

“Till Death do us Part” Addressing the Theology of Perseverance within Nigerian Christian Marriage by Re-Interpreting Pauline's Concept of Marriage

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Abstract

Marriage is believed to be the first institution God established in the Garden of Eden. It is a union of commitment and taking of vows right from the Old Testament down to the New Testament. The scriptures support marriage to be a lifelong commitment that is outlined in Paul's letters. The phrase "till death do us part" is common in a substantial number of Christian weddings where the couples take the oath either by saying it after the person joining or they read it themselves. This begs the question: what kind of death is the phrase "till death do us part" referring to within Pauline's letters in salvaging theology of perseverance that is oppressive to women? Several marriages appear to be dead spiritually, socially, and emotionally, but not physically yet. For instance, many marriages are suffering from gender-based violence in the name of "till death do us part" and the theology of perseverance. Many women are suffering and most churches in Nigeria preach perseverance in marriages which appears to be one-sided due to many reasons that this paper seeks to address. It is on this backdrop that this paper attempts to re-interpret the "theology of perseverance" that is being preached by most members of the clergy within Nigeria through a "hermeneutics of life" and the salvific act of Christ as found in the Pauline letters on marriage. To also balance theology of perseverance to both men and women and not one-sided. Such re-interpretation helps in understanding and re-defining the concept of "till death do us part" and the "theology of perseverance" in salvaging women specifically from gender-based violence, subordination, and exploitation within the Christian family in Nigeria through balanced theology of perseverance.

Keywords: Marriage, Death, Vow, Perseverance, Gender, Family

Introduction

Marriage is a wonderful union that comes with a mystery. The mysteries include phrases like "till death do us part", "for better for worse", and so on. Marriage has different definitions depending on one's worldview and perspective. The various religions we have around the world have different ideas and beliefs when it comes to the nature of marriage. However, from biblical and evangelical Christian points of view, marriage can be defined as: "the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife which becomes the foundation for a home and family" (ECWA Adult Sunday school manual, 2019:1). There are other views of marriage that are controversial and complicated to the evangelical position, especially within the Nigerian church such as gay and lesbian. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the heterosexual concept of marriage which is between a man and a woman. Christian marriage originates from God as recorded in Genesis 2:18 "it is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him." This was also echoed by Jesus in the gospels (Mat. 19:1-12; Mk. 10:12) on the centrality and importance of the marriage relationship which is a covenant and should not be easily broken. One of the reasons why a woman and a man were created was to meet the needs of each other through marriage and companionship that is full of love, understanding, care, compassion and making the home enjoyable.

Similarly, Apostle Paul also gave instructions and teachings about marriage. The Pauline concept of marriage appears to be misinterpreted and misapplied to the Christian definition of what marriage entails within Nigerian churches. This work, therefore, explores the biblical idea of marriage with particular reference to Pauline letters and how several churches ended up misinterpreting the letters with the theology of perseverance (till death do us part) even when some marriages are dead (not physically but emotionally, socially, and spiritually). Dinah Abbey-Mensah (1997: 176) noted that "a lot of people at times explain their suffering by saying that it is 'God's will' or 'part of God's plan for my life.'" The theology of perseverance has become the slogan in a majority of the churches and seminaries within Nigeria leading to an emotional and spiritual disconnect between couples in marriage, while less attention is given to how such marriages can be saved from such abuse. Therefore, this paper reinterprets the Pauline concepts of marriage in addressing the "theology of perseverance" using the phrase "till death do us part" which is common within the Nigerian churches leading to gender-based violence to salvage women from this silenced pandemic.

This paper employs *Biblical hermeneutics of life* coined by Teresa and Oduyoye (2000) who argue that the interpretation of biblical text should be towards salvation and liberation of humanity from all forms of abuse, gender violence, oppression, exploitation either at home, church and society. The *hermeneutics of life* is used within the African Women Theologians framework for analysing the realities of women that are experiencing violence of different forms and are being told that marriage is "for better and for worse", and "till death do you part." This approach also incorporated the experiences of women since the paper is contextualized to Nigerian churches, which helps bring out the reality of the theology of perseverance within Christian marriages in Nigeria. Furthermore, several of the women are also sustaining such theology through their songs and interpretation of Pauline texts on marriage as will be discussed below. The paper is divided into the following parts: New Testament concepts of marriage, theology of perseverance within Nigeria, and the reinterpretation of Pauline concepts of marriage through the hermeneutics of life to salvage the horrible situation some marriages are going through.

