


The spate of spousal homicide in Nigeria: Reconsidering the Christian divorce prohibition

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In recent times, spousal homicide resulting from domestic violence has been on the increase in Nigeria, and one major factor responsible for this is the Christian doctrine that prohibits divorce. Hence, employing the historical-critical exegesis and descriptive approach, this article postulated a correlation between this doctrine and spousal homicide, and sought a possible reconsideration of divorce prohibition as a solution to the latter. The work found that in Nigeria, because of the conservative view of divorce, the churches dissuade women experiencing domestic violence from divorce, just as they treat divorcees with contempt and segregation. Hence, there exists a correlation between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide because the latter is usually an outcome of domestic abuse. Therefore, the article argued that a solution to spousal homicide in Nigeria could arise from a reconsideration of divorce prohibition through a critical examination of the biblical texts upon which the doctrine is anchored.

Contribution: This article is a contribution to the discourse on the spate of spousal homicide in Nigeria arising from domestic violence. It postulates a correlation between the Christian divorce prohibition and spousal homicide, and therefore proposes a reconsideration of this doctrine as a solution to the latter.

Keywords: spousal homicide; divorce prohibition; domestic violence; Nigerian churches and marriage abuse; Oshinachi Nwachukwu.

Introduction

In Nigeria, as in many parts of the world, 'the statistics of domestic violence are damning' (Unigwe 2022). It is indicated from newspapers and social media reports, that a significant number of the incidents of intimate partner violence (IPV) result in the killing of one partner by the other, oftentimes the murdered partner being the wife.¹ Hence, according to recent research, there has been 'an astronomical increase' (Okoye et al. 2020:33) in spousal homicide in Nigeria, so much that it is estimated that 'an average of 300–350 women are killed' annually by their husbands or boyfriends (Okoye et al. 2020:33). The volume of the reports in the dailies and other media confirm that spousal killing 'is fast becoming one of the most common and frequent types of murder in Nigeria' (Aborisade, Adebayo & Shontan 2019:488). Spousal homicide is not exclusive to the adherents of any particular religion, but cuts across all religions. Nonetheless, this article focusses on its occurrence among Christians in Nigeria. The issue of divorce (and remarriage²) has posed a problem for the church throughout its historical existence, and still remains one of the most 'delicate and difficult problems of the Church' (Nnabugwu 2022:23). Although there are divergent interpretations of the teaching of the Bible on divorce, there is the traditional view that forbids divorce in absolute terms. In Nigeria, many denominations, particularly the mainline groups, stick to this view. It is noteworthy, though, that some of the African Initiated Churches (AIC) depart from this doctrine as 'their members do practise polygamy, divorce and remarriage' (Ademiluka 2019a:848). However, events in recent times are a pointer to the fact that spousal killing poses a great challenge to the doctrine of no-divorce. This article, therefore, postulates a correlation between the doctrine of prohibition of divorce for Christians and the high rate of spousal homicide in Nigeria, and consequently seeks a possible reconsideration of the doctrine. The article adopts the historical-critical exegesis and the descriptive approach. Under the historical-critical exegesis, otherwise known as historical criticism, the biblical interpreter takes into account issues such as the literary form, the possible historical situation and date of composition of a text, the meaning of the words in the original language (Krentz 1975:6) and then

1.Hence, this article focusses on women as the receiving end of spousal killing.

2.The problem of divorce is usually discussed together with that of remarriage, but the latter does not fall within the purpose of this article. Hence, the focus here is primarily on divorce.

attempts 'to reconstruct a history as a background to facilitate [a] better understanding of the text' (Cranford 2002:150). In this article, this method is employed as applicable for the study of the relevant texts. For the discussion of the attitude towards divorce in Nigerian churches as well as the spate of spousal homicide in the country, the work uses the descriptive approach, gathering and analysing relevant sources for these subjects. As used here, the descriptive method simply means to 'describe a phenomenon and its characteristics' (Nassaji 2015:130). The article firstly discusses the doctrine of divorce prohibition in the Bible and in the history of the church. Secondly, it describes attitude to divorce in Nigerian churches. Thirdly, the work identifies a correlation between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide in Nigeria. Fourthly, it advocates a reconsideration of divorce prohibition from the critical-biblical perspective.

