

WHEN IS A CHRISTIAN REALLY MARRIED?

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This subject is becoming a controversial one of late. I am going to approach this topic as a Nigeria Christian. This is so, that non-Nigerian readers will understand the angle from which I am approaching the subject.

Many young people go to the Alter pregnant. They come to the alter to be wedded already pregnant. Most times the Pastors are not aware, and sometimes, with knowledge of their pregnancy, they wed them. Between five to eight months after wedding, they give birth to their babies. Pastors are being accused of being an accomplice and covering up for these people. The reason why this is so, is that some of them argue they wedded at the registry, or had had the traditional wedding. The question now is when is a Christian really married? Should a Christian come to the Alter of God for wedding pregnant? Why go through the church wedding when you claim that you are already married? If the Christian marriage is important to you, why don't you wait (keep away from sex) until the marriage is done since that is the Christian rule? Why Christian marriage in the first place? Think about this and try to answer these questions that I have raised in the light of Christianity.

LEVELS AND KINDS OF MARRIAGE

There are levels and kinds of marriage:

1. The traditional (customary, tribal) marriage ceremonies.
2. The registry or what some people call the "Court wedding".
3. The Christian (church) wedding.

These three marriage ceremonies are accepted to be authentic. The customary or traditional marriage is recognized by our nation as authentic but has no legal document to prove them. Families don't issue certificates of marriage to the couple. So where marriage certificate is needed to prove that one is married, one will have nothing to show. That is why those who go through such marriage are expected to go to the registry to register their marriages. In the process, they go through another marriage ceremony conducted by the government official. This makes it look as if the customary marriage is not authentic, but it is.

Every Nigerian is expected to go through the traditional (customary) marriage because that is the traditional ways of making the family of the bride release their daughter to the suitor and his family. That is the meeting point of both families in discussion, relationship and celebration of a marriage covenant.

The customary marriage is therefore the first stage in a proper Christian marriage. For some, this is the only marriage they have experienced and that is where they are willing to stop. Such people have no legal document to back up

their marriage. So in a civilized society where certificate documentation is important, they are like people who never married, but they are.

For the Christian, it is only one of the marriage ceremonies one has to undergo. The church wedding or marriage ceremony is the climax for the Christian. There are those who do only the traditional and they stop there. There are those who do only the registry. These are those who have problems with their parents and families over their choice of a life partner or some other problem. If you investigate all professed Christians who didn't wed in the church but did only registry, and may be traditional wedding too, it is always as a result of a problem that they are not willing to make known, or they are under discipline, or they have broken one of the laws concerning wedding in their local church, or they have problem with either of the two families involved. Usually, all things being normal one is expected to settle with the family before proceeding to the registry. Marriage without parental blessings definitely is not the best. Be patient with your parents to get their approval for your marriage to get their blessings. Don't just rush to the registry and join yourself together. If you have a problem with your church, solve the problem first before rushing out in rebellion. A marriage in rebellion has its own negative effects. Many in marriage today may not recognize or admit the fact that the way and manner they went about their marriage at the initial stage is responsible for the numerous problems they have been experiencing in their marriage. Think about it.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

It is true there is no place in the Bible where we were commanded to have church weddings. But the church leadership over the years deemed it fit to institute the Christian (church) weddings with the main aim of having the couples take their marriage vows in the presence of the Lord witnessed by the Church and conducted by the anointed Minister of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you want to argue that it is not in the Bible, I will like you to also consider the fact that there are so many good things we do today in the church that is not written in the Bible directly. There is no place the Bible says we should have church conventions, breakfast meetings, monthly vigils, church buildings, seminaries and ordination and ministerial licenses and certificates, etc. There are many things for administrative and management purposes that have been put in place to make the Christian church function properly, and we cannot deny the fact they are working. There are some instructions Apostle Paul gave that he tells us they are his own instructions, which he gives as one with the Spirit of God.

"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her." (1 Cor 7:12 NIV)

"Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." (1 Cor 7:25 NIV)

The church leadership however has authority from the Lord Jesus Christ to manage the church.

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 18:18 NIV)

And they deemed it fit to institute Christian marriage to be conducted by a minister of the gospel in the presence of the Lord, before many witnesses. The intending couples are made to go through a series of marital teachings and counseling sessions to prepare them for marriage. The church leadership seeks to make sure that the intending couple avoids sex and living together before their church marriage.

