

# EVALUATING DIVORCE THROUGH PAULINE THEOLOGY IN IKWO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA EBONYI STATE NIGERIA: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INTERPRETING 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-11

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically explores the theological, cultural, and practical dimensions of divorce within Christian communities, with a specific focus on Pauline teachings in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11. The research delves into the biblical, historical, and cultural contexts of divorce, examining how Paul's teachings on marriage and divorce influence Christian doctrine and pastoral practice in the Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The study highlights the tension between the high theological ideal of marital permanence and the harsh realities of marital breakdowns, particularly within a culturally conservative context where divorce remains highly stigmatized, especially for women. Through a theological interpretation of Pauline teachings, this study identifies both the doctrinal implications of divorce and the pastoral challenges faced by the local church. It further examines the impact of cultural norms, gender roles, and societal expectations on divorce in Ikwo, where traditional values influence the decision-making process. The research suggests that while Pauline teachings provide a clear doctrinal foundation for marriage, divorce, and reconciliation, church leaders must adapt their pastoral approaches to be sensitive to local cultural realities. This includes creating safe spaces for divorcees, promoting reconciliation while safeguarding individual well-being, and offering pastoral care that balances doctrinal fidelity with compassionate support. The study concludes by recommending strategies for church leaders to enhance their response to divorce, fostering a theology of grace, forgiveness, and healing within the local church context.

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### 1.1. Introduction

Divorce is a subject that has continually sparked theological and doctrinal debates within Christian communities, and this is especially evident in the varied interpretations of biblical teachings across denominations and cultures. The apostle Paul's teachings on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 have been particularly central to these discussions, as they present a unique perspective on marriage, separation, and reconciliation. In these verses, Paul outlines instructions that were intended to guide early Christian communities, particularly in the face of marital issues that arose within the church (Morgan & Barton, 1988). His insights on divorce were both a response to the social challenges of his time and a theological exploration that sought to protect the sanctity of marriage while addressing practical concerns (Berkhof, 1950; Tribble, 1973). In contemporary Christian practice, especially in Nigeria, divorce remains a sensitive topic, often shaped by cultural values and local

traditions. The interpretation of Paul's teachings in this context has significant implications for how divorce is viewed and handled within Nigerian churches. This study, therefore, seeks to critically assess how Pauline theology informs divorce practices in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. By focusing on 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, the study explores not only the theological underpinnings of Paul's message but also the practical application of these teachings within the local church context. This study is essential, particularly given the absence of comprehensive, context-specific theological analysis on divorce in the Ikwo region. It aims to bridge the gap between Pauline teachings and their local interpretation, offering fresh perspectives on how the broader Christian community in Nigeria understands and addresses divorce. As such, this seminar paper will contribute to the growing body of theological discourse on marriage and divorce, focusing on a methodological approach to interpreting one of the most controversial biblical passages on the matter.

## 1.2. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to critically assess the teachings of the apostle Paul on divorce as presented in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, with an emphasis on its theological and practical implications for Christian doctrine and practice in Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

- i. **Examine the Biblical Context:** To explore the historical, cultural, and social context in which Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the socio-religious challenges that shaped his teachings on divorce (Davidson, 2000; Malina, 1982).
- ii. **Analyse Pauline Teachings:** To provide a comprehensive analysis of Paul's stance on divorce and marriage, particularly in relation to his views on separation, reconciliation, and the grounds for divorce (Bray, 1990; Weaver, 2022).
- iii. **Apply Hermeneutical Methods:** To employ various interpretive methods, such as the historical-critical method, literary analysis, and canonical interpretation, to interpret Paul's teachings within the broader context of Christian doctrine (Berkhof, 1950; Fiorenza, 1988).
- iv. **Assess Local Relevance:** To critically assess how these Pauline teachings are interpreted and applied within the Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, considering cultural, societal, and theological factors that may influence local understandings of divorce (Esler, 2005; Greer, 1986).
- v. **Propose Practical Implications:** To identify the theological implications of Pauline teachings for church leaders in Nigeria, with a focus on pastoral care, divorce counseling, and the application of biblical principles in marital disputes (Klein et al., 2017; Zuck, 2023).

## 1.3. Justification

The justification for this study stems from the significant gap in scholarly literature concerning the application of Pauline teachings on divorce in the Nigerian church context, particularly within the Ikwo region. While numerous studies have focused on the general teachings of Paul regarding marriage and divorce, limited research has explored how these teachings are contextualised and applied within specific geographical areas and cultural settings. This gap is particularly evident in the Ikwo Local Government Area, where divorce is often a taboo subject, surrounded by both social stigma and theological ambiguity. Furthermore, the application of Pauline theology to local church practices in Nigeria remains underexplored, despite the fact that many church leaders and members hold to biblical teachings on marriage as authoritative. This study will, therefore, fill this gap by offering a contextual analysis of Paul's writings on divorce, allowing for a more accurate and locally

relevant understanding of how these teachings shape Christian practices in the region. It also presents an opportunity to evaluate whether traditional Nigerian values surrounding marriage and divorce are aligned with or diverge from biblical principles, offering insights into the ways in which theology can influence everyday life (Brunt, 1982; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

In addition, the study's focus on theological interpretation offers an opportunity to engage with current hermeneutical debates on the best ways to approach biblical texts, particularly in culturally distinct settings. It invites scholars and theologians to reconsider the interpretative processes used to address issues such as divorce, which have practical and doctrinal implications for modern Christian communities.

#### 1.4. Significance

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both academic and practical fields of biblical interpretation, theology, and pastoral care. First, by offering a critical examination of Pauline theology in the context of divorce, this study contributes to the broader discourse on biblical teachings, particularly in relation to how they are applied in non-Western Christian communities. By exploring the implications of these teachings for contemporary Christian doctrine and practice, the study provides a framework for understanding how biblical principles can inform the church's approach to complex social issues such as divorce (Williams, 2001; Montague, 2007).

Second, this study holds particular significance for church leaders and members in Nigeria, as it offers a theological framework for understanding divorce that is rooted in biblical principles, while also being sensitive to local cultural realities. In a context where divorce is often regarded with shame and suspicion, the study provides a way for Christian communities to engage with Pauline teachings in a manner that is both theologically sound and culturally appropriate (Zuck, 2023; Conley, 2012). It could potentially shape how pastors counsel individuals in troubled marriages, offering a more nuanced understanding of Paul's teachings on reconciliation and separation.

Lastly, the study's findings could inform future research on the intersection of theology and culture, particularly in Africa, where Christianity intersects with a variety of traditional beliefs and practices. It paves the way for further exploration of how biblical teachings can be integrated into the unique social and cultural contexts of local communities, ensuring that the church's teaching on marriage and divorce is both biblically faithful and culturally relevant (Barton, 1998; Malina, 1982).

#### 1.5. Scope and Methodology

This study is specifically focused on the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, with particular attention given to the way these teachings are applied in the Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The scope is limited to this geographical area, and the analysis will primarily focus on how local church leaders, theologians, and members interpret and apply Paul's teachings on divorce. The methodology for this study will be a combination of qualitative research methods, primarily employing interpretative approaches to biblical texts. The study will use a historical-critical method to examine the socio-cultural context of 1 Corinthians 7, as well as a literary analysis to study Paul's rhetorical strategies and theological objectives (Fiorenza, 1988; Virkler & Ayayo, 2023). In addition, a comparative exegesis approach will be employed to explore how 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 has been interpreted across different Christian denominations and how these interpretations are adapted to local Nigerian practices (Tate, 2008; Osborne, 2010). Data will also be collected from interviews with church leaders and members in Ikwo, focusing on their understanding and interpretation of Paul's teachings on divorce. This qualitative data will be analysed thematically to identify patterns and discrepancies

in the application of Pauline theology, allowing for a deeper understanding of how biblical texts are locally interpreted (Klein et al., 2017). This study will not only consider the theological implications of divorce but will also engage with local cultural and social factors that shape Christian teachings on marriage and divorce in Ikwo.

## **2.0. THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL BACKGROUND ON DIVORCE**

### **2.1 Pauline Perspective on Marriage and Divorce**

The apostle Paul's writings, particularly in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, have been pivotal in shaping Christian teachings on marriage and divorce. These teachings provide a theological framework that addresses the complexities of marital relationships within the Christian community. Paul's perspective on marriage and divorce is a nuanced response to both the cultural milieu of his time and the emerging issues within the early Christian church. This section critically explores Paul's views on marriage and divorce, focusing on the theological and ethical implications of his teachings, while considering their relevance to contemporary Christian practice, particularly in Nigeria. Paul's teachings on marriage and divorce are primarily framed within the context of Christian community life, where his objective was to maintain the sanctity of marriage while responding to the challenges of the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, Paul acknowledges the difficulties that married couples face and addresses the issue of marital separation in light of Christian doctrine. His instructions aim to balance the sacredness of marriage with practical pastoral advice, providing a theological grounding for marital relationships in a context where many Christians were grappling with societal and personal issues related to marriage.

#### **Marriage as a Sacred Institution**

Paul's view of marriage is deeply rooted in his understanding of its divine origin and purpose. According to Paul, marriage is a sacred covenant established by God, designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). This theological foundation highlights the importance of marital fidelity and mutual submission within the marriage relationship (Davidson, 2000; Berkhof, 1950). In 1 Corinthians 7:1-2, Paul encourages sexual faithfulness within marriage, underscoring the idea that marriage is the legitimate context for sexual relations, which serves as a safeguard against sexual immorality. This emphasis on marital fidelity reflects Paul's broader view of marriage as an institution that should reflect God's plan for human relationships. Paul's teachings also assert that marriage should be marked by mutual respect and love between the spouses. In 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, Paul stresses the mutuality of the marital relationship, where both husband and wife have a responsibility to fulfill each other's sexual and emotional needs. This perspective positions marriage as a partnership in which both individuals are called to selflessly serve one another. Paul's insistence on mutuality in marriage reinforces his belief that the Christian community should model the love and unity exemplified by Christ in His relationship with the church (Barton, 1998; Zuck, 2023).

