as somebody’s wife.

It may be noted that in the Old Testament dispensation, the punishment for a man who commits such crime against a young non-betrothed woman was only to marry her or pay what is required as the bride price by the father of the young woman if he (the father) refused his marriage of the young woman (Deut. 22: 28-29; see also Exo. 22:16-17).

New Testament Insight on Courtship

The best-known example of betrothal in the New Testament is that of Jesus’ mother, Mary, and her fiancé, Joseph. The Greek word “*μνηστευθείσης*” (interpreted by New International Version [NIV]) as “*having been betrothed*” and King James Version as “*espoused*”) used in Matthew 1:18 can rightly be translated as being in courtship. Therefore, it was not illogical of Joseph that when he learned that Mary was pregnant, before he understood the miraculous nature of the conception, he thought that Mary had violated the betrothal or courtship, which was as binding as a marriage contract. At first, Joseph believed that his only recourse was to divorce her, or “*divorce her quietly*” (Matt. 1:19 NIV. See also Deut. 24:1). Matthew records the account thus:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:18–19).

It may be observed that though Mary was “*pledged to be married*” to Joseph, the passage above referred to him as “*her husband*”. The fact that a “*divorce*” was contemplated as a requirement to break the betrothal shows that their premarital (or courtship) contract was legally binding. If, even during the betrothal (courtship) period, Mary had been sexually intimate with someone other than Joseph, she would have been guilty of adultery.

There may not be concurrence of opinions yet on the details of courtship during biblical time by scholars, but an overview can be done from varied biblical sources. The parents, or a confidential friend, of the bridegroom chose the bride (Genesis 24; 21: 21; 38:6). The parents' consent was asked first, then that of the bride (Genesis 24:58). The presents (dowry), called “*מֹהָר (mohar)*” are paid to the bride and/or her parents (Gen. 34:12; Exo. 22:17; I Sam. 18:25), while gifts, “*מַתָּן (mattan)*” are given to the relatives (Gen. 34:12; Numb. 18:11; Prov. 18:16; 19:6; 21:14). The dowry could take the form of service (Genesis 29; 1 Sam. 18:25). Between betrothal (commencement of courtship) and marriage, all communication between the couple

was carried on through the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29). They were considered to be married to a degree, so that being unfaithful was punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:23-24) - as it was for any marital unfaithfulness. If the bridegroom did not want to go through with the marriage, he could divorce her by issuing her a bill of divorcement (Deuteronomy 24:1; Matthew 1:19).

What Christians Should Watch Out For In Courtship

Once a Christian couple has moved from the stage of initial attraction in their courtship, it is essential that the certain issues must be considered by both parties prior to marriage or even engagement. Kore (1970) outlines twelve basic areas. They include:

- i. His or her personal relationship with God. Has the person truly identified himself or herself with God through Jesus Christ? Is he or she living a Christian life?
- ii. His or her cultural background. What is the traditional beliefs and practices of his or her people? Some Christians may regard this as unnecessary but the truth is that you are not marrying him or her alone but his or her people and their culture as well.
- iii. His or her educational background. He or she may not necessarily be a graduate before qualifying for marriage, but is he or she compatible with you? Will you not regret later? The question is better resolved now than regretting later. You may even ask also, what type of school did he or she attended? What program of study? Again, "am I compatible with the demands of the program of his or her profession?"
- iv. His or her economic background. The point here is not whether he or she is poor but his or her compatibility with you. Is he or she of the upper, middle or lower class by background? A man of the lower class, for example, may find it difficult to adjust very well to the high demand, most times, of a woman from the upper class.
- v. His or her denominational ties, are we of the same denomination? What happens to our future children if we must remain with our different denominations, if we say it does not matter now?
- vi. His or her marriage concept. What is his or her concept of marriage as a permanent union, a covenant, or a contract that is unbreakable? What is his or her view about divorce? Is he or she against its abuse contrary to some Christian's doctrine of the temporary separation as the means of settling serious marital problems; or he or she sees nothing wrong with divorce?
- vii. His or her world view. His or her goals, priorities, values and objectives for living.
- viii. His or her attitude towards work, career, earning and spending money.
- ix. His or her self-image and self-esteem: Is his or her self-esteem high or low? Positive or negative?
- x. His or her attitude towards children.
- xi. His or her attitude towards sex.
- xii. His or her attitude towards relatives, in-laws and friends.