The doctrine of divorce prohibition in the history of the church

The Christian teaching that prohibits divorce derived from the Bible. The Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 permits a man to divorce his wife apparently for the reason of adultery. It states that if a man finds 'some uncleanness' (v. 1, King James Version [KJV]) in his wife, he may write her a bill of divorce and send her away. The divorced wife may marry any other man except the first husband. In biblical traditions, there appears to be no controversy on the intent of this passage until it was quoted for Jesus by the Pharisees, as will be discussed presently. Perhaps, the most popularly cited Old Testament (OT) text for the doctrine of divorce prohibition is Malachi 2:16. It is commonly agreed, though, that this verse is one of the most difficult in the Hebrew Bible (HB) (Ademiluka 2019a:848). The version that is mostly quoted reads: 'For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence' (e.g. Revised Standard Version [RSV]). This rendering ostensibly forbids divorce in absolute terms, especially as it is purported to have come directly from God himself. However, as will be seen later, some English versions have different readings to the effect that the verse is not saying God hates divorce.

The New Testament (NT) teaching on divorce begins with Jesus' response to the Pharisees' query as to whether it is lawful or unlawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason (Mk 10:2–12; Mt 5:31–32; 19:3–12; Lk 16:18). Jesus did not answer their question directly but referred them to Genesis 2:24 which states that a man cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Therefore, 'what God has joined together, let not man put asunder' (Mt 19:6, RSV). The Pharisees queried further why Moses permitted divorce by way of a man giving a divorce certificate to his wife, thereby referring Jesus to Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Jesus replied that Moses allowed divorce because of the Hebrew man's hardheartedness, adding that 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery' (Mk 10:11–12, RSV). The account in Matthew

includes what is commonly called the 'exception clause': '[W]hoever divorces his wife, *except for fornication*, and marries another, commits adultery' (Mt 19:9; cf. 5:32, KJV). Murray (1946:191) notes that Jesus hereby instituted two provisions concerning divorce: 'He abrogated the Mosaic [*death*] penalty for adultery and legitimated divorce for adultery'. Although many scholars argue that the exception clause was not part of Jesus' original statement (e.g. Heth 1990:95; Omowole 2006:131), the church has generally accepted it throughout its history, as will be seen later on in the article. In 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, Paul relies on Jesus' teaching on divorce as a divine authority:

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband (v.10). But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; and let not the husband put away his wife. (v.11, KJV)

As expressed by Chow (2021:173), Paul attributes 'this strict prohibition' to Jesus, relying on Jesus as a higher authority to appropriately address the Corinthian Christians' desire for divorce. Accordingly, for the church, Paul's position here strengthens Jesus' teaching on divorce. Divorce is forbidden absolutely, and where it has taken place, 'the initiator must remain single or be reconciled to his or her spouse' (Ademiluka 2019b:6). This position is often supported with verse 39, generally interpreted to mean a woman is bound to her husband until the latter dies. Although some interpreters argue that Paul does not intend to include Matthew's exception clause (e.g. Laney 1990:44), the general attitude of the church implies that it accepts the exception clause as implicit in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11.

In summary, the teaching of the Bible on divorce, according to the conservative view, is that divorce is prohibited except on grounds of adultery; the prohibition which is 'given to both the husbands and the wives without exception' (Chow 2021:172). The prohibition of remarriage where divorce occurs because of adultery, 'presupposes [*the*] indissolubility of [*the*] marital bond' (Chow 2021:172). Supporting this view, Olatunbosun (2022:560) states that from the creation of humankind, God has 'upheld the [*institution*] of marriage [*as*] a lifelong commitment' between couples.