New Testament concept of Marriage

The New Testament concept of marriage is fundamental to the understanding of Pauline's teaching on marriage. However, the beginning of marriage is traced back to Genesis 2:18 which says, "the LORD God said, it is not good for the man to be alone, I will make a helper suitable for him." In other words, it was not the intention of the man, but God saw the need to make a suitable partner for the man which was the beginning of the marriage. To affirm this relationship instituted by God, God said: "for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Therefore, marriage entails the union of a man and a woman which does not involve external interference but for the two to live together as couples and in loving companionship.

Gwamna Dogaraje Adayibe (2006: 30) notes that "the Hebrew word *lagah*, literally means 'to take' a wife (Gen. 19:14), while the Greek *gameo* is a common verb "to marry", found also in the Septuagint (LXX). The Hebrew society was built on the foundation of the family which derived its force from the institution of marriage in Genesis." Marriage in the Old Testament was intended to be a voluntary or arranged life-long covenant and commitment that couples make to each other. It, therefore, took a religious element of Jewish life, drawing symbolic hints to the Israelite's covenant (Hos. 2:4; Mal. 2:14-16) relationship with God in terms of God's steadfast

love, faithfulness and mercy. Writings concerning the importance of marriage to the Jews, William Barclay (1975: 196) notes: "No nation has ever had a higher view of marriage than the Jews. Marriage was a sacred duty. To remain unmarried after the age of twenty, except to concentrate upon the study of the law, was to break a positive commandment to be fruitful and multiply." It should be noted that within the Jewish culture and in most of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, marriage was also patriarchal; the husband has power over the woman in which she is considered less than the man.

Similarly, the New Testament builds on the Old Testament concepts of marriage. For instance, in the gospels, Jesus affirmed the absolute character of marriage and its indissolubility in Matthew 19:1-9. Divorce which had been tolerated because of the hardness of the heart of the Israelites must be excluded from the kingdom of God in which the world returns to its original perfection. As recorded in Mark 10:6ff Jesus states: "at the beginning of creation he made them male and female...and the two shall become one flesh." Jesus in Mark's gospel emphasizes how marriage was instituted to be right from the beginning of creation as the two will become one flesh. The oneness is important and does not give room for divorce right from Genesis, but the hardness of the hearts of the Israelites made Moses permit divorce. Pesche (1996: 472) has this to say about the words "one flesh":

In marriage, man and woman render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and actions. Man and woman with their different gifts and abilities complete each other in this covenant in the most perfect way. They become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:23ff). The expression "one flesh" asserts in a very concrete and vivid way the mutual completion of man and wife affected by marriage. It implies that marriage is not merely a bond, but constitutes a new being, a being – together, an actuality that we can never undo.

The idea of one flesh is very significant to the Christian marriage where it shows equity of the husband and wife in a loving relationship of marriage. It further shows togetherness in everything and not only in sexual intimacy as many allude to when it comes to the interpretation of Genesis 2:23. Paul the Apostle also wrote about marriage in several of his letters. For Paul, marriage is characterized by leadership (headship), showing that in a marriage relationship the husband is an active player within the home. Several passages of Pauline's letters discussed marriage but this work is limited to just a few such as 1 Corinthians 7, and Ephesians 5:22-33. The writing of such passages appears to be influenced by a patriarchal Graeco-Roman society in which the letters are located. However, the environment during the time of writing plays a part as

Adamolekun Taiye (2006: 141) observed that "in the Jewish and Hellenistic cultures the wife was subordinated to the husband, the age differential was large and the process of betrothal was arranged by parents."