How effective this has been is another subject for discussion. But the important thing is that the Church is playing her role upholding righteousness and maintaining discipline. Many in time past and in present time find it difficult to measure up to the strict instructions and standard of the church on this issue. These are the ones that find solace in registry and claim that church wedding is not necessary.

It is the desire of every true and faithful Christian to have Christian wedding. The marital covenant vows taken by the couple in the presence of the Lord and before many witnesses is powerful and binding because it commits those concerned in the relationship to one another. It is willingly taken, and most importantly in the presence of the Lord. In the traditional marriage, there is no exchange of marital vows, and the marriage can be done on your behalf in your absence, and a man or woman can be imposed on you by your parents and relations.

Those who married as non-Christians and are now Christians are not bound by law to do church wedding, but if they wish to do so, they are free. But for the single Christian who wants to get married, he or she is expected to marry as a Christian in the Christian way.

Christian marriage has become the tradition and part of the Christian life for centuries. Therefore, if a Christian does not marry according to the Christian tradition, he is not reckoned as a true and serious Christian. Every true Christian looks forward to his or her wedding in the church conducted by the minister of the gospel usually by their own pastor. Standards have been set, and the expectations off the church of courting couples before marriage are very high. They are expected to keep away from sex until the marriage ceremonies are complete. Marriage counseling and teaching sessions are conducted for them to prepare them for a successful married life. They are not expected to move in together and live as though they were married. They are expected to live separately till the wedding is done.

When anybody goes contrary to this rule, he or she has transgressed, because such has defiled, polluted him or herself and sinned against God. If you allow your emotions to control and influence you, you will live in immorality, and will not be able to wait for the marriage ceremonies to be complete before you start living together.

A Christian therefore, is said to be married when and after he or she has wedded in the church or have had a minister of the gospel conduct his or her wedding even outside the walls of the church building. For the Christian, the registry is necessary if the church he or she attends does not have the government certificate to issue to them. But, until the Christian wedding is done, you cannot be said to be married in the Christian way as is expected of a Christian.

OTHER MARRIAGES ARE A PROCESS

We have earlier seen that the traditional (customary) marriage is very necessary for that is the traditional setting for parents to hand over their daughter to the suitor. So, for a Christian, marriage is in three levels: – The traditional, the registry and the church wedding. The traditional is the place you settle with the families according to their local custom. The registry is for documentation and certificate. The church wedding is the Christian marriage conducted in the presence of the Lord, conducted by your pastor in the presence of your Christian brethren, family and friends. If you do not do the Christian wedding, you have not truly married as a Christian.

Why marry as an unbeliever, when you claim to be a Christian? Why marry in such a way that men will look upon you as a rebel to your family, or as an unbeliever. You are not permitted to start living together as husband and wife as soon as the traditional or the registry ceremonies are done, or both. You must be wedded as a Christian officiated by a Christian minister before you can be said to be married. Other marriage ceremonies are a process you have to go through before the real Christian wedding. This other two are necessary because of our culture and level of development as a nation. In other countries, it is not so. In the civilized world, it is either the registry or the Church. You only do one. But this is not our case in this country. Let us be reasonable and do the right thing.

CONCLUSION

Don't get pregnant before your wedding. It is a shame and a sign of immoral life. It is unchristian to involve yourself in sex before your Christian wedding. That you have gone through the registry and the traditional does not give you the right as a Christian to start having sex or living together. Until the Christian wedding is done, you are not permitted. This is the reason why I advice that the weddings be arranged to take place the same weekend, week, or at most within two weeks to solve this problem.

Weddings must not be expensive. Don't refuse church wedding because of cost. Your wedding must not be the elaborate type. There is no law that says that

weddings must be conducted on Saturday. You can be wedded on Sunday or any other day of your choice. Your wedding and the traditional can be done together in the same place and same day. You don't need to make a new dress to be married. You don't need a bridal train to be married. Just discuss with your church leaders what kind of Christian wedding you want, and they will assist you. You can have a cheap wedding. That it is cheap does not make it inferior to the elaborate ones.

Don't forget you are a Christian and not a pagan. View this matter as a Christian and not as a rebel. May the peace of God keep your heart over this matter. If you have gotten off track, repent and correct the wrong you have done. Get yourself properly married in the Christian way and the Lord will bless your marriage. Sex before marriage and living together with your partner before marriage is sinful and injurious to your spiritual relationship with God. If you rebel and go contrary to this principle, you will pay for it later.