From the time of the early church to the modern times, generally, the idea that the Bible prohibits divorce except for sexual immorality has 'dominated the Christian world' (Brooks 1999–2000:141). Tertullian (c. 200) held that Christ abrogated the OT law which permitted divorce, hence 'the marital bond is indissoluble' (Snuth 1990:132). Similarly, Origen (d. 254) noted that Jesus rejected the putting away of a wife for every cause. The opposition to divorce was so vigorous by the beginning of the 4th century that the Council of Elvira (c. 300) ruled that women who divorced their husbands for whatever reasons 'were to be excommunicated' (Snuth 1990:133). The Fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries also held very strict views in their interpretation of the NT on divorce. Jerome (347–420), for example, taught that if a woman left her husband for the cause of adultery, the divorced husband remained her husband for as long as he

lived. If the woman married another man, both she and the new husband were guilty of adultery, and could not receive the Holy Communion (Snuth 1990:134). For Augustine (354–430), marriage has a sacramental character by which it remains indissoluble till the death of either of the spouses. He taught that fornication is the only possible cause of the dissolution of a marital union, but the bond holds even where divorce has taken place because of fornication. Hence, Augustine is said to have refused to marry a second time after divorce (Crouzel 2014:482). The view that marriage remains indissoluble even where one partner has been found to have committed adultery seems to remain in force for centuries. For, in the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1275) held that not even adultery could dissolve a sacramental marriage. Aquinas explained that a believer might divorce an unbelieving partner but could not remarry, especially if ‘the unbelieving wife was willing to cohabit’ (Snuth 1990:134).

Thus, ‘[F]rom the Apostolic time down the ages’, the Catholic Church has rejected divorce among Christians (Oforchukwu 2010:61). Holding strictly to the teaching of Jesus, it has taught that only death can break the marital bond, as ‘marriage is sacred, and therefore ... no power on earth’ can dissolve it (Dekek 1971:150). This is not to say, however, that the church was wholly unanimous on this teaching. On the contrary, intermittently there arose dissenting voices that opposed the mainstream teaching, particularly in the course of the Reformation. For instance, taking as his premise Paul’s allowance for divorce and remarriage in cases of ‘willing desertion’ on the part of one partner (Brooks 1999–2000:141; cf. 1 Cor 7:12–16), Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1535) held that divorce could be allowed for causes other than sexual immorality, such as cruelty and hatred. Similarly, Martin Luther (1483–1546) believed there could be other legitimate causes for divorce such as desertion, hatred and anger (Brooks 1999–2000:141). Thomas More (d. 1535) wrote in his *Utopia* that marriage is intended for human pleasure, hence if a couple cannot live together happily, ‘they should be allowed to divorce and marry someone else’ (Snuth 1990:135).

Today, the church generally still holds the view that the Bible forbids divorce. The Catholic Church remains the strictest, such that in some Catholic countries such as the Philippines, divorce is illegal (Yodanis 2005:650). In Papua New Guinea, Catholicism advises women against divorce; ‘a wife should not leave her husband, even if his violence persists unabated’ (Jolly 2012:17). Instead of divorce, women should ‘accept their fate and to be martyrs for their nation and the family’ (Bystydzienski 2001:502).

Some Protestant denominations, too, prohibit divorce among their members, teaching that divorce is clearly forbidden in the Bible, and that God hates it. It is thus ‘contrary to God’s design for the family’ (Hobbs 2019:6). Some evangelical denominations discourage divorce so much that their women stay in abusive marriages ‘because they consider divorce sinful’ (Simister & Kowalewska 2016:1628). They are taught by their churches ‘that marriage must be preserved at any

cost’ (Foss & Warnke 2003:19). The following section examines this general teaching that the Bible forbids divorce as it obtains in the churches in Nigeria.

