

Scripturally, When Does Marriage Begin?
O. S. Asaolu (asaolu@yahoo.com), Lagos, Nigeria. {June 19, 2013}

This treatise is a response to the question and in particular to the argument of some that marriage begins with SEXUAL UNION and that consent, especially parental consent is unimportant.

Definitions and Preamble

Chambers 21st Century Dictionary Revised Edition

Court: verb (1) To try to win the love of someone (2) To try to win the favour of someone (3) To seek

Courtship: noun (1) The courting or wooing of an intended spouse (1) The period for which this lasts

Date: noun (1) a planned meeting or social outing, usually with a person one is attracted to

(2) a person whom one is meeting or going out with and who one usually finds attractive

Dating: verb (1) to go out with someone, especially to do so regularly

Betrothal: noun (1) formal engagement to be married

Espousal: a marriage or engagement

Betrothed: adj (1) said of a person engaged to marry someone

noun (2) a person to whom someone is betrothed

Marriage: noun (1) the act of ... (2) the state or relationship of... becoming husband and wife

Wedding: noun (1) a marriage ceremony (civil or religious) or the ceremony together with the associated celebrations.

When say, a man is attracted to a lady and he expresses his affection and interest by words and action, he is courting or wooing her. She may reject, tolerate or accept his advances and this may take some time. If she consents to be his friend, she becomes a female-friend. If they get-together often and relate with romantic sentiments then they are dating each other, with the lady commonly known as a girlfriend. When both agree to consolidate their friendship and mutually profess love with the intent of getting married, they are courting each other and are privately engaged. When their families having been introduced to one another, mutually accept the lovers' declaration of desire and agreement to get married, the man and lady are espoused or betrothed to each other or publicly engaged, they may be referred to as fiancé and fiancée respectively. The duo may then be joined together in marriage thereafter as husband and wife at a wedding ceremony (involving exchange of fidelity vows, dowry, party, etc.) with invitations to several well-wishers.

Thus between the time that a man sees a woman and they get married, the following usually takes place: *befriending, wooing, dating, mutual courtship, personal engagement and open betrothal*. The process that leads to a marriage may be terminated by anyone e.g. if:

- The man does not woo the lady he felt attracted to
- The lady rejects the man's advances for any reason
- The lady accepts to be a friend but refuses to be his lover
- Either party refuses to take the other home to the family as intended spouse
- A family rejects the chosen mate and frustrates the planned wedding
- An invited or uninvited guest gives a valid and acceptable reason why the wedding should not hold
- Either party changes his/her mind at the last minute and refuse to exchange marital vows, etc.

Similarly, some of the intervening steps of a marriage process may be combined such as:

- The lady agreeing to be a girlfriend and lover from the very beginning
- The family introduction, engagement and wedding ceremony may take place simultaneously or as two or three distinct events
- The families may even do the wooing and engagement for and on behalf of the couple with the man and lady submitting to the process and later getting married with or without direct mutual courting.

Introduction

The words “wedding, marriage, married and marry” occurs collectively 78 times in 67 verses in the KJV Bible. Biblically, “**marriage**” means *the union of a man and a woman as one in a [divinely] covenanted relationship primarily for companionship and secondarily for sexual gratification, purity and procreation*. It is a state of wedlock or matrimony; the act and status of a man and a woman in becoming and remaining husband and wife to each other. It is a life-changing and lifetime-intended relationship ordained of God since the beginning of creation -Gen 2:18-25, Mt 19:3-12, Rm 7:1-3, 1 Cor 7:10-11. Marriage is an important decision one makes in a lifetime. Though enacted by the union of two individuals, it leads to new families which are the bedrock of society and the human race. The subjects or parties going into marriage should be *free and eligible* –that is adults of sound minds who are not blood relations and who are neither currently married to someone else. Marriage involves:

- **preparation**, which requires maturity/stability emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially, financially and spiritually
- **an agreement** of giving, receiving and accepting in love,
- **a celebration**, or public wedding proclamation with or without a feast/party
- **a consummation**, or conjugal/sexual intimacy
- **a consolidation**, or building a new family-home with or without children
- **and is meant to be terminated by death.**

God gave the first woman unto her husband and there weren't many choices then for those involved. That was in the beginning when the world population was 2 and the LORD personally used to visit man's home before the fall or entrance of sin into the world. After man insinuated to Jehovah that his (Adam's) disobedience was facilitated by “*the woman whom thou gavest to be with me*” (Gen 3:15), God allows each person to seek his/her spouse and take individual responsibility. Nevertheless, “*Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.*” –Prov. 18:22. Under the Old Testament, God regulated the civil and religious life of the nation of Israel with enumerated laws. In the superseding New Testament, He regulates the spiritual and moral government of Christians with gospel principles, He allows separation between the state and religion.