The patriarchal interpretation of the Pauline letters has also contributed to the oppression and marginalization of women in marriage and given rise to the theology of perseverance that several churches within Nigeria are teaching and preaching. Marriage which was created and instituted by God for companionship, love and procreation has now become a den of misery for several women because of abuses that are inflicted on them by some men in the name of marriage.

In several conservative Nigerian churches (that hold onto the patriarchal and cultural interpretation of the Bible), it is rare to hear about what the Bible says about women. Nigerian conservative churches (as mentioned above) with their many variations have not produced a body official dogmatic carved from the Nigerian context even with Nigerian theology mostly guided by western epistemology; however, they have developed a patriarchal and cultural theology on what God requires of Christian women that are married (Moses Iliya, 2021). Instead of promoting a new style of life appropriate to people who are made in God's image, the church in Africa especially Nigeria continues to use the Old Testament and Pauline Epistles to buttress the norms of patriarchy, traditions and culture (Mercy Oduyoye, 2000: 174). For example, the man is the head of the wife and she is to submit in everything (Eph. 5:22-24). Many of the preachers and teachers lay more emphasis on the submission of women to men than the mutual submission, 'So men ought to love their wives as their bodies. He that loves his wife loves himself. Also 'women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must submit, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Cor. 14: 34 - 35). Furthermore, many Biblical pronouncements that have a direct parallel to the Nigerian traditional corpus of proverbs, such as those that deal with family relations, are mostly cited by several men to reinforce patriarchal culture and traditional views that undermine women in abusive marriages with the idea that marriage is a covenant and women needs to persevere pays less attention on how they can be saved (Oduyoye, 2004: 91 - 92).

Theology of Perseverance in Nigerian Churches

Nigerian society was and is still patriarchal, where the final authority rests on the husband in the home and public sphere. Marriage within Nigerian cultures that is patriarchal goes with

headship; it means that men are seen as dominant figures over women and children, to an extent that they have the final say in virtually everything. This is a situation where a woman appears to be following all instructions of a man even when his decisions are wrong. Makama Allanana (2013:116) argues that “a patriarchal society subjugates women in various ways through social activities which they are considered inferior, while men require gaining authority which shows the inequality of men and women, especially within the family settings, in church and political spaces.”

Chakravarti (2006:75) expressed the same view when he stated that patriarchal constructions of social practices are legitimized by traditional religion and religious institutions as most religious practices regard male authority as superior regarding family life, marriage, and divorce are all linked to patriarchal control over women. A woman's legal identity concerning marriage and divorce is determined by her religion and culture which has laid down duties for women in their marital relationship. Such patriarchal systems have turned women into objects that can be obtained and controlled. For instance, several women in Nigeria are facing different forms of violence due to the patriarchal and cultural system that oppresses them (Teefah, 2019). There are no official statistical records, it is difficult to establish the extent of domestic violence as hundreds of cases go unreported and undocumented, most religious leaders preach perseverance specifically to women and in rare cases are men told to also persevere with nagging women, not cooking at the right time, complaining of sex when they are tired, the way some women talk to their husbands among others. Domestic violence is seldom reported because of many reasons. Some could be a result of fear of reprisal and a lack of response from law enforcement officials (Okpe, 2002: 115-118). Abbey-Mensah (1997:177) added that a break in the marriage will be a big blow to their children so the women prefer to stay and suffer. Certain social and emotional entanglements may also serve to keep women in abusive situations.

The patriarchal and cultural oppression in marriage is also made possible through religious belief and interpretations of the biblical concept of marriage concerning the headship of men over women. Male superiority and dominance are highly toughened and legitimized by such religious convictions and teaching (Akpotor, 2016: 235). Essien and Ukpong (2012: 4-5) observed that religion is the strongest factor in society and most likely wields the most powerful influence on the philosophy and existence of the people. They believe that women in Nigeria are in a difficult religious position typified by varied denominations and religious leaders that are not necessarily

well-trained theologically, mentally and culturally. Even the organisational structures of religious institutions as well as doctrines inferred from interpreting religious books have effects on the level of regard accorded to women within the home and society.