Attitude to divorce in Nigerian churches

In Nigeria, the general attitude of the churches towards divorce is depicted at every marriage solemnisation, when both bride and groom are made to take the marriage oath which they promise to keep ‘in sickness or in health, in riches or in poverty, for better, for worse ... as long as you both shall live’ (Ademiluka 2019b:2). As discussed in the preceding section, the belief that couples are in a covenant ‘till death do them part’ derives from 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, particularly verse 39. Nonetheless, the emphasis that divorce is totally forbidden comes from Malachi 2:16. Ademiluka (2019a:850) observes that in Nigeria, it is most commonly preached that God hates divorce, with preachers citing the Malachi text. Most of the denominations, particularly the mainline churches, adhere to the view of total prohibition of divorce. As mentioned earlier, the Catholic Church is the strictest on the issue of divorce, as in Catholicism, ‘it is impossible to dissolve a valid sacramental marriage’ (Moore 2017). As Nnabugwu (2022:32) puts it, it is not accepted that a valid marriage can be dissolved, ‘even in the case of adultery [because] ... a ratified and consummated marriage is both intrinsically and extrinsically indissoluble’. Hence, Stephen N. Ezeanya, when he was the Archbishop of the Diocese of Onitsha in southern Nigeria, categorised divorcees and remarried Catholics among those in ‘sinful and irregular unions’ (Nnabugwu 2022:33). And for their punishment, he decreed that they ‘are not allowed to participate in the sacramental life of the Church’ (cf. Gwimi 2015:106–124; Nnabugwu 2022:33); that is, they should not be served the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion. This punishment is meant to protect the sanctity of the sacraments as well as serve as a deterrent to others. The Anglican Communion in Nigeria holds the same doctrine. For instance, the constitution of the Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Lagos West states that ‘marriage, by divine institution, is a life-long union ... that endures till “death do us part”’ (Adesanya 2009:3). The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) also states that couples should endeavour to live together ‘until death do them part’ (NBC 2015:11).

Several reasons are advanced for the prohibition of divorce. The NBC (2015:10), for example, encourages its members to avoid divorce because it ‘brings disrepute to our Christian testimony’. Pastor Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), writing on Malachi 2:13–16, reiterated that God hates divorce, stating that ‘divorce represents a kind of bereavement’ because it damages important personal relationships (‘Pastor Adeboye’s advice on marriage’ 2014). According to Uroko and Enobong (2022:6), divorce has far-reaching consequences, not only for the church, but also for the couple, the children as well as the society (cf. Anaana, Ahura & Tyoakaa 2019:33–35; Yusuf & Yusuf 2020:35). Because of divorce, the image of the church is at stake, just as

it 'loses its boldness in its evangelistic outreaches' (Uroko & Enobong 2022:6). Moreover, children of divorced spouses often experience 'conduct disorders, delinquency and impulsive behaviour' (Uroko & Enobong 2022:6). In the next section, the article examines the correlation between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide in Nigeria.

Divorce prohibition and spousal homicide in Nigeria

The churches' conservative view of divorce impacts negatively on their attitude towards domestic violence, hence the correlation between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide. As rightly observed by human rights activist, Joe Odumakin, the rate of 'domestic violence leading to spousal killing' is on the increase in Nigeria, and one of the factors responsible for this is the attitude of some religious leaders towards the former (Abiaziem 2020). In view of the prohibition of divorce, the counselling that abused persons, particularly women, usually receive from their churches is to continue to endure. Most pastors would tell an abused woman to continue to submit and trust that God would intervene somehow. They hardly 'advise a battered wife to leave her husband' (Grady 2001), believing they do not have the right to encourage spouses contrary to God's word which prohibits divorce (Richards 1990:216). '[A]nyone who tries to separate couples would face the wrath of God because what God has joined together, let no man put asunder' (Maluleke & Nadar 2002:7, 9). Because of such attitude from the church, many women remain in and live through abusive marriages, while some die in such relationships. Narrating her own experience, one abused woman lamented:

I endured years of physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of my ex-husband. I kept enduring because my pastor told me that a wise woman builds her home with her hands. (Halim 2019:n.p.)