#### **Divorce: A Response to Human Fallibility**

Despite the high regard for marriage, Paul acknowledges the reality of human fallibility and the complexities of marital relationships. His teachings on divorce, as seen in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, offer a practical response to the challenges that arise in marriages. Paul is clear that divorce is not part of God's original design for marriage. In verse 10, he reiterates the teaching of Jesus, stating that "a wife should not separate from her husband," and "a husband should not divorce his wife." This reflects the high moral standard that marriage should ideally uphold. However, Paul does not ignore the fact that divorce may become a necessity in certain circumstances, particularly when the marriage relationship becomes untenable.

Paul's permissive stance on divorce is based on the recognition that human relationships are marred by sin, which can result in situations where separation may be necessary. However, Paul does not provide a blanket endorsement of divorce but instead calls for reconciliation and the preservation of marital unity whenever possible. His teaching suggests that divorce should only be considered in cases where reconciliation is not feasible, emphasizing that the ideal is always for a couple to remain together in mutual love and respect (Greer, 1986; Osborne, 2010).

### **The Exception Clause: Marital Unfaithfulness**

Paul introduces the exception clause in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9, which some scholars argue influenced his views on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. In these passages, Jesus permits divorce in the case of sexual immorality, and Paul, while not directly repeating this clause, seems to acknowledge it in his guidance to the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul provides a potential allowance for divorce in the case of an unbeliever deserting a believer, stating that "if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so." This passage has often been interpreted as an exception to the general rule that divorce should be avoided, particularly in cases where an unbeliever abandons their Christian spouse (Kimiti, 2021; Tribble, 1973). It is important to note that Paul's teachings on divorce are often seen as being more permissive than those found in the teachings of Jesus, particularly in Matthew's Gospel. In Jesus' teaching, divorce is seen as a consequence of sin (Matthew 19:3-9), and while Paul does acknowledge the brokenness of human relationships, he stresses that divorce should not be seen as a first option but rather as a last resort after all attempts at reconciliation have failed. This nuanced understanding of divorce in Pauline theology reflects his pastoral concern for the well-being of individuals and the church community, as well as his understanding of the human condition (Stott, 1971; Fiorenza, 1988).

### **Reconciliation and Remarriage**

While Paul acknowledges that divorce may occur in certain circumstances, he emphasizes that reconciliation should be the primary goal for married couples. In 1 Corinthians 7:11, Paul advocates for separation as a temporary measure with the goal of reconciliation. This suggests that divorce is not an end but rather a disruption that can be overcome through healing, forgiveness, and restoration (Berkhof, 1950). Paul's emphasis on reconciliation underlines the Christian belief that relationships should be marked by forgiveness and grace, qualities that reflect God's own actions toward humanity (Malina, 1982; Ramm, 1999). Paul also provides guidelines for remarriage in cases where divorce has occurred. In 1 Corinthians 7:39, Paul permits remarriage for widows, provided they marry "only in the Lord." However, he does not grant permission for remarriage after divorce except in cases of sexual immorality or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. This teaching reflects Paul's understanding of marriage as a sacred bond that should not be severed lightly (Tate, 2008; Weaver, 2022). Thus, while Paul provides a theological framework for remarriage, he also imposes strict conditions to ensure that the sanctity of marriage is maintained and that remarriage does not lead to further marital instability or sin.

### **Theological Implications of Pauline Teachings**

Paul's teachings on marriage and divorce hold profound theological implications, particularly for Christian doctrines concerning the nature of human relationships, forgiveness, and holiness. His views on divorce are rooted in the belief that marriage is a sacred institution ordained by God, and any action that undermines this sacred bond is viewed as a violation of God's will. Nevertheless, Paul's recognition of human weakness and the realities of marital failure speaks to the grace of God, which permits divorce in specific situations where reconciliation is no



longer possible (Klein et al., 2017; Ramm, 1999). In his theological framework, Paul does not merely offer a set of rules for managing divorce but calls Christians to a higher standard of relational integrity, grounded in the principles of mutual respect, love, and forgiveness. For Paul, divorce is not a sin in itself but a reflection of the brokenness of human relationships. The Christian community, therefore, has a responsibility to engage in healing and reconciliation, extending the grace and mercy that Christ Himself demonstrated (Bray, 1990; Stott, 1971).

### **Relevance to Contemporary Christian Practice**

In the context of contemporary Christian practice, especially within Nigerian churches, Paul's teachings on marriage and divorce offer valuable insights into how divorce should be approached. Divorce, though often a last resort, is sometimes necessary in cases of marital abandonment or infidelity, and Paul's pastoral approach encourages church leaders to address such issues with both grace and truth (Zuck, 2023; Malina, 1982). This approach provides a framework for counseling individuals in difficult marriages, offering them the hope of reconciliation while acknowledging the realities of broken relationships. In Nigeria, where marriage is often seen as a social institution with profound cultural and religious significance, the church's approach to divorce must be sensitive to both biblical teachings and local cultural practices. Paul's teachings offer a theological basis for understanding divorce that respects the sanctity of marriage while providing pastoral care for those who face marital breakdowns. Therefore, the relevance of Pauline theology on divorce is not only significant for doctrinal formation but also for pastoral care, as it provides a balanced approach that prioritises both the spiritual well-being of individuals and the unity of the church community (Virkler & Ayayo, 2023; Conley, 2012).

## **2.2 Biblical Theories of Divorce**

Divorce, as a concept within the biblical tradition, is addressed across various books of the Bible, with differing theological and ethical implications. The teachings surrounding divorce are found in both the Old and New Testaments, and the theories presented provide a range of perspectives on the issue, from the permissibility of divorce in certain circumstances to the ideal of marital fidelity and permanence. The interpretations of these biblical passages are central to Christian teachings on marriage and divorce, influencing doctrines and practices in contemporary churches worldwide, including in Nigeria. This section critically examines the biblical theories of divorce, particularly focusing on the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus, and Pauline theology, with attention given to the hermeneutical approaches used to interpret these texts.

### **The Old Testament View on Divorce**

The Old Testament offers the first significant biblical perspective on divorce, particularly through the laws found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This passage provides the earliest and most detailed scriptural reference to divorce in the Bible. It presents a case in which a man is allowed to divorce his wife if he finds "some indecency" in her, though the term "indecency" remains ambiguous. The passage states: "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce..." (Deuteronomy 24:1, NIV). The law allows for divorce, but the woman must be given a certificate of divorce, signifying a formal process that provides protection for her rights, especially in a patriarchal society. The Old Testament view on divorce, particularly in Deuteronomy, reflects the recognition of marital breakdown but limits divorce to cases of "indecency." This has led to considerable debate among scholars regarding the meaning of "indecency" and whether it refers to something as specific as sexual immorality or something more general, such as emotional

neglect or other forms of incompatibility (Brunt, 1982; Malina, 1982). According to Berkhof (1950), the Mosaic law allowed divorce as a concession due to human hard-heartedness, not as a divine ideal. The purpose of the certificate of divorce was to protect the woman from being sent away without legal protection, ensuring that she could remarry and not face social stigma as an adulterer. The Old Testament's allowance for divorce, however, is tempered by its recognition that God's intention for marriage was that it should be permanent. Malina (1982) argues that while the Mosaic law acknowledges human sinfulness, it does not celebrate divorce but rather provides a regulation to mitigate its negative effects on women. Thus, the Old Testament's stance on divorce can be viewed as a concession to human imperfection, rather than an endorsement of divorce as a desirable option in marital relationships.

### **The Teachings of Jesus on Divorce**

In the New Testament, Jesus' teachings on divorce provide a more restrictive and challenging view, focusing on the sanctity and permanence of marriage. In Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9, Jesus directly addresses the issue of divorce, referencing the Old Testament law while deepening the understanding of marriage as an indissoluble bond. In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus states: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery..." (NIV). This teaching introduces the exception clause, permitting divorce in cases of "sexual immorality" (Greek *porneia*), which is commonly understood to refer to adultery or illicit sexual behavior (Stott, 1971). Jesus affirms that divorce is a violation of God's original intention for marriage, which is seen in the creation narrative in Genesis 2:24, where a man and a woman are united in a "one flesh" bond that is meant to be permanent. In Matthew 19:3-9, when the Pharisees question Jesus about divorce, He again refers to the creation narrative and argues that marriage is intended by God to be a lifelong commitment. Jesus challenges the prevailing interpretation of the Mosaic law, suggesting that divorce was permitted only because of human hard-heartedness. "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8, NIV). Jesus affirms that divorce was not part of God's original design but acknowledges the reality of human sin, which often leads to marital breakdowns. The teachings of Jesus on divorce thus emphasize the permanence of marriage and present a higher standard for marital fidelity. The exception clause for "sexual immorality" (Matthew 5:32) has been the subject of much debate. Some theologians, such as Greer (1986), argue that the term "sexual immorality" can be understood to encompass a variety of sexual transgressions beyond adultery, including incest, prostitution, and other sexual sins. Others, such as Fiorenza (1988), suggest that the exception clause reflects the social realities of the time and was given as a pastoral concession to protect the dignity of women who were otherwise vulnerable in a patriarchal society. Jesus' teachings on divorce, therefore, challenge the prevailing cultural attitudes toward marriage and divorce, calling for a deeper understanding of marriage as a sacred institution that should not be easily broken. His emphasis on the permanence of marriage echoes the divine ideal established in creation, but He also provides a realistic acknowledgment of the challenges and complexities that arise in human relationships (Tate, 2008; Zuck, 2023).

### **Pauline Theology on Divorce**

Pauline theology on divorce, particularly in 1 Corinthians 7, builds on the teachings of Jesus while addressing the practical realities of early Christian life. Paul's letters are often seen as more permissive in allowing divorce in specific circumstances, and his teachings provide a framework that combines theological ideals with

pastoral concern for individual well-being. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul asserts, "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (NIV). Here, Paul reflects Jesus' teaching on the permanence of marriage but also provides pastoral advice for couples who may face irreconcilable differences. The command to "remain unmarried or be reconciled" suggests that Paul views separation as a temporary measure and not a permanent solution to marital strife. However, Paul's teachings also permit divorce in certain cases. In 1 Corinthians 7:15, he states, "But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (NIV). This passage introduces the notion of abandonment, which has been interpreted as an acceptable ground for divorce. In this instance, Paul provides a pastoral concession for a believer whose spouse, who does not share the Christian faith, abandons the marriage. This teaching reflects Paul's concern for the peace and spiritual well-being of the individual, allowing for divorce in cases where reconciliation is not possible. Paul's permissive stance on divorce is often seen as more flexible than the teachings of Jesus, particularly regarding abandonment by an unbeliever (Conley, 2012). Paul's rationale for allowing divorce in cases of abandonment reflects his broader pastoral concern for the church community and its members. He emphasizes that the Christian life should not be marked by constant strife, and if an unbelieving spouse chooses to leave, the believer is not bound to remain in an untenable relationship. This view is consistent with Paul's practical approach to Christian living, where the focus is on maintaining peace and preserving the dignity of the individual (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Kimiti, 2021).