Argument: God joins a couple together “when a man leaves his father and mother, and cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh (Mat 19:5) - when these actions occur, marriage is contracted... ”

Answer: Are you suggesting that they are not married until the three actions fully take place literally speaking? My understanding is that God recognizes their togetherness when “the woman is given in marriage” which THEN **leads to** “leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh.” This belief is informed by the fact that scripture, even Jesus, reinforces the ‘giving in marriage’ concept which is supported by customs generally. Even Eve was given unto Adam. A man may seduce [or abduct & brainwash] a young female adult (e.g. a 21-year undergraduate) and start living with her against her people's wish. Their mutual or compelled consent, cohabitation and sexual union alone do not necessarily constitute a valid marriage in the eyes of all. Surely, such a woman may solely give herself in a registry (though that is somehow superfluous to the intent of ‘giving’). When God said a man shall ‘leave his parents and cleave...’ he must have had a cordial parting in mind otherwise he would have used words like “reject/abandon/renounce” etc. Same goes for the woman too. If a wedding brings sorrow to the parents and is not truly celebrated by the couple's loved ones then that is not the norm and though legal does not provide for good report. Thus my exhortation that Christians strive to provide for things honest before God and men. Personally I believe that for one to receive parental opposition rather than parental blessing is an indication that one is either marrying the wrong person or trying to go into it at the wrong time. The only two cases I can immediately think of right now are those of Esau (Gen 26:34-35) and Samson who was able to persuade his parents to accept his choice (Judges 14:1-5). I know that any two eligible persons may discountenance parental opposition/advice (which oftentimes seems based on tribal and other

extraneous issues) and simply proceed to elope/live together as husband and wife yet such opposition could be providence working in the background.

Argument: It is when "*a man leaves his father and mother, and cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh*" (Mat 19:5) - when these actions occur, marriage is contracted, and recognized by God... God is the only 'public' witness that gives spiritual existence to marriage (Mal 2:14-16) - He recognizes the marriage because the three ingredients are fulfilled, even if there were no parents or family members present to give (or receive) the woman... "Becoming one flesh" denotes sexual union, and is the consummation of marriage, when "joining" occurs (c.f. 1 Cor 6:16) i.e. this is the point of no return.

Answer: Let us examine the text:

Genesis 2:24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

Matthew 19:4-5 And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?

The fundamental issue is "who is a man joined to"? Is it to any woman or every woman? No! He is joined to his wife. He leaves the parents in order to be able to cleave to and BECOME one flesh with... **his wife**. When did the woman become his wife? When she was given to him, by herself primarily and by her parents/guardians secondarily. This giving is normally done in a way that conveys the message clearly to the public, usually via a wedding ceremony in accordance with the customs and/or laws of the land. Cohabitation alone between a man and a woman does not equate to marriage, sex between a man and a woman does not also constitute a marriage. What initiates a marriage is the mutual consent which is affirmed before God (and society, relations often inclusive) that "**henceforth we are** husband and wife." The parental and societal role is expedient to witness that a valid marriage is being contracted; this is to the benefit of both the couple and the society.

For example, in April 2013, a case was reported in Ohio, USA of three women rescued from a man's apartment. Each of them had been declared missing as a teenager over a decade ago. They were kept against their will by an abductor, made incommunicado from society. One of the rescued ladies has a six year old daughter. Well it could be argued that her kidnapper did leave his parents, did cleave to her and became one flesh with her via sexual union! Was she his wife?? I posit that those three actions are consequent to an initiated marriage or wedding and their occurrence alone does not necessarily always indicate that a valid marriage has taken place. A man may be delayed by some cause (e.g. sudden medical illness or other emergency) from having sex with his newly married wife, Joseph the husband of Jesus' mother is a peculiar example -Mt 1:18-25. Thus we see that those three actions should follow a wedding and they do not altogether precede God's recognition of a marriage, especially the sex part.