Another one reported that:

I left an abusive marriage the first time, but pastors talked me back. The same thing happened the second time. When I was about losing my life I ran without listening to anyone anymore. ... I'm eternally grateful to God that I did not die. (Abiaziem 2020:n.p.)

These stories represent numerous instances where women are discouraged from leaving abusive relationships 'because their religious organisations will either mock [*them*] or not permit such' (Abiaziem 2020). Even in situations where 'relationships have become life-threatening', the highest that some churches would do is to allow the couples to separate, not to divorce (Ademiluka 2019b:4). For instance, in the Catholic Church,

In cases where living together has become too difficult or practically impossible, the Church permits a physical separation of the spouses ... but the two still remain married [*because*] their marriage bond ... [*is*] indissoluble. (Moore 2017:n.p.)

According to the Archbishop of Lagos State, Most Rev. Alfred Adewale Martins, the church does not condone divorce, but if all efforts to make a marriage work fail, 'the

couple is advised to separate' (Onyebukwa 2022). Pastor John Oluwadare, General Superintendent of Christ Redemption Bible Church, explains that the separation is for a period of time and to enable the couple resolve their issues and 'find their way back to each other' (Onyebukwa 2022).

As observed precedingly, with the Catholic Church denying divorced and remarried members of participation in some sacraments, in line with the view of absolute prohibition of divorce, some Nigerian churches 'treat divorcees with contempt and segregation' (Ademiluka 2019b:4). Hence, Eunice Omerah, 37, 'became a pariah in her church [*and*] branded "a bad example" to women in the church', all because she opted out of marriage when it was obvious that death was the other option (Halim 2019). Eunice's pastor stopped her from working in the ushering department, while the other women in the church started avoiding her. To avoid such maltreatment, most divorced women do not remain in their original churches; they 'simply disappear in many cases and never return to their home church' (Baker 2019). In this way, the stigma of divorce is 'dangled over women and empowers their abusers' (Unigwe 2022). The message of the church seems to be: '[T]ake the abuse until "death do you part"' (Unigwe 2022). In this regard, Phiri (2002:25) notes that because these punitive attitudes are supported from Bible passages, for spouses in abusive relationships, such passages 'become a death trap'. Baker (2019) is therefore correct when she states that for many women suffering divorce, 'faith communities often do more harm than good', denying them of social and relational support when most needed.

Nonetheless, the correlation between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide shows more vividly in some cases where one spouse kills the other, most often the wife being the murdered partner. Anenga (2017) reports the story of an elder of 'a particular church' in Benue State who beat his wife to death. Hitherto, this church had taught the doctrine of no-divorce in absolute terms. Before her death,

The woman, who was also a church leader, would report her situation [*of being beaten*] to the church council, but the pastor and elders of the church would always encourage her to hang on, citing the scriptures and reminding her of her status as woman leader, and above all, the marriage doctrine of 'for better, for worse'. (Anenga 2017:n.p.)

However, subsequent to her death, the church began to allow 'couples who are under persistent physical abuse ... to live separately, not divorce' (Anenga 2017). The circumstances surrounding the death of Oshinachi Nwachukwu in 2022 raised questions about 'gender-violence and the extent to which religious teachings ... condemn divorce' irrespective of the circumstances (Akinwotu 2022). As expressed by West (2022), the uproar that greeted Oshinachi's death allegedly because of abusive treatment from her husband 'brought the Christian doctrine on [*divorce*] under scrutiny'. Although her husband denied it, it was widely alleged that the popular gospel singer 'was a victim of domestic abuse' (Akinwotu 2022).