These areas must be carefully observed not necessarily for putting off an already established relationship but to create enablement for thorough, objective and serious discussion of the relevant or salient subjects and motifs.

General Subject of Discussion during Courtship

Every Marriage-minded courtship partners often wonder what they should talk about at different stages of the courtship. According to Einhorn and Zimmerman (2015) opined that even people with good conversational skills may be uncomfortable breaking the ice with someone new, or wonder when to switch from light topics of discussion to ones that are more serious. Someone who feels comfortable discussing just about anything with a new date, and doesn't seem to run out of topics to talk about as the weeks go by, might nevertheless overlook certain subjects that help them gain insight into the a partner's philosophy of life, goals for the future, and approach to different life situations.

The search for a marriage partner involves more than finding someone to love. It's essentially a search for someone to build a satisfying, enduring life with. A dating couple should view their courtship as a time to connect to each other emotionally, observe each other in different life situations and learn about each other's significant life experiences, value systems, points of view, and expectations.

Some salient topics for Discussion during courtship therefore are:

1. **Children:** The issue of the number of children the family should raise, how and when, is most times, the first subject of discussion by most young persons in courtship. Admittedly, they may not be able to meet their expressed preference, during marriage proper, due to one circumstance or another that may become the reality. But, at least if lovers discuss the matter of children during courtship period, they would have provided an opportunity for each other to express opinions which might be the means of serious misunderstandings if reserved until later.
2. **Finances/Economic of the Home:** This issue is also generally discussed during courtship among young people. However, circumstances after marriage, may alter this discussions made prior to marriage. It is good for this issue to be discussed. For instance, the woman should know if she is expected to get a job and help in maintaining the family budget. Again, if the young lady is that type that prefers a career to home-making, the issue should be discussed honestly with her prospective husband before marriage. Many young men would want to know in advance whether their prospective wives share their attitude toward home-making.
3. **Relations to Parents:** This is another important subject that must be discussed by young couple during courtship. There are some young men and women who may insist on living close to their parents after marriage. There are also others that do not like this to avoid parental interference. Many marriage counseling experts believe that, the relationship between the married couple and the parents-in-law may be very delicate if not well handled. Therefore, the new couples should be able to discuss extensively the extent of their involvement with their

close relatives, bearing in mind that they are starting a new home, entirely different from that of their parents.

4. **Limitations of Relationship during Courtship:** Since physical attraction, as mentioned above, is one of the risks of young men and women in courtship, they will do well to discuss the matter frankly so as to arrive at a mutual understanding and a definition of the limits of physical expressions beyond which they will not permit themselves to pass until after marriage. With such understanding, either one will remind the other, when the occasion arises, of the restrictions agreed upon.

5. **Observable Habits:** Either of the young couple should be open minded to tell his or her partner any unpleasant habit he or she may have observed, and both should be objective in discussing it. Blood (2009) gave an example of a young couple, still in courtship, whose old habits changed after mutual discussions on them. One of them was to testify later about it, thus:

I think Esther's pressures have been good for me. I used to put off studying until the last minute, but now I'd rather study first and play afterward...Esther's changed too, since we started going together. She has a pretty sharp temper and she used to jump on me and not care. But we've talked it over so now she tries to keep it down to a minimum and she apologizes afterward when she does blow off at me (p.60).

It is important to realize that it takes far more than a few dates for most persons on courtship to begin to entertain the thought that they may have met the right person to marry, but at the point of these discussions is the most ideal to bring in what Einhorn and Zimmerman (2015) refers to as the "M". They observe thus:

Nevertheless, it's still important to mention the "M" word after the first few dates – just to make sure that the two of you are both dating for the same purpose. Even though marriage may be your ultimate objective, the person you are dating may just want to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, be dating reluctantly in response to social pressure, or hope to get married "someday" but not any time soon. Why risk developing a close emotional connection with someone whose doesn't share your goal? (p.56).