### **Theological Implications of Biblical Theories of Divorce**

The theories of divorce found in the Bible present a complex and multifaceted understanding of marriage, sin, and human relationships. In the Old Testament, divorce was permitted as a concession due to human sinfulness, with the goal of protecting the rights of women. In the teachings of Jesus, divorce is permitted only in cases of sexual immorality, reflecting a higher standard of marital fidelity while acknowledging the reality of human fallibility. Pauline theology, while affirming the permanence of marriage, allows for divorce in cases of abandonment by an unbeliever, highlighting a pastoral concern for peace and spiritual well-being. These biblical theories of divorce reflect the tension between God's ideal for marriage and the realities of human sin. Divorce is not presented as a desirable outcome but as a concession to the fallen nature of human relationships. The biblical approach to divorce calls for reconciliation and forgiveness, yet it acknowledges that certain circumstances, such as sexual immorality and abandonment, may necessitate separation. The challenge for contemporary Christian practice, particularly in the Nigerian context, lies in applying these biblical teachings in a way that balances theological fidelity with pastoral compassion. The biblical theories of divorce also underscore the importance of understanding the cultural and historical context in which these teachings were given. The Old Testament, New Testament, and Pauline letters were all written within specific cultural frameworks that shaped the biblical authors' views on marriage and divorce. Understanding these contexts is essential for interpreting these teachings today, particularly in a society where divorce is still viewed with social stigma and cultural disapproval.

### **2.3 Ethical and Doctrinal Implications**

The ethical and doctrinal implications of divorce, as presented in biblical texts, are vast and multifaceted. Divorce touches upon key Christian doctrines such as the sanctity of marriage, forgiveness, grace, and human sinfulness. These teachings



also raise significant ethical questions, particularly regarding the treatment of individuals in broken relationships, the rights of women, and the church's role in mediating conflicts. The ethics of divorce in the biblical context must be understood within the framework of God's original design for marriage, the fallen state of humanity, and the pastoral need for reconciliation and healing. This section critically examines the ethical and doctrinal implications of divorce, focusing on the biblical teachings of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Pauline theology, as well as their application in contemporary Christian practice.

### **Ethical Implications: Divorce and the Sanctity of Marriage**

The ethical foundation for marriage in biblical thought is based on the understanding that marriage is a divine institution. In Genesis 2:24, the marital bond is described as a union where "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." This foundational passage underscores the sacredness of marriage as a covenant relationship, meant to reflect the unity and love between Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:22-33). From this standpoint, divorce is seen as a breach of this sacred bond, undermining God's original purpose for human relationships (Berkhof, 1950; Stott, 1971). The ethical implications of divorce, therefore, involve a theological consideration of the permanence and sanctity of marriage. Divorce, as a rupture of the marital bond, raises serious ethical concerns. While the Bible acknowledges the reality of human sin and the brokenness of relationships, it still upholds the sanctity of marriage as an ideal. Thus, the ethical question that arises is not whether divorce should be permitted but under what circumstances it should be allowed. The teachings of Jesus, especially in Matthew 19:3-9, emphasize the high standard of marital fidelity and the seriousness of divorce. Jesus explicitly states that divorce was allowed by Moses due to the hardness of human hearts, but it was never part of God's original plan (Matthew 19:8). The ethical challenge, therefore, lies in upholding the ideal of marriage while acknowledging the imperfections of human relationships. In this regard, Christian ethics on divorce must balance the respect for the sanctity of marriage with the pastoral care required for individuals in broken relationships. The ethical stance must prioritize reconciliation and healing, offering a path to forgiveness and restoration for those affected by marital breakdown (Greer, 1986; Zuck, 2023). The challenge here is to maintain the dignity of those who experience divorce while not minimizing the sanctity of marriage or treating divorce as a trivial matter.

### **Ethical Treatment of Women in Divorce**

One of the key ethical concerns raised by divorce, especially in biblical contexts, is the treatment of women. The Old Testament laws, particularly in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, provided a formal process for divorce but placed the burden of proof and the responsibility for initiating divorce primarily on the husband. While the certificate of divorce was intended to protect the woman from being unjustly abandoned, it did not fully address the social and cultural implications of divorce for women. In ancient Israel, divorce was often a patriarchal right, and women were vulnerable to mistreatment. They could be divorced for reasons that were not necessarily related to any fault of their own, leaving them in a precarious social position (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). In the New Testament, particularly in the teachings of Jesus and Paul, the ethical treatment of women in the context of divorce is more clearly emphasized. Jesus' teachings, particularly in Matthew 5:31-32, indicate that divorce should not be used as a means of exploiting or mistreating women. Jesus points to the fact that divorce makes women vulnerable to adultery, as they would often have no recourse but to remarry, given their social standing. In this way, Jesus' teaching seeks to protect women from exploitation and degradation in a patriarchal society (Fiorenza, 1988; Stott, 1971). Paul, too, in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, offers guidelines that

aim to protect both spouses in cases of marital separation. His instruction that "a wife must not separate from her husband, but if she does, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband" reflects an ethical concern for the welfare of both spouses, particularly women, who in ancient times were more vulnerable to social stigma. Paul's counsel reflects the pastoral concern to preserve both the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of the marriage bond, even in cases of separation (Greer, 1986; Klein et al., 2017). The ethical treatment of women in divorce must be understood in the context of the broader biblical ethical framework of justice, compassion, and dignity. Christian ethics on divorce must promote the protection of women, ensuring that they are not exploited or abandoned without support. The church's role in offering pastoral care and guidance in divorce cases should prioritize the well-being and dignity of both spouses, particularly women, who have historically been marginalized in divorce proceedings.

### **Doctrinal Implications: Divorce as a Violation of God's Original Plan**

The doctrinal implications of divorce are rooted in the biblical understanding of marriage as a covenant between husband and wife, ordained by God. In both the Old and New Testaments, divorce is treated as a violation of God's ideal for marriage. The foundational doctrine of marriage as a permanent covenant relationship (Genesis 2:24) is central to understanding why divorce is problematic from a biblical perspective. The doctrinal implications are not merely about the legality of divorce but the theological understanding that divorce disrupts the divine purpose of marriage. The teachings of Jesus in Matthew 19:3-9 reinforce this doctrinal perspective, emphasizing that divorce is not part of God's original plan but a concession due to human sinfulness. Jesus stresses that marriage is meant to be a permanent union, reflecting the union between Christ and the church. Therefore, from a doctrinal perspective, divorce represents a breakdown of this divine model, as it fractures the oneness that marriage is intended to create (Tate, 2008; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). The church's doctrinal position on divorce must therefore reflect this high view of marriage, upholding the sanctity and permanence of the marital bond while allowing for divorce only in cases where it is a necessary response to sin or abandonment. In Pauline theology, the doctrinal implications of divorce are also clear. While Paul acknowledges the reality of divorce in certain situations, his writings in 1 Corinthians 7 maintain the importance of the marriage covenant. For Paul, divorce is a failure to live up to God's calling for marriage, and while he permits divorce in specific cases (such as abandonment by an unbeliever), he encourages reconciliation wherever possible (Davidson, 2000; Stott, 1971). The doctrinal understanding that divorce is not part of God's original design underscores the church's commitment to promoting marital fidelity and unity, even in the face of human fallibility.

### **Doctrinal and Ethical Challenges in Contemporary Christian Practice**

In contemporary Christian practice, the doctrinal and ethical implications of divorce present a number of challenges, especially in a culturally diverse context like Nigeria. While the Bible presents a high view of marriage, the realities of marital breakdowns in a fallen world require the church to offer pastoral care that acknowledges both the sanctity of marriage and the complexities of human relationships. In Nigeria, where marriage is often seen as a sacred and social contract, the ethical and doctrinal implications of divorce can be especially challenging. Divorce is often viewed with social stigma, particularly for women, and the church's response to divorce must carefully navigate these cultural sensitivities while remaining faithful to biblical teachings. One of the challenges is the tension between upholding the sanctity of marriage and providing compassion for those who experience marital breakdown. Divorce, while not ideal, may be the only option

in cases of abuse, infidelity, or abandonment, and the church must be prepared to offer grace and support in such circumstances. The ethical challenge for the church is to maintain its doctrinal commitment to the permanence of marriage while providing a compassionate pastoral response to individuals in difficult marital situations (Bray, 1990; Greer, 1986). Another challenge is the ethical treatment of divorced individuals within the church. Divorcees, particularly women, may feel marginalized or stigmatized in churches that emphasize the permanence of marriage without offering sufficient pastoral care for those who have experienced divorce. The church must ensure that its teaching on divorce is balanced with a commitment to the healing and restoration of individuals who have been affected by marital breakdown (Barton, 1998; Conley, 2012). The doctrinal position on divorce must therefore be tempered by pastoral concern for the well-being of individuals, offering a path toward healing, reconciliation, and dignity for those who have experienced the pain of divorce.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO INTERPRETING 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-11

#### 3.1 Historical-Critical Method

The historical-critical method has long been regarded as a foundational approach in biblical scholarship. It aims to uncover the original meaning of a biblical text by considering its historical context, the circumstances of its composition, and the cultural milieu in which it was written. In the case of 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, this method allows us to critically examine Paul's teachings on marriage and divorce by exploring the social, religious, and historical background of the Corinthian church. By understanding the context in which Paul wrote, scholars can better grasp the nuances of his instructions and their intended meaning for the original audience. This section will critically engage with the historical-critical method, examining the historical and cultural contexts that shape the interpretation of Paul's teaching on divorce and marital relationships in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11.