On 8 April, the 42-year-old died at a hospital in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. Her husband, Peter Nwachukwu, a pastor, said she had been suffering from an undisclosed illness, but in the days that followed, family members and friends alleged that she had died from injuries sustained from domestic abuse. Her four children told Nigerian authorities that Nwachukwu had suffered constant violence at the hands of their father, who they said had sworn them to secrecy. (Akinwotu 2022:n.p.; cf. Unigwe 2022:n.p.)

Oshinachi was a popular member of Dunamis International Gospel Centre in Abuja. Social media reports are not unanimous on the view of this church on divorce. According to Akinwotu (2022), one post in 2019 reported Paul Enenche, the founder of the church as speaking against domestic abuse, writing, 'It is better to be alive without a marriage than to be killed before your time because you are married'. However, Becky Paul-Enenche, the founder's wife, is shown to have posted, 'Never make divorce an option at all. The stress you put your children through may affect them for the rest of their lives'. While these reports may be conflicting, Oshinachi's fears associated with divorce prohibition most likely kept her stuck to her abusive marriage until she died. Before her death, Oshinachi had confided in some of her friends that she would have left the marriage if not 'for the church and what people will say' (Unigwe 2022). Some said, she actually attempted to leave at a point but the founder 'intervened and convinced her to stay' (Unigwe 2022). As reported by Akinwotu (2022), Oshinachi's friends and relatives had pleaded with her to leave her husband, but she did not because she felt that 'God is against divorce'. West (2022) is therefore correct when he states that:

Oshinachi's death sparked an avalanche of criticisms against the anti-divorce doctrine of the church. The reason was that many Christians have suffered abuses of varying degrees in their troubled marriages but the fear of stigma, ostracization, and condemnation by their fellow believers and the church leadership kept them perpetually subdued until some died while several others developed serious health issues as a result. (West 2022:n.p.)

A relationship is thus established between the doctrine of prohibition of divorce and spousal homicide in Nigeria. As a solution to this problem, the remaining section of the article undertakes a reconsideration of divorce prohibition by critically examining the main biblical passages upon which the doctrine is anchored.

Reconsidering the Christian divorce prohibition

As indicated earlier, the doctrine of divorce prohibition derives from a conservative interpretation of three main texts, namely Malachi 2:16, Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11–12 and 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39. It has also been demonstrated that Malachi 2:16a is the most popularly quoted text in support of the doctrine because, as found in some English versions, the text depicts God himself saying he hates divorce. Malachi 2:16 belongs to the third (2:10–16) of the six disputations of which the book is composed (Ademiluka 2019a:851). In this disputation, the author condemns

interfaith marriage between Israelite men and foreign women, as well as divorce as infidelity within covenanted marriages. In verses 13 and 14, God rejects the offerings of the men of Israel and withholds his blessings from them because they have broken the marriage vows which they made to the wives of their youth. Verse 15, therefore, warns against dealing treacherously with one's wife. Building on this thought, verse 16 'condemns divorce, apparently as violence against the divorced' (Ademiluka 2019a:852), repeating the warning against being unfaithful to one's wife. No doubt, the text is much more problematic, but many scholars agree with the reconstruction presented here (cf. Ademiluka 2019a; e.g. Hugenberger 1994:887; Laney 1990:30). Verse 16, particularly, is said to be one of the most difficult texts in the HB, as it has 'engaged significant scholarly debate' since the early 1900s (O'Brien 1996:245). The difficulty reflects in the multiple, 'sometimes contradictory English translations' of verse 16a (Ademiluka 2019a:852). In the Masoretic Text (MT), it is presented as *כִּי־שָׂנֵא שְׁלֵחַ אֱמֹר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכֹסֶה חַמְסַּם עַל־לְבוּשׁוֹ*. Here, the text is in the perfect (i.e. past tense), but, being an oracle, it is usually rendered in the present, in which case it would literally be translated as: 'For he hates sending away, says Yahweh the God of Israel, and he covers violence upon his garment'. One major problem with the text has to do with the subject of the two main verbs, *שָׂנֵא* [to hate] and *כֹּסֶה* [to cover], both of which are in the third person. If Yahweh is the subject, then Yahweh is the one who hates sending away, and the one who also covers violence upon his garment, which does not seem to make much sense. This uncertainty is reflected in the English translations, as said earlier. Out of the 12³ I consulted, nine make Yahweh the subject of *שָׂנֵא* and out of these nine, eight put Malachi 2:16a in the direct speech: 'I hate divorce...' (Ademiluka 2019a:858). These eight may have all derived from the KJV's indirect speech, 'For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment'. It is important to quickly point out here that the *וְכֹסֶה חַמְסַּם* [and he covers violence] of the MT is rendered in the KJV as 'for one covereth violence', apparently an indication of the uncertainty involved in the literal reading. The derived 'I hate divorce' of some other English versions has thus moved farther away from the original MT.