Patriarchal ideology preaches and teaches the “theology of perseverance” within marriage which several women are at a disadvantage and vulnerable to violence and other kinds of discrimination and injustices within the religious and public sphere. According to the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) service handbook (2018: 5), it states that "by establishing marriage, God wants a man and a woman to find help from each other to enable them to live in this world full of different forms of suffering." By implication, marriage is all about the perseverance of both couples in the face of different forms of suffering either inflicted by the man or woman. The "theology of perseverance" is a major theme or topic within the marriage system in Nigeria and especially traditional culture which is sustained through the various interpretations of religions (Islam & Christianity) instructions and teachings.

Furthermore, several women within Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) Lafia District Church Council meeting observe that cultural and religious socialization makes them remain in abusive marriages or because of their children. In circumstances when they are abused by their husbands, they feel their husbands are expressing their emotional pain; several women seem to help their partner and deny their physical security. Several women justify the situation by denying that such things happen to them; in which most women do not perceive their abuser's use of violence as a form of abuse and negative use of authority. But as a form of his right to discipline them because of what they have done, which is supported by a culture of silence from the women and the societal norms and the interpretation of marriage by the church (Regina & Patrick, 2012:70-71).

Agents Sustaining Wrong Idea of Perseverance in Marriage

Some agents are sustaining the theology of perseverance in marriage. The religious leaders (Christianity) within Nigeria who still preach the "theology of perseverance" focus on the women only, that "marriage is for better or for worse, till death do us part." For instance, the oath-taking during wedding ceremonies is captured by the COCIN service handbook (2018: 8) which states, "I ask these people present to witness, that before God, I ... take you ... to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death." Similarly, Evangelical Church

Winning All (ECWA) Minister's Handbook (2002: 85) states that "I ... take thee ... to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse; for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's Holy ordinance." However, this raised concern for this research: what does it mean till death do us part? What are couples or societies, religious leaders and followers understanding of "till death do us part"? How can hermeneutics of life interpretation of till death do us part salvage women and men from oppressive marriage relationships?

The idea of 'till death do us part' is not a new thing to several traditional people, especially among Christians. "Till death do us part" means whatever God has joined together let no human being separate even when it is abusive and gender violence is present, and perhaps no one is discussing the salvation of women especially when they are the victims of such oppressive marriage. Igbelina-Igbokwe (2013: 12) observes a "correlation between patriarchal ideology, women oppression and abuse in the advice that some women give to their daughters when giving them out in marriage." In some areas in Nigeria, for instance, during the traditional wedding, most parents (father and mother) encourage their daughters to remain in their marriages, irrespective of the circumstances they face in their matrimonial homes with the idea "for better for worse till death do you part", and virtually nothing is said to the man who is the key actor in the marriage. This type of advice according to Solomon Ademiluka (2018: 339) is coupled with the custom of the bride price (which gives the husband the impression that he has paid off his father-in-law), may not inspire men to put up with inadequacies on the part of their wives or salvage their wives from oppression.

The experience of several women being victims of violence has generated strong negative feelings about themselves, including feelings of guilt and shame all with the belief of "till death do us part." Maltreated women often report feeling embarrassed about getting involved with the abuser or not acting on the warning signs of the abuse. The victim may accept it as true that she is to blame for her mistreatment and such feelings of obligation may decrease the likelihood that victims will report the abuse because marriage is all about perseverance till death do you part. Antai (2011:11) notes that the sufferers of domestic violence may engage in reasoning strategies such as denying the abuse never happened, minimizing the threatening nature of the perpetrators of the abuse, or justifying why the abuse happened. These strategies may help women and some men to cope with the abuse, but they further decrease the likelihood that the abuse will be

reported. Furthermore, Antai (2011: 11) explain that acts of physical violence against women other than sexual include:

- i)* pushing, shaking or throwing something at her; *ii)* slapping her or twisting her arm;
- iii)* punching or hitting her with something harmful; *iv)* kicking or dragging her; *v)* strangling or burning her; *vi)* threatening her with a weapon (e.g., gun or knife); and
- vii)* attacking her with a weapon.