#### The Context of the Corinthian Church

The historical context of 1 Corinthians is critical for understanding Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7. The letter was written to a church located in the ancient city of Corinth, a cosmopolitan hub in the Roman Empire, known for its wealth, diversity, and moral complexity. The city had a reputation for immorality, as reflected in the Greek word *korinthiazomai*, which referred to the act of engaging in sexual immorality (Berkhof, 1950). Corinth was home to the Temple of Aphrodite, and its religious practices often involved sacred prostitution and other forms of sexual behavior that were considered sinful by Jewish and early Christian standards. This environment influenced the struggles and challenges faced by the Corinthian believers, especially regarding issues of sexual morality and marital fidelity (Davidson, 2000; Osborne, 2010). The Corinthian church was a diverse community, consisting of both Jewish and Gentile converts. Many of these individuals came from pagan backgrounds and were unfamiliar with Christian teachings on marriage, family, and sexuality. As a result, Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 were intended to address not only the doctrinal and ethical issues within the church but also the practical concerns faced by Christians living in a morally permissive and sexually charged environment. The social environment in Corinth, characterized by its laxity towards sexual ethics and divorce, provides the backdrop for understanding the urgency and pastoral nature of Paul's response (Malina, 1982; Tribble, 1973). Paul's instructions on marriage and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7 are a direct response to questions raised by the Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 7:1). The Corinthians had written to Paul, seeking guidance on matters of marital relations, celibacy, and divorce. In this context, Paul's response was not merely theoretical but pragmatic, aimed at providing the Corinthian church with clear

directives for Christian living in a morally challenging society (Tate, 2008). Therefore, the historical context reveals that Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7 were driven by the need to address specific concerns within the church, including the proper understanding of marriage, sexual relations, and divorce.

### **The Social and Cultural Context of Divorce**

In examining the historical-critical method, it is important to consider the social and cultural norms of the time, particularly as they relate to the institution of marriage and divorce. In the Roman world, divorce was a legal procedure that could be initiated by either party, with little to no societal stigma attached to the process. Roman law allowed for divorce on a range of grounds, including adultery, infertility, and incompatibility. Divorce was seen as a relatively common practice, and it was not considered a moral failure or a breach of social order as it often is in many modern societies (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Stott, 1971). This cultural norm stands in stark contrast to the high view of marriage in Jewish tradition, where marriage was considered a sacred covenant between man, woman, and God. In the Jewish tradition, divorce was allowed under specific circumstances, most notably in cases of sexual immorality, as seen in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. However, Jewish law, particularly in the time of Jesus, was highly influenced by rabbinical interpretations, which debated the grounds for divorce. Some rabbis took a restrictive approach, allowing divorce only for adultery, while others adopted a more lenient view, permitting divorce for a broader range of reasons, including emotional neglect or even trivial matters such as burning the meal (Berkhof, 1950; Greer, 1986). This tension within Jewish law likely shaped the debates on divorce that Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 7, as his audience would have had exposure to these different perspectives on the subject. Paul's position on divorce, as presented in 1 Corinthians 7, reflects both his Jewish heritage and his Christian convictions. He does not offer a blanket endorsement of divorce but instead insists on the sanctity and permanence of marriage while acknowledging the complexities of human relationships. His teachings on divorce in this context must be understood as both a reflection of the Jewish understanding of marriage and a response to the social realities in the Corinthian church, where divorce was prevalent and seen as a normative social practice (Davidson, 2000; Malina, 1982).

### **Pauline Theology and the Historical Context**

To understand Paul's perspective on divorce, it is essential to explore his theology, particularly his view of marriage as a sacred covenant. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul affirms the permanence of marriage, echoing the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 19:3-9, where divorce is seen as contrary to God's original plan for marriage. Paul's use of the phrase "not I, but the Lord" indicates that he is reaffirming the teachings of Jesus on divorce, aligning himself with the Christian tradition that upholds marriage as a divine institution (Tate, 2008). In this regard, Paul's teachings on divorce can be understood as an extension of Jesus' own emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, even though Paul's letters also present more flexible pastoral guidelines, particularly in cases of separation or abandonment. Paul's theological view of marriage reflects his broader concern for the unity of the Christian community. For Paul, marriage is not only a private relationship between husband and wife but also a public witness to the unity of the body of Christ. The ethical and doctrinal implications of marriage, therefore, extend beyond individual relationships and affect the health of the church community as a whole. In this context, divorce becomes not just an individual issue but a communal one, with implications for the integrity of the Christian witness (Davidson, 2000; Stott, 1971). Paul's advice to married couples, particularly his call for reconciliation and the preservation of

marital unity, underscores the broader theological and communal significance of marriage within the Christian life.

### **The Historical-Critical Method in Pauline Exegesis**

The historical-critical method emphasizes the importance of understanding the author's intent, the audience's context, and the historical circumstances that shape a given text. In the case of 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, this method allows scholars to assess the relevance of Paul's teachings in their original historical setting, while also recognizing the broader theological implications for the Christian community. Paul's instructions on marriage and divorce were not abstract theological propositions but practical responses to real issues faced by the Corinthian believers. The historical-critical method encourages us to ask why Paul was addressing these issues and what specific challenges the Corinthian church was facing in relation to marriage and divorce (Barton, 1998; Klein et al., 2017). Paul's pastoral concern in 1 Corinthians 7 can be seen as an effort to address both the theological and social dimensions of marriage within the Corinthian church. His teachings are not solely concerned with doctrinal purity but also with the well-being of individuals and the integrity of the community. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul provides specific advice for Christians married to unbelievers, offering guidance on how to navigate these relationships without compromising the faith. This advice, while not directly related to divorce, shows Paul's concern for the practical challenges faced by the Corinthians in their mixed marriages and highlights the historical-cultural context of early Christian communities (Osborne, 2010; Tribble, 1973). Furthermore, the historical-critical method encourages a comparison of Paul's teachings with other ancient sources, including Jewish and Greco-Roman texts, to understand how his views on divorce align with or diverge from contemporary thought. By examining the social, cultural, and legal frameworks that shaped the Corinthians' understanding of marriage, scholars can better appreciate the significance of Paul's instructions and their implications for the early church (Virkler & Ayayo, 2023; Graves, 2017).

### **Challenges of Applying the Historical-Critical Method**

While the historical-critical method provides valuable insights into the historical context of biblical texts, it also has limitations. One of the primary challenges of applying this method to 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 is the difficulty of reconstructing the precise circumstances that prompted Paul's letter. The Corinthian church was facing numerous issues related to marriage, sexuality, and morality, but the specific details of the problems raised by the Corinthians are not always clear. The lack of detailed information about the questions posed by the Corinthians makes it difficult to fully understand the reasons for Paul's particular instructions (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Conley, 2012). Another challenge is the question of cultural distance. The cultural and social realities of first-century Corinth differ significantly from those of contemporary Christian communities, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Nigeria. While the historical-critical method allows for a deep understanding of the ancient context, applying these insights to modern situations requires careful consideration of cultural and theological developments over the centuries (Davidson, 2000). This raises important questions about how to adapt Paul's teachings to contemporary issues of marriage and divorce, particularly in societies where divorce is still highly stigmatized, and marital relationships are often defined by different cultural norms and expectations (Bray, 1990; Kimiti, 2021).

### **3.2 Literary and Canonical Analysis**

Literary and canonical analysis represents two critical methods for interpreting biblical texts. While the historical-critical method examines the context of a text, literary and canonical analysis focus on the structure, form, and placement of the



text within the broader canon of Scripture. Literary analysis looks at the text's narrative style, literary devices, and rhetorical strategies, while canonical analysis examines how a particular text fits within the larger framework of biblical revelation. When applied to 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, these methods offer deeper insights into Paul's instructions on marriage, divorce, and reconciliation, illuminating not only the immediate context of the letter but also the broader theological message within the New Testament canon. This section critically engages with both literary and canonical analysis of 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, providing a detailed examination of Paul's teachings on divorce and marriage.

### **Literary Analysis: Structure and Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 7**

1 Corinthians 7:1-11 is framed as a response to questions the Corinthians posed about marriage, celibacy, and divorce. The literary structure of this passage is essential for understanding how Paul constructs his argument. The passage can be divided into three major sections: verses 1-2, verses 3-5, and verses 6-11. Each section addresses different aspects of the marital relationship, offering pastoral advice on issues of sexual relations, mutual responsibility, and separation.

#### **Verses 1-2: The Call to Marital Fidelity**

Paul begins with a brief affirmation of the legitimacy of marriage. He states, "It is good for a man not to marry," but then he acknowledges the reality of human desires, emphasizing the importance of marital fidelity: "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:1-2, ESV). These verses serve as an introduction to Paul's more specific instructions and establish the foundational view of marriage as a God-ordained institution that addresses sexual desire in a moral and righteous manner. Paul's rhetorical strategy here is not to disparage marriage but to address the pressing issue of sexual immorality, which was rampant in Corinth due to its morally permissive culture (Berkhof, 1950; Tribble, 1973). His rhetoric, while valuing marriage, acknowledges the complexity of human desires and the necessity of marital fidelity in light of sexual temptation. The literary construction of verses 1-2 sets the tone for Paul's argument in the rest of the passage. It is a nuanced approach that balances idealism (marriage as good) with pragmatism (marriage as a safeguard against immorality). This creates a dynamic rhetorical tension that reflects Paul's broader pastoral concern for the well-being of the Corinthian church, encouraging them to embrace a higher standard of holiness while also recognizing their struggles with sin.

#### **Verses 3-5: Mutual Responsibility in Marriage**

In verses 3-5, Paul emphasizes the mutual responsibility of husband and wife in their marital relationship. He writes, "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:3, ESV). Here, Paul introduces the concept of mutuality in marriage, stressing that both spouses have a duty to fulfill each other's physical and emotional needs. The literary form of this instruction, with its parallel structure ("husband to wife" and "wife to husband"), underscores the equality of the marital relationship and the need for mutual submission, a theme that is developed more fully in Ephesians 5:22-33.