Nonetheless, commonly ignored or unknown to many, are the few English versions which have contrary translations that seem to make more sense. For example, the English Standard Version (ESV) makes 'the man', not God, the subject of both *שָׂנֵא* and *שְׁלֵחַ*, rendering the passage as, 'For the man who hates and divorces ... covers his garment with violence'. This is similar to the translation in the New International Version (NIV): 'The man who hates and divorces his wife ... does violence to the one he should protect'. This alternative translation makes more sense in that 'it understands the subject of *hate* as the divorcing husband, rather than

3.The American Standard Version (ASV); the Douay-Rheims American Edition (DRA); the English Standard Version (ESV); the Geneva Bible (GNV); the New Jewish Publication Society (JPS); the King James Version (KJV); the New American Bible (NAB); the New International Version (NIV); the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB); the New Living Translation (NLT); and the Revised Standard Version (RSV); the World English Bible (WEB).

God' (Hugenberger 1984:887). In other words, divorcing occurs because of aversion; that is, the man hates his wife, therefore he divorces her (Glazier-McDonald 1987:609). Jones (1980:683) affirms that this translation 'makes excellent sense in the context', and agrees with those of the New English Bible (NEB) and the New Vulgate Edition, among others. Moreover, this alternative interpretation is more probable in the context of OT traditions than the traditional apparent absolute prohibition of divorce. As Zehnder (2003:256) plausibly observes, an 'outright rejection of divorce by Yahweh would be astonishing' in view of Deuteronomy 24:1–4, just as it would stand against the practice of divorce as indicated in Ezra 10:3. More importantly, the interpretation of Malachi 2:16a in terms of divorcing because of hatred is in perfect harmony with the suggestion, earlier alluded to, that Malachi 2:10–16 castigates Jewish men who were divorcing their native Jewish wives because they wanted to marry women of foreign faiths (Ademiluka 2019a:862); hence, Jones' (1980:683) statement that this translation 'makes excellent sense in the context'. Thus, the popular translation 'I hate divorce' attributed to God 'misses the intent of the text' (Ademiluka 2019a:862), and 'cannot be automatically applied to all cases of divorce' (Edgar 1990:153).