Ezejiolor (2011:140) also buttresses that domestic violence cuts across all societies in Nigeria and at times is excused by a woman's lack of taking action and support from her family members and church traditions to save herself and other women like her. When a woman suffers violence due to failure to meet some socially accepted standard of behaviour, such failure is usually an accepted excuse for the violence she suffers, especially within the family context. A woman could suffer violence for withholding sex, nagging, or challenging the man's behaviour. She could be subjected to violence for not preparing meals on time, having, or being under suspicion of having a sexual relationship outside the marriage. This according to Elijah Ipole (2018:1) strongly encourages such women to persevere in their marriage either because of the children, or family name or not to put the husband to shame.

But the reality is that most marriages are dead already, even though the couples are still alive and probably living in the same house. As Elijah (2018:xxxiii) noted, "some wives are suffering and dying silently in the hands of their husbands. I may not be far from the truth if I say that it appears these days, marriage is topping the list of silent killer diseases. Many precious lives have been sent to their early graves by their husbands." It is believed that if 10 married were asked to re-marry their husbands again in another life, 8 may not even want to see them face-to-face ever or get married to such men. Similarly, conservative religious doctrine reinforces patriarchal traditions that play into gender-based violence as this paper considers it a "theology of perseverance" since less attention is given to such evil acts and women are told to remain and pray yet no action is taken. For instance, the late Osinachi Nwachukwu who died on 8th April 2022, who was in a violent marriage for a long time but decided to persevere the abuse probably because the church was silent about the situation, which led to her death. Furthermore, most elderly women tell the younger ones to "remain there, and submit to your husband." Or they

always tell them, to keep praying for the man perhaps he is possessed by demons or bewitched by another woman.

In propagating the "theology of perseverance" which is not balanced on both couples, the women's fellowship within the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Nigeria has several songs sustaining the "theology of perseverance". For instance, the song *Gargadi Ga Mataye* (encouragement to women) which reads: "women here are an encouragement to us, in the book of Ephesians 5:22 says we should obey because of that we should obey." The chorus also reads; "women we are to obey the word of God, we should obey our husbands, because they are our umbrella, the day God takes away our umbrella there is a problem, so let's persevere." The second verse of the same song is also important. It reads; "some women are not patient, are not obeying their husbands at home, because of that there is no peace at home, and no obedience, no love in their home." While the last verse states: "in marriage, if your husband is cheating on you, beating you, you should persevere and keep praying for him, God in heaven will judge everyone." Considering this song, "theology of perseverance" is the central focus of several women and the teaching of the church because it is believed that marriage is "till death do us part." Even when he beats her or cheats on her, she is told marriage is perseverance which appears to give room for several men to abuse their wives because they will persevere.

Another song titled *Biyaya* (Obedience) reads; "obedience is the medicine of men; obedience is the remedy for patience. A woman should wake up early in the morning and kneel to greet her husband as her Lord, did you wake up well? If your husband is a criminal without fear, obey him and pray he will change. If your husband is a womanizer without shame, pray for him he will change. If your husband is a drunkard without integrity, obey and pray he will change." This is because Paul the apostle in his letters said to women that men are the head of the homes so women are to obey them in everything.

The interpretation of marriage by Nigerian Christians is focused on the "theology of perseverance" that is one-sided with the ideology of "till death do us part" has become and continues to ring in the mouths of Christians and clergies alike. However, this paper aims at salvaging and redefining what "till death do us part" through the reinterpretation of the Pauline theology of Marriage which several women, men and church leaders are using in preaching and teaching the "theology of perseverance" that is one-sided and not balanced. Death can be physically, emotionally, spiritually and even psychologically, which in this case, several women

and men in marriages are, but are still in it because of their children. Or because of shame to report their abusive husbands to authority to help salvage their marriages. Such “theology of perseverance” that is one-sided has led some women to die physically due to domestic violence inflicted on them by their husbands (such as Osinachi as mentioned above). Therefore, re-interpreting Pauline’s letters can salvage the situation, which some women specifically are going through in marriage and the idea of "till death do us part" that is one-sided and not balanced.