Paul's use of the phrase "conjugal rights" (or "marital duty") reflects the Jewish view of marriage as a sacred and contractual relationship that includes the obligation of sexual intimacy. However, the way Paul frames this within the context of Christian love and responsibility takes it beyond a mere transactional view. His rhetorical emphasis on mutuality reinforces the Christian ethic of self-giving love, where spouses serve one another, reflecting the love of Christ for the church (Davidson, 2000; Zuck, 2023). By insisting that each spouse is responsible for fulfilling the other's needs, Paul elevates the ethical standard for marriage, making it not just a

legal contract but a relational and spiritual bond grounded in mutual respect and care. Paul's instruction to withhold sexual relations "for a limited time" only for mutual prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5) also provides a safeguard against neglect. This detail underscores the importance of maintaining a physical connection between spouses, not only for the avoidance of temptation but also as a spiritual discipline that fosters unity and communion within the marriage.

### **Verses 6-11: Divorce and Separation**

The final section of this passage addresses the issue of separation and divorce. In verses 6-7, Paul expresses that he is giving his counsel, not as a command, acknowledging that celibacy can be a legitimate option for some but emphasizing that it is a gift from God, not a requirement for all. This rhetorical concession acknowledges the varied situations within the Corinthian church, where some members may have been struggling with the demands of marriage while others sought to live celibately for the sake of the kingdom (Osborne, 2010; Klein et al., 2017). The rhetorical flexibility here shows Paul's pastoral sensitivity to the diverse needs of the Christian community, highlighting that different individuals are called to different lifestyles. In verses 10-11, Paul offers instructions on divorce, stating that a wife should not separate from her husband, and if she does, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to him. The symmetry of Paul's instruction to both husband and wife emphasizes the equal responsibility for maintaining the marriage covenant. Paul's rhetorical tone is firm, but he provides an alternative to divorce through reconciliation, underscoring the Christian ideal of marital unity and restoration (Fiorenza, 1988). His concern is not just doctrinal but deeply pastoral, aiming to prevent the dissolution of marriages in the Corinthian church. Paul's rhetorical approach here is shaped by his understanding of marriage as a representation of the relationship between Christ and the church. The ethical implications of divorce and separation are not just personal or relational but communal, as they affect the witness of the church and the integrity of its members. Paul's firm stance on reconciliation, despite his recognition of the real struggles within marriages, illustrates the tension between the ideal of marital permanence and the realities of human sin (Bray, 1990; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

### **Canonical Analysis: Theological Implications Within the New Testament Canon**

Canonical analysis goes beyond the literary and historical context of a specific passage to examine how the text fits within the broader biblical canon. In the case of 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, canonical analysis allows us to explore the theological significance of Paul's teachings on marriage and divorce in light of the broader biblical narrative, particularly the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament.

#### **Marriage in the Old Testament and Jesus' Teachings**

The concept of marriage in the Old Testament provides the foundation for understanding Paul's teachings on divorce. In Genesis 2:24, marriage is portrayed as a divinely instituted covenant between man and woman, designed to be permanent: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This foundational text sets the stage for understanding the sanctity of marriage, which Paul echoes in his teaching. The command in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, which mirrors the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 19:6, reinforces the idea that marriage is a sacred bond that should not be broken except under specific circumstances (Davidson, 2000; Osborne, 2010).

Jesus' teachings on divorce, particularly in Matthew 19:3-9, provide further theological context for Paul's instructions. While Jesus upholds the sanctity of marriage, He permits divorce only in cases of sexual immorality, echoing the more

restrictive view found in the Old Testament, where divorce was permitted for reasons of marital unfaithfulness (Malina, 1982; Stott, 1971). However, unlike the Mosaic law, which allowed for divorce for a wide range of reasons, Jesus narrows the grounds for divorce to adultery, challenging the prevailing cultural attitudes toward divorce in His time (Barton, 1998). Paul, drawing on Jesus' teachings, similarly restricts divorce to cases of marital infidelity and abandonment by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:15). While Paul's theology on divorce aligns with Jesus' high view of marriage, he offers a more flexible pastoral response to the challenges faced by the Corinthian church. His canonical approach emphasizes the reconciliation of broken marriages wherever possible, highlighting the communal and relational aspect of marriage in the body of Christ (Greer, 1986; Klein et al., 2017).

### **Marriage in the New Testament Canon**

The teachings of Jesus and Paul are not isolated but are part of a broader New Testament vision of marriage. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul further develops the theological understanding of marriage, likening the union between husband and wife to the relationship between Christ and the church. This sacramental view of marriage underpins Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7, where he calls for mutual submission and sacrificial love within marriage. The New Testament canon, in its entirety, presents marriage as a sacred institution that reflects the redemptive relationship between Christ and His people, underscoring the theological significance of marital fidelity and the ethical imperative to uphold the sanctity of marriage (Zuck, 2023). In this broader canonical context, 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 becomes a critical text for understanding how the church should navigate the challenges of divorce in light of the biblical ideal of marriage. Paul's teachings offer a pastoral and theological framework that seeks to uphold the ideal of marital permanence while addressing the realities of human sin and brokenness.

### **3.3 Theological Interpretation**

The theological interpretation of Scripture is an approach that seeks to understand biblical texts not just in terms of historical or literary contexts but with an emphasis on their doctrinal and ethical implications for faith and practice. It involves interpreting Scripture through the lens of God's revealed will and considering how it informs Christian belief, ethics, and life. Theological interpretation, therefore, moves beyond simply understanding the text in its original context and seeks to draw out its meaning for the Christian community across time and space. This section critically engages with the theological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, particularly focusing on the passage's teachings on marriage, divorce, and reconciliation, and its implications for Christian doctrine and practice.

#### **Theological Context: Marriage as a Covenant**

Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 must be understood within the broader theological framework of marriage as a covenant. From the very beginning of Scripture, marriage is presented as a sacred institution established by God. In Genesis 2:24, the marital union is described as a divinely ordained covenant in which a man and a woman become "one flesh." This theological understanding of marriage as a covenantal relationship is foundational to Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7. For Paul, marriage is not merely a contractual or social arrangement but a covenantal bond that reflects God's intentions for human relationships. The idea of covenant is crucial because it implies permanence, mutual responsibility, and a deep spiritual union between the husband and wife, which is intended to mirror the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul echoes this covenantal theology by teaching that marriage should not be dissolved, except under specific circumstances. He refers to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:6, where Jesus emphasizes the permanence of the marital

bond: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6, ESV). Paul's teaching here, rooted in the theological understanding of marriage as a covenant, insists that divorce is a violation of God's original design. Theologically, divorce is not merely a legal issue but a spiritual one, as it breaks the covenantal bond that was intended to last for life. Paul's approach to marriage is deeply theological, as he situates it within the context of God's redemptive plan. This is evident in his insistence on reconciliation in cases of separation (1 Corinthians 7:11). For Paul, marriage reflects the unity between Christ and the Church, and the rupture of that union through divorce is not just a personal failure but a theological one that has implications for the Christian community's witness to the world. Therefore, the theological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 involves not just understanding the text in its historical context but also recognizing its implications for Christian living and ecclesial identity.

### **Divorce and the Ethical Demands of Christian Life**

A central theme in 1 Corinthians 7 is the ethical demand placed upon Christians to live in a manner that reflects their identity in Christ. Paul's teachings on divorce are framed by the broader ethical vision of Christian holiness. While Paul acknowledges the reality of marital breakdown, he does not treat divorce as an ideal solution. Instead, he emphasizes that reconciliation should always be the goal of any marital separation. The theological implication of this teaching is that the ethical life of a Christian is marked by the same grace and forgiveness that is found in the relationship between Christ and His people. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul encourages couples who experience separation to reconcile or remain unmarried, reflecting the Christian call to unity and reconciliation in all relationships (Greer, 1986). This ethical vision reflects the broader theological understanding that God's grace is sufficient to heal and restore even broken relationships. The Christian call to forgiveness, as exemplified in the relationship between Christ and the Church, is central to Paul's teaching on marriage. Divorce, therefore, is seen not as a final solution but as a concession in situations where reconciliation is impossible. Theologically, this reinforces the idea that Christians are called to emulate God's grace in all their relationships, including their marriages. In cases of marital infidelity, Paul's allowance for divorce aligns with the teachings of Jesus, who permitted divorce in cases of sexual immorality (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). However, Paul places greater emphasis on reconciliation, urging that divorce should not be the first response to marital difficulties. Theologically, this approach underscores the priority of healing and restoration in the Christian life, a theme that runs throughout Paul's letters. Divorce, in this sense, is seen as a tragic result of human sin, but not as an inevitable or desirable end (Barton, 1998; Osborne, 2010).

### **The Role of the Church in Divorce and Reconciliation**

Theologically, the church plays a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the difficulties of marriage and divorce. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 are not just for individual couples but also for the wider Christian community. The church is called to be a community of reconciliation, and this extends to cases of marital breakdown. Theological interpretation of this passage implies that the church has a responsibility to provide pastoral care for couples in distress, offering guidance that prioritizes reconciliation and healing. This pastoral responsibility reflects the biblical understanding of the church as a place of refuge and restoration, where individuals can find support and encouragement to work through their relational difficulties. Theologically, the church's role in dealing with divorce goes beyond merely offering advice on how to handle marital problems. The church is called to embody the love and grace of Christ in its dealings with those experiencing broken relationships. This includes providing spiritual support, counseling, and a safe space

for couples to work toward reconciliation. For Paul, the church's role in promoting reconciliation is not merely a matter of offering guidance but of embodying the very grace and forgiveness that Christ extends to His followers (Fiorenza, 1988; Weaver, 2022). Moreover, the theological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 highlights the communal aspect of marriage and divorce within the church. Divorce does not only affect the individuals involved but also the broader community. The health of the church as a witness to the world is closely tied to the quality of its relationships, including those within marriage. Therefore, the church is called to provide a witness to the world through its commitment to marital fidelity, reconciliation, and the restoration of broken relationships. In this sense, the church's response to divorce is not just about individual salvation but about the witness of the Christian community to the world (Tate, 2008; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

### **Theological Reflection on Divorce as a Pastoral Challenge**

Theologically, divorce presents a significant pastoral challenge, as it touches on the deep emotional, relational, and spiritual aspects of human life. Paul's teachings on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7 are not abstract doctrinal statements but practical guidelines for addressing the real and painful realities that believers face in their marriages. The ethical implications of divorce are grounded in the theological reality of human sinfulness and the need for grace. Divorce, in this sense, is not just a legal or social issue but a deeply theological one, as it reflects the brokenness of human relationships and the need for reconciliation and healing. The theological interpretation of divorce, therefore, involves recognizing the complexity of human relationships and the challenges faced by individuals in difficult marriages. Theologically, it is important to emphasize that divorce is not an unforgivable sin but a result of human sin and imperfection. The focus, theologically, is on the possibility of redemption and restoration, even in the midst of marital breakdown. In this light, the church's response to divorce should be marked by compassion, forgiveness, and a commitment to helping individuals heal and grow (Greer, 1986; Kimiti, 2021).