Blood (2009) however, posited four ways of approaching all discussions in order to make success out of them. Firstly, the program must not be one sided, but based on the premises that both partners had deficiencies. Secondly, changes should be pursued openly with no attempt to put something-over on anyone. By frankly talking out their critical reactions to (and positive reactions for) one another, a feeling of mutual respect would be created. Thirdly, as a result of this process of persuasion, as above mentioned, each partner has accepted the other's desire as a goal for himself and felt supported by the other's respect and love. Therefore, under these circumstances, the critical partner should not put pressure on a reluctant person but help in the attainment of shared goals. Fourthly, the changes should be pursued early in the relationship rather than hope for in the future. If improved, compatibility is necessary to marital satisfaction; it should be achieved before even getting engaged.

There are other subjects that could be discussed. For example; have any of them married previously? The other better know it now because he or she will certainly know later and then it may cause great harm to the marriage. Have any of them assumed financial obligations which are still unfulfilled? Is either of the partners having any physical or hereditary defects? All these concerns ought to be plainly conversed and the consequences considered.

Observable Benefits of Courtship

Despite the fear in certain quarters about the goodness or other wise of courtships among Christian youths before marriage, many benefits are there to be derived if courtship is well guided in Christian marriages. They include the following:

- 1) **Self-Expression-** Studies have shown that with experience comes relief from being tongue-tied. In courtship, self-confidence is gained as rooms are created for conversations. In this way, difficulties in communication are removed, self-expression is gained and this leads to happy marriage.
- 2) **Creates Empathy-** Communication is said to be a two-way process. It begins with self-expression but is completed only when the message is received by the other party. Empathy is the ability to perceive the partners attitudes and feelings. It differs from sympathy because it does not necessarily involved agreement or fellow-feeling with the partners. Empathy is a skill that can be acquired and developed. Courtship provides opportunity for the development and practice of empathy.

Empathy is very important in any marriage. It enables the partner to sense his or her partner's mood in every little thing. When you know someone well, you will be able to guess correctly when he or she is tired, hungry, annoyed, etc. some wives can guess correctly what their husbands would like to eat in a given mood without hearing from him but by only watching. This skill therefore, depends not only on listening to what is said but on the sensitivity to non-verbal clues in facial expressions. A skillful empathizer sees through verbal pretenses to the real feelings within.

- 3) **Giving and Taking-** the expressed needs of two persons are hardly ever the same. When therefore, choices must be made between two mutually exclusive preferences, new skills are called upon. The total giving-up of one's choice to satisfy the other may not be the needed solution under such circumstances. There has to be some giving and taking. And only the period of courtship can provide the needed opportunity for practices on the settling of such problems in marriages, including Christians.

Observable Dangers/Disadvantages of Courtship:

Having highlighted some of the benefits of courtship in Christian marriage, we may as well look at some of the ills resulting from its abuse. They are:

1. **Premarital intimacy-** The bible is unequivocally against premarital sexual relationship. The bible specifically warns that every young woman is expected to be a virgin until her marriage and the husband is supposed to marry her as such (Deut22: 20f). In the New Testament period, fornication – having intimate intercourse while unmarried, was regarded as self-defilement, and sin (I Cor. 6:18). The young Christians on courtship are advised to strive, to maintain their proper image in Christ Jesus (II Cor. 3:18 and regard their partners as beloved in Christ (I John 3:2; 4: 11).

2. **Disappointments** – Another ill of courtship which is, again, as a result of abuse is the issue of disappointments. Some Christians are known to have courted for many years and at the end the young man or woman, without due regard, abandoned his or her partner. During early courtships, where doubts ensue that are serious, there is nothing wrong if the young man or woman should stand off and re-evaluate the friendship as impartially as possible (Kore, 1970). But it is unwise to terminate a courtship brashly simply because some human traits have manifested. In other words, since courtship is a learning process, as earlier stated, some minor human traits can be forgiven and errors corrected.

Conclusion

Conclusively, therefore, the research submits that courtship has a vital place in Christian marriage and it is not unbiblical. Not only does the period of courtship (acquaintance) leads to a better chance of happy marriage; it also allows for a better understanding of each other; create empathy, commitment, etc. and allows for the opportunity to discuss issues for the mutual benefit of both partners and their family. But we may quickly point out that courtship is not a trial marriage and must not be seen as such. It is only the cumulative processes of the final steps towards marriage. It is correct, therefore, to refer to courtship as the most important preparation for marriage.

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