Hermeneutics of Life Re-Interpretation of Marriage in Pauline’s Letters

In order to address the "theology of perseverance" that appears to be one sided, there is a need to revisit and reinterpret the theology of marriage using *Biblical Hermeneutics of life* by African women theologians with the concept of salvation in Pauline letters as the hermeneutical framework for the church in Nigeria. This paper used the soteriologic definition by Mercy Oduyoye (2013: 12), where she advocates that salvation means to rescue from an individual and moral evil like racism, poverty, abuse in the marriage, subordination, patriarchal interpretation and marginalization. Oduyoye further argues that Africans recognize life as not entirely materialistic – the desire for salvation from evil forces is the yearning for what she called "life after life", that is, the desire to have a closer relationship with what she refers to variously as Supreme Being, Source of Life, Life Force, Being Itself or God.

Salvation in this context aims at saving several women that are going through gender-based violence in the name of perseverance in marriage within the Nigerian context that is one-sided with a balanced theology of love, care, and mutuality within marriage. Musimbi Kanyoro (2001:106) notes that "our concern with biblical text is not just to condemn the culture but to seek tools to analyse culture to reach out to women in bondage with it." The hermeneutic of life interpretation of Pauline's concept of marriage is aimed at addressing the misapplication and misinterpretation of passages in Paul's letters to socialize women with a balanced "theology of perseverance" that focus on both couples. Therefore, to balance the "theology of perseverance" is to reinterpret Pauline's concepts of marriage to address the religious, cultural and social oppression that women experience in the name of marriage.

In the letter of 1 Corinthians 7, for instance, Paul depicts marriage as a relationship in which husbands and wives have equal standing and equal authority over the body of the other (1 Cor. 7). As Oduyoye (1993:37) affirms, “we are accountable in our theology to God and to the people to whom we tell it.” Therefore, the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 should focus on the mutuality and salvation of men and women in a relationship of marriage that is based on companionship, love and understanding as God intended it to be. That was why Paul insisted that none of the couples should deny each other sexual pleasure and intimacy except by mutual consent of both parties and for a higher value (balanced theology of perseverance). But he equally warns that the period should not be unnecessarily prolonged to avoid Satan taking advantage of any lack of self-control (1 Cor. 7:6). So within married life sexual intercourse is normal, temporary abstinence is only a concession, which must be based on mutual agreement (1 Cor. 7:5-6).

Furthermore, one can deduce from Paul's view that marriage is of shared authority among married couples, which honours both the needs and the rights, as well as the competence of each sexual partner within the bond of one family (Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Cor. 7; 2 Cor. 7:27; 11:2). Of interest to this paper and interpretation of marriage is what Tertullian (trans. William P. 1951: 35-36) said regarding Pauline understanding of marriage:

How beautiful, then, the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practised, they are as brother and sister, both servants of the same Master, nothing divides them, either in flesh or in spirit. They pray together, they worship together, they fast together instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another.

Marriage within Pauline's letters should be interpreted to enhance the lives of women not to be used to oppress women in any way even with the "theology of perseverance" that needs to be balanced. By extrapolation, wives and husbands could work at honouring one another's needs and rights in all aspects of their shared lives that are motivated by *agape* (unconditional love) and companionship to save several women from abusive marriage through a balanced interpretation of marriage. Pauline's concepts on marriage insist on the Christian understanding of the social role of each partner as well defined and the relationship to be "as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22). Thus, marriage relationships should be based on companionship, love and "in the Lord" showing a balanced theology of marriage that enhances the lives of both couples. Similarly, Omowole (2006:126) affirms that "Paul teaches the oneness of the marital partner and that marriage is permanent... Paul reiterates the lifelong permanence of marriage union, affirming the

law of Christ concerning such union when he addresses problems in the Corinthians church: 1 Corinthians 7.”