As discussed earlier, the doctrine that divorce is permissible only on grounds of adultery stems from Jesus' teaching as contained in the gospels. Standing on the authority of Jesus, Paul maintains this same position in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, namely that husband and wife should not separate, and if and where one spouse has left the other, he or she should remain single or be reconciled to his or her partner. In verses 12 and 13, Paul still upholds 'Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce' in marriages between believers and unbelievers (Chow 2021:173). A Christian should not divorce his or her non-Christian partner if the latter is willing to maintain the marital status. However, the twist comes in verse 15 where Paul says divorce is permissible where 'the unbelieving partner desires to break the marital bond' (Chow 2021:174). 'But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace' (RSV). In contrast to his invocation of Jesus' authority in verse 10 ('not I, but the Lord'), with his comment in verse 12 ('I, not the Lord') Paul explicitly makes 'the exception on his own authority' (Hunter 2021:36). In other words, Paul is aware that his position 'goes beyond the strict prohibition contained in the teaching of Jesus' (cf. Brooks 1999–2000:141; Hunter 2021:36). In this instance, then, Paul has 'explicitly justified divorce' (Hunter 2021:36), and for a reason 'other than sexual immorality' (Ademiluka 2019b:8). It is noteworthy that Paul decides 'to relax Jesus' strict prohibition' (Chow 2021:176). The issue of marriage between Christians and non-Christians 'would not have arisen in the context of the historical ministry of Jesus' (Hunter 2021:36). Paul found it at Corinth, but rather than demanding that the Corinthian Christians should 'abide by Jesus' strict command by all the means available' (Chow 2021:176), he adapted the doctrine to the new situation. As Ademiluka (2019b:9) puts it, Paul met a situation not covered

by Jesus' teaching, and decided to 'allow the reality of the new situation to determine the response'.

Paul's approach here is instructive for the correlation between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide in Nigeria. Hence, some interpreters have taken Paul's 'position further to include domestic violence' (Brooks 1999–2000:141). In this regard, Ademiluka (2019b:9) opines that Paul's approach here would allow divorce in cases of 'constant wife battery, acid bath and other forms [of violence] that constitute threat to life'. In such cases, following Paul's example, the church should recommend divorce for the spouses involved. As expressed by Olatunbosun (2022:560), in situations of constant abuse, pastors and counsellors may have to balance the call for forgiveness with 'the unavoidable reality of divorce'. When the church in Nigeria expands the grounds for divorce to include domestic violence, this will 'prevent marital conflict from snowballing into violence' (Familusi 2019:8) and spousal homicide. In the words of Falaye (2020:216), this will prevent untimely death of couples in abusive marriages.

Conclusion

Spousal homicide has been on the increase in recent times in Nigeria, and one of the factors responsible for this development is the prohibition of divorce as a Christian doctrine. Because of a conservative interpretation of biblical texts such as Malachi 2:16, Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11–12 and 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, throughout its history the church has generally held the doctrine that the Bible prohibits divorce, except for sexual immorality. In Nigeria, this conservative view of divorce impacts negatively on the churches' attitude towards domestic violence, such that the counselling that abused persons usually receive from their churches is to remain in marriage irrespective of the circumstances. In view of absolute prohibition of divorce, divorcees are treated with contempt and segregation in their churches. Hence, a correlation exists between divorce prohibition and spousal homicide because the latter is oftentimes the result of domestic abuse. However, the correlation is more vividly experienced in cases where spouses have died in abused marriages, having refused to leave because of the anti-divorce doctrine. Therefore, a solution to spousal homicide in Nigeria would come from a reconsideration of this doctrine by critically examining the main biblical passages upon which it is anchored. The 'I hate divorce' attributed to God in many English versions of Malachi 2:16 is a most improbable translation, just as it misses the intent of the original context. Hence, it is irrelevant in the context of divorce as a response to domestic violence. Standing on the authority of Jesus as contained in the gospels, Paul maintains in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 that divorce is permissible only for adultery. But in verses 12–15, he says divorce is permissible where a non-Christian partner desires to separate from his or her Christian spouse. In this way, Paul justifies divorce for a reason outside adultery. Thus, in mixed marriages, Paul found a situation not covered by Jesus' teaching, and therefore relaxed the strict prohibition, allowing the reality of that situation to determine the response to it. Paul's

approach here is applicable to situations of domestic violence. In other words, the Bible is silent on what to do in such circumstances, but following Paul's example, Nigerian churches should recommend divorce where marriages become turbulent, posing a threat to life. When the grounds for divorce are thus expanded to include domestic violence, there will be a significant reduction in the spate of spousal homicide in Nigeria.

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