### **3.4 Comparative Exegesis**

Comparative exegesis is a method of biblical interpretation that involves comparing different biblical texts or traditions to draw out a deeper understanding of a particular passage. This method allows interpreters to examine how different scriptural traditions, both within the same canon and across various canons, handle similar themes or teachings. When applied to the issue of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:1-11, comparative exegesis involves comparing Paul's teachings on divorce with the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, the teachings of the Old Testament, and other New Testament letters. This method provides insights into the continuity and discontinuity between these traditions and helps us understand how divorce is understood within the broader biblical narrative.

#### **Comparative Exegesis: Paul and Jesus on Divorce**

The teachings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 on divorce bear significant similarities and differences to the teachings of Jesus on the same topic. In Matthew 19:3-9, Jesus explicitly states that divorce was permitted by Moses due to the hardness of human hearts but that it was not part of God's original design for marriage. He asserts, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6, ESV). Jesus permits divorce only in cases of sexual immorality, making marital fidelity the ideal standard. Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7 reflect this same high view of marriage, though with a nuanced approach. Like Jesus, Paul insists that divorce should not be the default option but that reconciliation should be pursued whenever possible (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). However, Paul also provides a pastoral concession that Jesus does not explicitly address: the possibility of divorce in cases of abandonment by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:15). This exception introduces a new



dimension to Paul's teaching, as he recognizes the difficulties of mixed marriages in the early Christian community, where one spouse may be a believer and the other an unbeliever. Theologically, this development in Pauline thought allows for a broader application of the divorce rule, providing pastoral care for individuals in these complex situations (Kimiti, 2021; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). In comparative exegesis, we see that while Paul follows Jesus' strict teaching on marital permanence, he introduces a more flexible pastoral approach that accommodates the realities of the early church, where believers lived in challenging relational circumstances. Paul's focus on reconciliation and the sanctity of marriage is consistent with Jesus' emphasis, but his broader allowance for divorce reflects the pastoral needs of his time.

### **Comparative Exegesis: Paul and the Old Testament on Divorce**

The Old Testament provides a foundation for understanding biblical views on divorce, particularly in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This passage permits divorce for reasons of "indecent," but the term remains ambiguous, and the law is framed more as a concession than an ideal. In the Old Testament, divorce was allowed but regulated to protect women, ensuring that they were not cast aside without the possibility of remarriage. However, the high ideal for marriage remained intact, and divorce was not encouraged but permitted as a means to address human sin and broken relationships. Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7 build upon this Old Testament understanding, particularly in his insistence on the permanence of marriage. However, Paul is more restrictive than the Old Testament in terms of the grounds for divorce. While Deuteronomy allowed for a broader range of reasons for divorce, Paul limits divorce to situations of marital infidelity or abandonment by an unbeliever. The comparative exegesis of these two traditions reveals a continuity in the high view of marriage as a divine covenant but also highlights the differences in the approach to divorce. Paul's teachings are both consistent with and more restrictive than the Mosaic law, reflecting the influence of Jesus' teachings while considering the practical realities of the early Christian community (Barton, 1998; Stott, 1971).

### **Comparative Exegesis: Pauline Teachings and Other New Testament Letters**

Comparing Paul's teachings on divorce with those in other New Testament letters further enriches our understanding of the topic. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul presents marriage as a reflection of Christ's love for the Church, reinforcing the idea that marriage should be marked by sacrificial love and mutual submission. While the focus in Ephesians is more on the relationship between husband and wife than on divorce, the implication is that divorce is inconsistent with the Christlike love that should characterize marital relationships. This connection between love and marital permanence supports Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7, where he insists on reconciliation and unity as the ideal for married couples. In contrast to Paul's teachings, the pastoral epistles, such as 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, focus on the qualifications for church leaders, which include the requirement to be "the husband of one wife." While these passages do not directly address divorce, they reflect the broader New Testament teaching on the sanctity of marriage and the ethical expectations for Christian leaders. When read in conjunction with 1 Corinthians 7, these passages highlight the importance of marital fidelity and the ethical demand for Christians to reflect Christ's love in their relationships (Weaver, 2022; Malina, 1982).

## 4.0 ANALYSIS OF DIVORCE IN THE IKWO CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

### 4.1 Local Church Practices and Beliefs on Divorce

In the Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria, the practice of divorce within Christian communities is deeply intertwined with both theological beliefs and cultural norms. While the overarching theological teachings of the Christian faith, as found in the Bible, inform the local church's stance on marriage and divorce, these teachings are often shaped by the sociocultural environment in which they are practiced. This section critically examines the local church's beliefs and practices surrounding divorce, with a particular focus on how Christian doctrines on marriage and divorce are applied within the Ikwo context, alongside the pastoral care provided by church leaders in the region.

#### **Biblical Teachings and Local Church Practices**

The Christian community in Ikwo, much like in other parts of Nigeria, generally holds to the high view of marriage found in biblical teachings. The sanctity of marriage is emphasized, with a strong doctrinal belief in the permanence of the marital bond, which is rooted in Scripture. Passages such as Genesis 2:24, which presents marriage as a divine institution, and Jesus' teachings in Matthew 19:6, which stress that "what God has joined together, let no one separate," are foundational to local beliefs. Local pastors and church leaders often refer to these scriptures when addressing issues of marriage and divorce, reiterating the view that divorce is a deviation from God's original intent for marriage (Stott, 1971; Zuck, 2023). Despite this biblical teaching, however, the practical application of these principles is often influenced by the lived experiences and challenges faced by couples in Ikwo. In many cases, the local church community exhibits a tension between maintaining the theological ideal of marital permanence and acknowledging the difficult realities of divorce. As a result, local church practices tend to emphasize the restoration of relationships, offering counseling and mediation to couples in distress. The pastoral response to marital issues in Ikwo involves not just theological instruction but also practical support aimed at healing and reconciliation. Divorce is viewed as a last resort, but pastors often attempt to facilitate reconciliation through regular counseling sessions, prayer meetings, and family interventions (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Conley, 2012).

#### **Divorce and Church Discipline**

When divorce does occur within the local church community in Ikwo, it often raises issues of church discipline. The approach to divorce varies between denominations, but it is generally understood that divorce should not be celebrated or viewed as a desirable outcome. Most churches in Ikwo adhere to the belief that divorce is morally and spiritually damaging, both to the individuals involved and to the wider church community. However, there is no uniform approach to how divorcees are treated within the church. In some cases, divorcees may face stigmatization, and their ability to participate in church activities may be restricted. In contrast, some churches take a more pastoral approach, offering support for the healing process and encouraging divorcees to continue participating in the life of the church, albeit with caution and sensitivity. Church leaders in Ikwo are often confronted with the difficult decision of whether to accept or exclude divorcees from full participation in church life. The ethical dilemma arises from balancing the church's doctrinal commitment to the sanctity of marriage with the need for compassion and support for those who have gone through divorce. While some pastors in Ikwo are more conservative and may advocate for a strict interpretation of divorce, others are more lenient, emphasizing forgiveness, restoration, and the redemptive possibilities of grace (Fiorenza, 1988; Greer, 1986).

## **The Role of Pastoral Counseling**

Pastoral counseling plays a critical role in the Ikwo church's response to divorce. Church leaders offer counseling services for couples experiencing marital difficulties, with the aim of preventing divorce whenever possible. The pastoral approach generally encourages open communication, mutual understanding, and prayer. In many cases, couples are encouraged to seek counseling before considering divorce, which often helps them explore solutions to their problems. Counseling sessions may involve both individual and couple's counseling, where personal issues, emotional challenges, and relational difficulties are addressed from a Christian perspective. Additionally, church leaders in Ikwo often offer family interventions, especially when external factors, such as infidelity or financial difficulties, are contributing to marital strain. These interventions are guided by the understanding that divorce should be avoided if possible and that the church's responsibility is to facilitate the reconciliation of couples in crisis. The church in Ikwo thus plays a dual role: both as a provider of doctrinal instruction on marriage and divorce and as a facilitator of practical and pastoral care for couples in distress (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of church counseling varies. Many couples, particularly those who have experienced prolonged relational strain, may find it difficult to reconcile and may eventually resort to divorce. The theological and ethical tension between the biblical teaching on marriage and the realities faced by couples in Ikwo continues to challenge the local church's approach to divorce. Church leaders are often faced with the difficult task of balancing the need for doctrinal purity with the call to extend grace and support to those who have experienced marital breakdown (Barton, 1998; Zuck, 2023).

## **4.2 Cultural Influences on Divorce**

In Ikwo Local Government Area, the practice of divorce is heavily influenced by both Christian teachings and local cultural norms. Divorce, as a concept, has evolved within the intersection of these influences, with significant implications for how divorce is perceived, managed, and addressed in the local context. The cultural understanding of marriage, gender roles, and societal expectations regarding family life plays a central role in shaping attitudes toward divorce and influencing how divorce is dealt with by the local Christian church. This section critically examines the cultural influences on divorce in Ikwo, focusing on how traditional customs, gender roles, and societal expectations intersect with Christian teachings to shape local attitudes toward divorce.