Similarly, Paul in the letter to Ephesians proclaims the sacredness and honourableness of marriage by using the marriage bond between husband and wife as an analogy of that of Christ with the church, which to Paul is a mystery (Eph. 5:22). Theologically, this paper argues that marriage is Christ’s redemptive and salvific act of love and is symbolically represented and made actual and present in the personal relationship of marriage that is based on companionship and mutual understanding between the couples. Omowole (2006:127) notes that “mutual submission is the guiding principle within Christian household. A believer in a marriage should not insist on his or her rights, there is a sense in which husbands are to submit to their wives. They are to put the interest of their wives first... being the head of the household signifies the husband must put himself at the service of the wife.”

That is to say, Christ's redemptive act of love is made present through married Christian couples, in their state of being married and in their conjugal relationships as they experienced within the pattern of social behaviour prevailing at the time. Marriage experiences, according to Pauline's letters should be in companionship and "in the Lord" which means the idea of "till death do us part" should be based on mutual submission and shared authority that saves the woman and man from oppression. Christian marriage is not based on structure, neither command nor obedience, but in the intrinsic call to *agape* and rendered service being the head of the household. It is an inward transformation in the spirit of *agape*, which deriving from grace permeates the relationship of ordinary, secular marriage (1 Cor. 7:4-5; Col. 3:19; Eph. 5:25).

Adamolekun (2006:145) asserts that “God instituted marriage for a man and a woman to complement one another and share the creative work of God through a loving companionship, mutual submission, saving his wife from oppression and understanding in the Lord." Marriage within Pauline's letters is not about enduring the suffering being inflicted on the woman by the husband in most cases but for a relationship that is based on companionship, love, self-control, and understanding as one flesh like how God created it to be from the beginning (Eph. 5:31; Gen. 2:24). The reference to marriage in Ephesians falls within the household codes with parallel readings that invoke Christ the Lord to whom obedience is paid. The passage in which the writer of Ephesians offers his view of marriage (Eph.5:21-33) is situated within a larger context (Eph.5:21-6:9) which sets forth a list of household duties that existed within a family at that time.

In the letter of Ephesians, the Christ-and-church application probably originates as an example of subordination (Eph. 5:23-24) in which the harmonious governing of the household and ability to rule rests closely on the male partner who is expected to save the woman as Christ did the church (Schnackenburg, 1991). Surprisingly, the writer takes over the household list from traditional material, but critiques it in Ephesians 5:23. His critique challenges the absolute authority of individuals or groups over others, of husbands, for instance, over wives who are oppressed, subjugated, exploited, and are suffering in the name of marriage in various homes using the idea of Christ being the saviour of the church. Therefore, the man is meant to be the saviour of the woman in virtually all aspects of life they live.

The letters of 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians establish the basic attitude required of all Christians concerning marriage and are not focused on the theology of perseverance but on companionship, love and the Lord. This connotes that even the act of saving women from abusive marriage is part of God's plan because God does not support the oppression of people but rather redemption. It is an attitude of giving way or of mutual obedience and respect for one another and treating each other in reverence to Christ's salvific act as Ephesians 5:23 states. It is an attitude which challenges not only the wives, children, and slaves, but also the husbands, fathers, and masters (Barth, 1974). Mutual submission is an attitude of all Christians because the root is that they "reverence Christ." It is a mutual giving way, which is required of all Christians, even of husbands and wives as they seek holiness together in the marriage relationship and even despite traditional family norms which give husbands some advantage to lord it over their wives leading to suffering and endurance in marriage instead of companionship as God instituted.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that a Christian wife is to give way to her husband, "as to the *Lord*" (Eph.5:22). What does come as a surprise will be the fixed male attitude that sees the husband as supreme lord and master of his wife and appeals to Ephesians 5:22-23 to ground and sustain that un-Christian (superior) attitude and oppression. Christ's model shows that salvation is all-inclusive in saving women from being suppressed by culture and other wrong ways of one-sided theology of perseverance.. The instruction is not that "the husband is the head of the wife," but that "in the same way that the Messiah is the head of the church, is the husband the head of the wife." A Christian husband's headship over his wife is in the image of and exemplified by Christ's headship and leadership over the Church by saving the Church. When a Christian husband understands this, he will understand the Christian responsibility he assumes toward the

woman to save her from external attack; the gift he receives in marriage as his wife (Eph. 5:31; Gen. 2:22-24). In a Christian marriage, spouses are required to give way mutually, not because of any inequality between them, neither because of any subordination of one to the other, or because of fear, but only because they have such a personal unity that they live only for the good of that one person (companionship).