Indeed Gen 4:1 says "*And Adam knew his wife and she conceived and bare Cain...*" This implies that she was **already married to Adam when God gave her to him**. She was thus **recognized by inspiration as his wife** BEFORE THEY HAD SEX TOGETHER otherwise they would be committing fornication. There is no going-round this BECAUSE it is a sin to *contemplate* having sexual intercourse with someone who is not one's spouse -Mt 5:28, 2 Pet 2:14, Prov 6:24-25, Jms 1:15. The necessary inference and conclusion is that LEAVING occurs at a wedding when they freely with sound minds, exchange marital vows before God (and society). CLEAVING

occurs when the new couple stay together and/or bond mentally and realize they are functionally a new single unit. BECOMING ONE FLESH occurs when they have sex. There **will be** time lapses between the three events but a marriage is initiated once the Leaving or wedding is done. The crux of your argument is that only God is needed as a witness and that the presence and/or concurrence of parents or society is immaterial. That would be perfectly okay if the couple were the only inhabitants of their planet, otherwise it is expedient to carry kith and kin along. Doing otherwise is not necessarily illegal by civil law but such could be stressful and irreputable. Surely, the Lord Jesus would prefer for us not to injure parents' conscience by shunning them and denying them the joy of giving a daughter in marriage. Prayers, appeals and time should soften their opposition if a marriage venture aligns with God's purpose for the individuals concerned. **When 'given in marriage,' authority or headship over a woman is transferred from her father to her husband -1 Cor 11:3; (4:15 & 2 Cor 11:2).** [A widow could somehow be argued to have 'outgrown' this requirement.] **Scripturally, people make marriages when this occurs -the giving of the daughter and her taking by the groom as his wife at a wedding ceremony –**

*“And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: Neither shalt thou **make marriages** with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.” -Deut 7:2-3*

*“Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; **and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands**, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.” -Jere 29:6*

*“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which **made a marriage** for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were **bidden to the wedding**: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: **come unto the marriage.**” -Mt 22:2-4*

*“For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, **marrying and giving in marriage**, until the day that Noe entered into the ark.” -Mt 24:38,*

*“So then he that **giveth her in marriage** doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better” -1 Cor 7:38.*

When families partake to give and take a bride as described above, it is generally termed Traditional or Customary marriage. God may not necessarily always join together those who circumvent this process even if they have consensual sex. When people become “one flesh” by fornication, adultery, homosexuality, incest, polygamy, etc. they need to repent and should not assume that their so-called union is pleasing to God -1 Cor 6:15-18, Mt 19:9. To rephrase; “*what therefore God hath NOT joined together, let man put asunder!*” For godly Customary marriages, those who wish to formally register their union with government for legal purposes (due to potential custody or inheritance issues, etc.) are required to thereafter do a Statutory marriage, based on the National Marriage Act or operational civil law of their territory, at a designated registry office or religious denomination *licensed* to celebrate marriages by the government authority. [In some societies, the customary and statutory ceremonies are combined as a single event. In others, they are split into two: ‘Traditional Wedding’ and ‘Registry Wedding.’] In most jurisdictions, legally one may skip the customary or proceed to contract statutory marriage even without parental consent (if ≥ 21 years or a widow) but such is not advisable -2 Cor 8:21 & Phil 4:8 The concept of “Church Wedding” whereby the church actively or purportedly on behalf of God, joins a man and a woman as husband and wife in a religious service otherwise called ‘holy solemnization of matrimony’ is **unbiblical** and due to denominational tendencies. Nevertheless, Singles, please ‘look before you leap,’ one should study and investigate a potential partner before making engagement commitments. They should also carry the church or at least some brethren along (*for information purposes, decency, prayer and counseling*) in their plans and relationship –Please see the APPENDIX.

Argument: A person that sins via illicit sex becomes one with his/her adultery or fornication partner based on 1 Cor.6:16. S/he somehow becomes married to that person in God's sight. Therefore the innocent, true spouse should divorce and remarry.

Answer: The context of that verse is:

“Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” -1 Cor 6:15-18

We are to keep ourselves pure as part of the body of Christ and habitation of the Spirit. The passage says it is one's body that is joined to an harlot. Defilement occurs thereby but the link established does not constitute marriage. Oneness with a valid human spouse is more than physical union, it involves other aspects. *When* did Eve become the wife of Adam and Mary of Joseph? A steadfast believer is not married to Christ but is part of the church that is espoused to Him. If copulation alone means marriage as you suppose **then** every woman is automatically married to the man who broke her virginity; there is no fornication as per its secondary meaning. There is hardly adultery as whore-mongering men will be de-facto polygamists. There is no harlotry since the wayward woman in/voluntarily gets married to a new husband every time she has a different sexual partner. Otherwise, recognized prostitution becomes polyandry and thus divorce becomes unnecessary. Your assumptions are *self-defeating!*