### **Traditional Views on Marriage and Divorce**

In traditional Ikwo society, marriage is viewed as a foundational institution, not just for the couple involved but for the broader community. Marriage is often seen as a contract that binds two families together, and its success or failure can have significant social, economic, and familial consequences. Divorce, therefore, is seen as a failure of the family unit, with implications not only for the individuals involved but also for their extended families and communities. This cultural understanding of marriage and divorce is rooted in traditional African values that emphasize the importance of family unity, communal living, and the perpetuation of lineage. Traditionally, divorce in Ikwo society was not as legally formalized as it is today. Instead, it was often dealt with through informal processes, such as the return of the bride price or the separation of the couple by mutual agreement. However, with the spread of Christianity and the influence of Western legal frameworks, divorce has become a more formalized process in the Ikwo region, with legal and ecclesiastical procedures that regulate marital dissolution. Despite this formalization, the stigma attached to divorce remains strong in traditional Ikwo

society, where divorce is often viewed as a mark of personal failure or shame. The traditional understanding of marriage in Ikwo society emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of both the husband and wife, with the husband traditionally seen as the head of the household and the wife as the primary caregiver and nurturer of the family. This patriarchal structure influences how divorce is perceived, with women often facing greater societal stigma than men in the event of marital breakdown. A woman who experiences divorce is often seen as having failed in her primary role as a wife and mother, and may be viewed as socially and morally inferior to a woman who remains married (Greer, 1986; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

### **Gender Roles and Divorce**

Gender roles in Ikwo are strongly shaped by traditional customs, and these roles play a significant part in shaping the local view of divorce. In traditional African societies, marriage is often considered the central aspect of a woman's identity, and women are expected to fulfill specific roles within the family structure. These roles include childbearing, caregiving, and managing the home. Consequently, when a marriage ends in divorce, the societal stigma is often disproportionately directed toward women, who are perceived as failing in their societal duties (Berkhof, 1950). Women in Ikwo may face social exclusion, financial hardship, and emotional distress following a divorce, as they often lack the economic and social resources to live independently. The cultural expectation for women to uphold the family unit places significant pressure on them to remain in marriage, even in situations where there is marital conflict or abuse. This pressure can sometimes prevent women from seeking divorce or may lead to their staying in abusive relationships to avoid the shame and stigma associated with divorce (Zuck, 2023; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). In contrast, men are often less socially stigmatized by divorce and may retain their social status and respectability, despite the dissolution of their marriages. This gendered approach to divorce, shaped by cultural norms, complicates the church's efforts to provide equitable pastoral care for both men and women affected by divorce.

### **The Role of Cultural Expectations in Divorce Decisions**

Cultural expectations regarding marriage and divorce in Ikwo play a significant role in the decisions individuals make regarding marital dissolution. The decision to divorce is often influenced by factors such as familial pressure, economic stability, and social reputation. In Ikwo, the extended family plays a significant role in marital life, and decisions about divorce are often made in consultation with family members, particularly elders. While individuals may seek divorce for personal reasons, the decision is often influenced by the desire to maintain family harmony and avoid social disgrace (Tate, 2008; Stott, 1971). This cultural emphasis on communal decision-making can complicate the process of divorce, especially for individuals who wish to break free from an unhealthy or abusive marriage. The pressure to conform to traditional norms can lead to individuals enduring marital problems in silence, seeking external help only as a last resort. In such cases, the local church, while promoting reconciliation and healing, must contend with the strong cultural influences that often dictate marital decisions in Ikwo (Davidson, 2000).

### **4.3 Impact of Pauline Teachings on Divorce**

Pauline teachings on divorce, particularly as found in 1 Corinthians 7, have had a significant impact on the way Christian communities interpret and address the issue of marital breakdown. Paul's views, grounded in both theological conviction and pastoral concern, offer both a challenge and a guide for contemporary Christian practice, particularly in regions like Ikwo, where cultural norms strongly influence marital expectations. The influence of Pauline teachings, while primarily rooted in

theological and ethical considerations, also impacts the local church's pastoral approach to divorce, shaping the church's response to marital issues in ways that reflect both biblical fidelity and the realities of human relationships.

### **The Sanctity and Permanence of Marriage**

At the heart of Paul's teachings on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7 is the theological principle that marriage is a sacred institution intended by God to be permanent. For Paul, the marital bond reflects the unity between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33), making it a divine covenant that should not be easily dissolved. Paul's insistence that spouses should not separate or divorce, except in cases of marital infidelity or abandonment by an unbeliever, reinforces the belief in the sanctity of marriage as a reflection of God's will for human relationships. This high view of marriage, central to Pauline theology, has profoundly shaped Christian doctrine on divorce, including in Ikwo, where marriage is regarded as a critical societal and spiritual institution (Davidson, 2000; Zuck, 2023). The impact of this theological stance is evident in local Christian communities, where divorce is generally discouraged, and marital permanence is upheld as the ideal. For church leaders in Ikwo, Paul's teachings on the permanence of marriage provide a clear doctrinal framework for counseling couples facing marital difficulties. Pastoral responses to marital problems often reflect Paul's high view of marriage, with efforts made to reconcile couples and restore broken relationships. While the church in Ikwo recognizes the challenges couples face, particularly in cases of infidelity or abandonment, the overarching theological position on marriage remains one of unity and reconciliation (Tate, 2008; Stott, 1971). However, the impact of this high view of marriage is not without its challenges. The doctrinal emphasis on the permanence of marriage can sometimes lead to guilt and shame for individuals who experience divorce, especially women. In Ikwo, where traditional gender roles and cultural expectations place significant pressure on women to uphold marital unity, the church's teachings on divorce may inadvertently exacerbate the stigma faced by divorced individuals, especially those who have been victims of abuse or neglect (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). Consequently, while Pauline teachings provide a strong theological foundation for the sanctity of marriage, they also raise ethical and pastoral dilemmas when faced with the harsh realities of marital breakdowns in the Ikwo context.

### **Divorce as a Last Resort: Pastoral Implications**

One of the critical impacts of Pauline teachings on divorce is the pastoral emphasis on reconciliation. In 1 Corinthians 7:11, Paul instructs that if separation occurs, the couple should either reconcile or remain unmarried. This teaching has a profound impact on how the local church in Ikwo responds to marital crises. Rather than viewing divorce as an acceptable or desirable outcome, Paul's emphasis on reconciliation positions the church as a mediator, encouraging couples to work through their issues and seek spiritual healing. In the Ikwo church context, this emphasis on reconciliation translates into a pastoral commitment to addressing marital problems through counseling, prayer, and family intervention. Church leaders, in line with Pauline teaching, often encourage couples to exhaust all possible avenues for restoring their relationship before considering divorce. This pastoral approach seeks to embody the values of grace, forgiveness, and mutual respect, which are integral to Pauline theology. The church becomes a space where individuals can seek guidance, support, and spiritual direction in navigating their marital difficulties (Greer, 1986; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). However, the pastoral application of this teaching is not without its challenges. In some cases, couples in Ikwo may be reluctant to seek help due to societal pressures or the fear of being stigmatized by their community. Additionally, the cultural expectation that



marriages must endure, regardless of the circumstances, can place undue pressure on individuals to remain in unhealthy or even abusive relationships. In such cases, the church's pastoral emphasis on reconciliation can become problematic, as it may inadvertently encourage individuals to stay in situations where safety and well-being are at risk. While reconciliation is a biblical ideal, the pastoral challenge lies in balancing the call to restore marriages with the need to protect the dignity and well-being of those involved (Fiorenza, 1988; Malina, 1982).

### **Pauline Teachings and the Role of the Church in Divorce**

Pauline teachings have also shaped the church's role in managing divorce. In the Ikwo church, the role of the church is understood to be both spiritual and practical. Church leaders are tasked with not only teaching biblical doctrine but also offering support and intervention in cases of marital breakdown. Paul's emphasis on the role of the church as a community of reconciliation underscores the responsibility of church leaders to guide couples through marital difficulties and to promote the restoration of broken relationships (Davidson, 2000; Stott, 1971). This pastoral role is reflected in the church's commitment to offering counseling, mediation, and spiritual support to couples in distress. Church leaders often serve as intermediaries, helping couples communicate and resolve their conflicts in ways that reflect Christian values. However, as in many Christian communities, the church in Ikwo faces the challenge of being perceived as judgmental or punitive, particularly when it comes to divorce. Divorcees, especially women, may feel isolated or marginalized within the church community, which complicates the church's role as a place of healing and restoration. Pauline teachings on divorce, therefore, have a dual impact on the church: they provide a theological framework for upholding the sanctity of marriage but also challenge the church to extend grace and compassion to those affected by marital breakdown (Barton, 1998; Conley, 2012).

### **The Influence of Pauline Teachings on Divorcees**

In Ikwo, the influence of Pauline teachings on divorce is particularly significant for individuals who have experienced marital breakdown. Divorcees often face the challenge of reconciling their experience with the teachings of the church. Pauline's insistence on the permanence of marriage and the ideal of reconciliation can create a sense of guilt or shame for those who have gone through divorce. Divorcees may struggle with feelings of spiritual inadequacy or isolation, particularly if the divorce occurred due to factors outside their control, such as infidelity or abandonment (Tate, 2008; Weaver, 2022). The impact of Pauline teachings, in this context, is twofold. On the one hand, the theological emphasis on forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation provides hope for those who have experienced divorce. The idea that God's grace extends to all, including those who have failed in their marriages, is a powerful theological message that can offer healing and restoration. On the other hand, the doctrinal emphasis on marital permanence may make it difficult for individuals to feel fully accepted by the church, particularly if they perceive their divorce as a failure to meet the biblical ideal (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Greer, 1986). As a result, the impact of Pauline teachings on divorce in Ikwo can be both redemptive and burdensome, depending on how they are applied within the community.

### **4.4 Challenges and Controversies**

The issue of divorce, particularly in the Christian context of Ikwo, presents several challenges and controversies that reflect the tension between doctrinal purity and pastoral sensitivity. While the church holds to a high view of marriage and divorce is generally viewed as a last resort, the practical realities of marital breakdown often lead to difficult and sometimes contentious decisions. This section critically examines the challenges and controversies surrounding divorce in the Ikwo

Christian context, focusing on the tension between theological ideals and cultural pressures, as well as the complexities involved in offering pastoral care to those experiencing divorce.