Addressing the Theology of Perseverance within Nigerian Churches

The African women's understanding of salvation is rooted in human rescue from material impediments and the suffering they are going through in marriage. Some African cultural, religious and social beliefs and practices, including some church practices that undermine women, need to be salvaged through a balanced interpretation of the religious text on marriage. The Nigerian churches need to understand that marriage within Pauline letters should be interpreted not in the patriarchal way which subordinates the women to the oppressiveness that several men are inflicting on them, but on the salvific act of Christ to save humanity from sin including oppression and theology of perseverance. In the words of Oduyoye (1993: 38), "theologies worth that name in Africa speak of a salvation that reconciles humanity to God and with the creation and that brings a reign of justice, peace, and compassion on earth among human beings." By implication, the interpretation of biblical text should focus on the justice, peace, and compassion which God brought to humanity through Jesus Christ's death on the cross to save humanity from a misinterpretation of the text and unbalanced theology of perseverance. Therefore any interpretation of Pauline's concepts of marriage especially the idea "till death do us part" should be balanced and interpreted to mean in a loving relationship and companionship that God instituted for marriage. The salvation of humanity from oppressive marriages in which several women are dead to their husbands emotionally, and socially and many have lost their life (physically).

The Bible empowers readers to proclaim God's will through the salvific act of Jesus. This includes using various hermeneutical tools in the interpretation of the Bible which has been used as an oppressive tool in the hands of patriarchal society and cultures that consider marriage as the licence for evil practices on women because Christian marriage is said to be "for better for worst, till death do us part". Furthermore, Kanyoro (2001: 171) says that it is "a gift to women because it has opened our eyes to the fact that the future of society and the future of women depend on placing our trust in the message of salvation. We can read the Bible by ourselves and we can

count on God's word that says "God created men and women in God's image (Gen. 1:27)." Since women are also created in the image of God and are part of the salvation history, when married they are joined as one flesh with her husband, and need to be treated just the way husband wants to be treated and be saved from an abusive relationship (Eph. 5:28-29).

According to Musimbi Kanyoro (1996: 157), "the early church provides a model for Christian salvation from oppression. In Paul's letter to the Galatians the barriers that separate people are prohibited." The breaking of barriers in Ephesians signifies the barrier of one-sided "theology of perseverance" and for men to salvage their wives from oppressive marriage, as those having the image of God and needing to be treated in loving kindness and companionship within and outside marriage. The barrier of wife beating, cheating, not taking care of the woman and considering her as an object have been broken through Christ's act of salvation and love which husbands need to show their wives. To be able to salvage women from a misinterpretation of marriage through the theology of perseverance, there is a need for a balanced interpretation that upholds the salvation of women and men from all forms of oppression in marriage to that of companionship as God intended.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the fact that the notion of "till death do us part" emanates from a theology of perseverance that several churches are preaching and teaching and is being sustained by most of the women through the advice they give to their daughters when getting married. Theology of perseverance has become a silent killer disease within marriage and is contributing to the physical death of several women, even though some are dead spiritually and emotionally in the home. Therefore, the reinterpretation of Pauline concepts of marriage through the hermeneutics of life brings out the salvation of women and men from such wrong theology and a different understanding of what it means "till death do us part". It signifies a marriage relationship that is characterized by companionship, love, and understanding of the fact that both men and women are created in the image and likeness of God and need to be saved from the oppression of any kind. For such theology to be stopped, the church needs to incorporate different hermeneutical tools to interpret the Bible to salvage women from the danger of patriarchy that has given men ultimate power and authority to oppress women in the name of marriage and "till death do us part".

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