Conclusion

The sexual acts of fornication, rape or adultery do not automatically constitute a marriage. Marriage is contracted when a woman is given by her father (or guardian) unto the suitor who takes her as his wife. The ceremony is always witnessed by God (Mal 2:14-16) who actually joins them together. The Bible has numerous examples beginning with Gen 2:22-25. A couple physically, properly “become one flesh” when the newly married engage in sex. Since a wedding ceremony is a personal, family and social affair influenced by culture, expediency arises, individual judgment calls will have to be made. Marriage is more than the wedding ceremony which is just its beginning; it is a God-granted relationship between a couple intended to last for their lifetimes irrespective of their religious status or beliefs. The way one gets married is dependent not only on personal preferences but on family, custom and/or the laws of the land. It should be moderated by the application of biblical principles to glorify God;

- *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.* -Romans 12:18
- *Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.* -Romans 13:7
- *Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right.* -Ephesians 6:1

Sex is permissible only within marriage otherwise sin is committed.

- *“Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.”* - Hebrews 13:4
- *“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”* - 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- *“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.”* –Rev 22:14-15

APPENDIX: The Biblical Role of the Church in Marriage

1. To teach God's will on the subject in order to instruct, edify and counsel –Acts 20:20, 1 Thess 1:8, 2 Tim 2:16, Rm 15:4. For example, Ezra (10) was a teacher who taught the Israelites on marriage, Malachi taught the priests on it (2:14-16), John the Baptist taught Herod on same Mt 14:3-5. Jesus taught on marriage (Mt 19:1-9) and also his apostles (1 Cor 7, Eph 5:22-33, Rm 7:1-3, 1 Tim 4:1-3, 1 Pet 3:1-7)
2. To rejoice with those who rejoice, both individually and collectively. This includes attending feasts and celebrations (e.g. marriage ceremony) to which we are invited if deemed worthwhile and opportuned: I understand and believe that the church's representatives presence alone 'to witness the event' will encourage the family even without speaking a word and amount to an expedient spiritual work, fellowship and benevolence.
 - *Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep* - Romans 12:15
 - *And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, **all** the members rejoice with it* -1 Corinthians 12:26
 - *If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake.* -1 Corinthians 10:27
3. To encourage members to set good examples with their conduct or behavior and to keep godly homes –Prov 31:10ff, 1 Tim 3:1-12 & 5:8, Titus 2:3-5. Our salvation and societal well-being may be affected by it but the scriptural local church organization truly depends on it!
4. To discipline those who live in sexual and marital sins -1 Cor 5, 1 Tim 5:8

Marriage does NOT begin with sexual intercourse otherwise there would be no need for the church to discipline members that commit sexual immorality, simply congratulate such for getting married! Ruth (3-4) was encouraged to attract Boaz and he was a gentleman who did the proper thing. Engagement is not marriage, Deut 22:23-24, use "husband/wife" but we know it connotes Fiancé/Fiancée, recall when Joseph "*took unto him his wife*" –Mt 1:18,24. Contrary to what some now speculate about undocumented customs, in the Bible it is actually the MAN who pays dowry or take gifts to his father-in-law. Remember the marriage of Isaac, Jacob, Samson, David, etc? See also Gen 30:20; 34:12, Ex 22:17, 1 Sam 18:25. The practice of giving in marriage is seen in Gen 16:3, 25:20, 26:34, Josh 15:16-17, Judges 21:1,7, 1 Sam 18:17-27 & 25:44. This culture is pervasive even in Egypt and other lands -Genesis 41:45,1 Kings 11:19, 2 Chronicles 25:18. More examples:

- Isaac in Gen 24 and of Jacob in Gen 29:20-22, where the bride's family made a feast
- The good lesson from the Shechem & Tamar episode -Gen 34: 3-4,6,8-12, 14-16,18-19
- Samson's first marriage –Judges 14:2-10 where the groom made a feast
- The parable of Jesus in Mt 22 that "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son. And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come... Behold, **I have** prepared **my** dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage..."
- In John 2, Mary, Jesus and his disciples were invited guests (vs 1-2) at a wedding ceremony in Cana. Christ was not an officiating priest at that wedding, nor the Chairman of reception nor a Master of ceremony. The event was a social one, a party hosted by the groom (vs 9-10) and not a religious affair at the temple or synagogue.
- Jesus further indicated this must have been so with his parable in Luke 14:8-10 "*When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.*"
- The kind of honour a humble or rich guest is to receive at such party is unavailable and is indeed prohibited in the 'Church Hall' during a religious assembly –James 2:1-4.

Thus marriage ceremonies are personal, private matters for individuals and their families and invitees. It is not a function for the church and is **not part of her scriptural work to organize, fund or execute.**