### **Tension Between Theological Ideals and Cultural Realities**

One of the most significant challenges regarding divorce in Ikwo is the tension between the theological ideal of marital permanence and the cultural realities faced by individuals in troubled marriages. Christian doctrine, particularly the teachings of Paul, upholds marriage as a sacred and permanent union, with divorce as a tragic last resort. However, in the Ikwo context, marriage is also understood as a communal institution that binds not only individuals but also their families. This cultural expectation of lifelong marriage, coupled with the social pressures placed on individuals to remain married, complicates the application of Pauline teachings on divorce. In many cases, individuals who wish to divorce are often met with resistance from their families and communities. The stigma surrounding divorce is particularly strong for women, who are expected to uphold the family unit at all costs. This cultural pressure can make it difficult for individuals, particularly women, to seek divorce even in cases of abuse or infidelity, for fear of being ostracized or blamed for the marital breakdown (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Conley, 2012). The church, in its effort to uphold biblical principles, may inadvertently contribute to this cultural stigma, making it more difficult for divorcees to find acceptance and healing within the community.

### **The Ethics of Reconciliation vs. Safety**

Another significant controversy arises from the ethical tension between reconciliation and the safety of individuals in abusive marriages. Pauline teachings, particularly in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, emphasize the importance of reconciliation in cases of marital separation. However, this ideal is complicated by the reality of domestic violence and abuse, which may make reconciliation both dangerous and unethical. Church leaders in Ikwo often face the difficult decision of whether to encourage reconciliation in cases of abuse, where the safety and well-being of the victim are at risk. While some pastors and church leaders advocate for reconciliation as a reflection of God's grace and forgiveness, others argue that the safety of the individuals involved must take precedence over the call to restore the marriage. This controversy highlights the complexity of applying Pauline teachings in cases where marital breakdowns are caused by serious issues such as abuse, infidelity, or emotional neglect (Tate, 2008; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). The ethical dilemma here is whether the church's insistence on reconciliation can, in some cases, do more harm than good, particularly for vulnerable individuals who may feel pressured to remain in unsafe situations due to theological or cultural expectations.

### **Pastoral Care and Stigmatization**

The church's role in offering pastoral care to divorcees is another area of controversy. While many church leaders strive to offer grace and support to those affected by divorce, the stigma attached to divorce in Ikwo can make it difficult for individuals to seek help. Divorcees, especially women, may feel isolated or marginalized within the church community, either because they feel they have failed to live up to biblical standards or because they fear judgment from other members of the congregation (Greer, 1986; Malina, 1982). The pastoral care offered to divorcees is often shaped by the church's doctrinal stance on marriage, which emphasizes the permanence of the marital bond and the sanctity of the family unit. However, the stigma surrounding divorce in Ikwo may lead to a situation where divorcees feel excluded or alienated from the Christian community, which can further exacerbate their emotional and spiritual struggles. This presents a pastoral challenge, as the church must navigate between offering doctrinally faithful

guidance on marriage and divorce and providing compassionate care that fosters inclusion and healing for those affected by marital breakdown (Fiorenza, 1988; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). The challenge lies in balancing the church's theological stance with the need to support individuals in their healing process and help them reintegrate into the church community.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE**

### **5.1. Summary of Findings**

This paper has critically examined the issue of divorce through Pauline theology, focusing on 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 and its implications for Christian doctrine and practice, particularly in the Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Several key findings emerged from the analysis of Pauline teachings, the local church's practices, and the cultural influences on divorce. First, the Pauline perspective on marriage and divorce emphasizes the sanctity and permanence of marriage as a divine covenant, with divorce permitted only in exceptional circumstances, such as marital infidelity or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. These teachings align closely with the broader Christian view that marriage is a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the Church, thereby upholding the ideal of marital fidelity and unity (Berkhof, 1950; Zuck, 2023). Second, the local church in Ikwo holds a similar high view of marriage, grounded in biblical teachings, and generally discourages divorce. However, pastoral practice in the region reflects a tension between doctrinal ideals and the complex realities of marital breakdowns, particularly in cases of infidelity or abuse. While divorce is considered a last resort, the local church actively engages in efforts to restore marriages through counseling, reconciliation, and prayer (Davidson, 2000; Tribble, 1973). Nevertheless, cultural factors, particularly gender roles and societal pressures, complicate the application of Pauline teachings. Women, in particular, face greater social stigma in the event of divorce, which further marginalizes them and can limit their ability to seek help or find healing within the church (Greer, 1986; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978). Third, the cultural expectations surrounding marriage and divorce in Ikwo are heavily influenced by traditional views on family, gender roles, and social cohesion. While these cultural norms place immense pressure on individuals, especially women, to remain married, they also create a context in which divorce is often viewed as a failure of not just the couple but the extended family and community (Fiorenza, 1988; Malina, 1982). This cultural framework challenges the local church's ability to offer a fully compassionate and restorative response to those affected by divorce. Finally, the paper highlighted the pastoral challenges faced by church leaders in Ikwo as they navigate the tension between the ideal of marital permanence and the harsh realities of divorce. Pastoral care, while emphasizing reconciliation, sometimes struggles to address situations where reconciliation is impossible or unsafe, such as in cases of domestic abuse or prolonged infidelity. The church's response must balance doctrinal integrity with sensitivity to the lived experiences of individuals within the congregation (Kimiti, 2021; Tate, 2008).

### **Implications for Church Doctrine**

The findings of this study have significant implications for the church's doctrine on marriage and divorce. First, the high view of marriage in Pauline theology should remain central to Christian doctrine. Marriage, as a sacred covenant reflecting the union between Christ and the Church, must continue to be upheld as the ideal in Christian communities. However, this ideal should not be rigidly enforced without consideration of the complex realities that may lead to marital breakdowns. The church must be willing to apply Pauline teachings on divorce with a pastoral heart, understanding that human relationships are frail and that divorce may be necessary in cases of marital infidelity, abandonment, or abuse (Barton, 1998; Stott, 1971).

Second, Pauline's emphasis on reconciliation and the ideal of marital restoration must be reinforced within the church's doctrine, but this should be done with caution, particularly in cases where reconciliation is unsafe or unfeasible. Church doctrine must be flexible enough to allow for pastoral exceptions, where divorce becomes a necessary means of protecting individuals' safety and well-being. While reconciliation remains the goal, doctrinal clarity should also be given to situations where separation is a form of protection, not a theological failure (Weaver, 2022; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

Moreover, the church's doctrinal stance on divorce must consider the social and cultural context in which it operates. The doctrine should not only focus on doctrinal purity but also on practical realities, such as the cultural stigma attached to divorce, especially for women, and the lack of social support available to divorcees. Church doctrine, therefore, should be informed by a holistic understanding of the social challenges faced by individuals in difficult marriages. This includes offering pastoral care that seeks to restore relationships, but also ensuring that the church is a space of healing and acceptance for those who have experienced divorce (Zuck, 2023; Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978).

## 5.2. Recommendations for Pastoral Practice

Given the findings and the implications for church doctrine, several recommendations for pastoral practice in Ikwo and similar contexts are made. These recommendations aim to enhance the church's ability to support those affected by divorce while remaining faithful to the biblical teachings on marriage and reconciliation.

- i. **Emphasizing Grace and Reconciliation:** While divorce should remain the last resort, pastoral practice should place a strong emphasis on reconciliation as the ultimate goal. Pastoral counseling should encourage couples to work through marital difficulties and explore avenues of restoration. At the same time, pastors should acknowledge that there are situations where reconciliation is not possible or safe, such as in cases of abuse or infidelity. Therefore, reconciliation should be pursued wherever possible, but the pastoral response must also allow for divorce in cases where safety and well-being are at risk (Tate, 2008; Fiorenza, 1988).
- ii. **Creating Safe Spaces for Divorcees:** Pastoral care must extend beyond just preventing divorce to supporting those who have already experienced marital breakdown. In Ikwo, where the stigma surrounding divorce is strong, it is critical that the church creates a safe, supportive environment for divorcees. Divorcees, particularly women, must be welcomed back into the community, without fear of exclusion or judgment. Pastors should actively engage with divorcees, providing them with spiritual guidance, emotional support, and practical assistance in their journey of healing. This would involve providing separate pastoral programs for those who have experienced divorce, such as support groups, individual counseling, and opportunities for reintegration into church life (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Greer, 1986).
- iii. **Education and Training for Church Leaders:** Church leaders in Ikwo should be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to address divorce in a way that is both doctrinally faithful and pastorally sensitive. This includes training pastors to recognize the complex cultural and social factors that contribute to marital breakdowns and to offer appropriate interventions. Pastors should be trained not only in biblical theology but also in counseling techniques that can help them navigate the emotional and relational aspects of divorce, such as emotional trauma, family dynamics, and forgiveness (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1978; Weaver, 2022).

- iv. **Engaging with Cultural Realities:** Pastoral practice must engage with the cultural realities of Ikwo, particularly the role of gender and family in marital relationships. Pastors should be aware of the cultural pressures faced by women in divorce situations and should work to dismantle the stigma associated with divorce, especially for women. By promoting a theology of grace and inclusion, the church can become a place where both men and women feel supported and encouraged, rather than ostracized, after experiencing marital breakdown. This may involve engaging in community education and awareness campaigns to challenge cultural misconceptions about divorce and to foster a more compassionate understanding of marriage within the local context (Malina, 1982; Kimiti, 2021).
- v. **Encouraging Forgiveness and Restoration:** A key component of pastoral practice should be teaching forgiveness and restoration within the Christian community. While divorce may be necessary in some circumstances, the ultimate goal of Christian discipleship is reconciliation and healing. Pastors should encourage couples to forgive one another and offer opportunities for counseling and support that focus on healing emotional wounds, restoring relationships, and rebuilding trust. Even in cases of divorce, the church should emphasize the importance of forgiveness as part of the Christian calling to mirror Christ's grace in all relationships (Davidson, 2000; Weaver, 2022).

### 5.3. Conclusion

The issue of divorce presents significant challenges for Christian communities, particularly in areas like Ikwo, where both doctrinal beliefs and cultural norms shape attitudes toward marriage and marital breakdowns. Pauline teachings on divorce, while offering a high view of marriage and a pastoral emphasis on reconciliation, must be applied with sensitivity to the realities faced by individuals in troubled marriages. The local church in Ikwo must balance doctrinal fidelity with compassion for those who experience divorce, offering both spiritual and practical support. By emphasizing grace, reconciliation, and forgiveness, the church can play a pivotal role in helping individuals navigate the complexities of divorce, while remaining faithful to the biblical ideals of marriage and family. The implications of Pauline teachings on divorce, therefore, are not just doctrinal but pastoral, as the church seeks to extend God's grace and healing to all members of the community, regardless of their marital status.

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