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## CHRISTIAN ETHICAL RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE OF SEPARATION BY JOB AMONG CHRISTIAN COUPLES

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### ABSTRACT

Separation by job is a situation whereby married couples are not living together because of the circumstances of their jobs. In some instances, the husband and wife live and work in different cities or states, and only come visiting during weekends, leave periods, some public holidays, or only as it is convenient. In some more extreme cases, the husband and wife are living and working in separate countries. Visiting may not be convenient for many years and relocating may also not be possible because of immigration issues and other factors. The paper identified the challenge of separation by job among Christian couples as a contemporary ethical issue that should be responded to biblically. The paper clarifies that those considered to be separated by their job are couples whose circumstances of their jobs are not allowing them to live together. The paper examined factors that may be responsible for such phenomenon and the challenges this may pose on the family. It moreover presented a biblical view of marriage, and offered a biblical response to the challenge of separation by job among Christian couples. The paper concluded that couples who engage in such practice may have their various justifications for it; however, it still falls below biblical standard of marriage. No sacrifice is too big to make on the parts of Christian couples for the sake of their family's spiritual, physical, moral, and emotional health. Couples should critically consider their options and decisions biblically before taking decision on separation by job.

### KEYWORDS

Separation, Job, Couples, Christian, Marriage.



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## Introduction

One of the challenges contemporary Christian couples are facing is separation due to the nature of their jobs. Separation by job is a situation whereby married couples are not living together because of the circumstances of their jobs. In some instances, the husband and wife live and work in different cities or states, but only come visiting during weekends, leave periods, some public holidays, or only as it is convenient. In some more extreme cases, the husband and wife are living and working in separate countries and visiting may not be convenient for many years and relocating may also not be possible because of immigration issues and other factors. Furthermore, there may be the other situation where married couples are separated because their jobs require frequent travelling of one or both of the partners. In essence, they are still legally married but are living apart due to their jobs' demands and only make time out to be together as it is convenient for them.

This paper is written to answer the question: "What is the Christian/biblical view on marriage and separation by job among Christian couples?" The paper delves into the Christian view of marriage; identifies different factors that are responsible for separation by job among Christian couples; investigates the challenges such couples may face or are facing, and discusses moral insights from the biblical point of view to address the challenges.

## Christian View of Marriage

There are different views about marriage which are sometimes expressed out of individual's marriage experience, cultural and political orientations or society's deliberate redefinition of marriage in order to accommodate the perverseness in the world today. For example, some view marriage as a mere social contract where one must keep bargaining to one's advantage, and may be terminated when the terms of the contract are not met (Adeniji, 2017, 4). It is therefore important to state the Christian view on marriage in order to avoid contradictions and ambiguity.

**Marriage originates from God.** Wilbur O'Donovan (1996, 277) states that, "from the beginning, marriage was God's idea. It was not man's idea. Marriage was planned by God to meet the human need for companionship, love, mutual encouragement, practical help, and sexual satisfaction (Gen. 2:18, 1 Cor. 7:2-3)." Eck (2020,1) corroborates this position by affirming that marriage was instituted by God and it is a lifelong monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. Marriage has divine origin and the principles that must govern it must be taken from the One who instituted it. Marriage should not be thought of "only in terms of the man and the woman involved," there is the divine dimension which is the foundation for marriage.

**Marriage is the oldest institution in human society.** While addressing the issue of divorce in Matthew 19:1-12; Jesus reiterated that marriage existed before any human system or institution. He emphatically declared, "But it was not this way from the beginning" (v. 8). Since marriage came before any known human system, it can then be said that "marriage is the basis for a morally and socially stable society (O'Donovan, 1996, 278)." Marriage is the foundation for every other human society and relationship. The rules of God that govern marriage as the first institution in human society serve as the tool for achieving moral and stable marriage and society. The instability and immorality in the society is a reflection of what marriage has become.

**Marriage is between One Man (male) and One Woman (female).** This emphasis is needed because of so many contemporary and prevalent unchristian views about marriage. The contemporary world is plagued with gender redefinition and gender rights which challenge God's original intention about

marriage. The biblical-Christian view remains that marriage is between one male-man and one female-woman. Hence, same-sex marriage of any kind is not the Christian view and is contrary to God's intention of marriage from the beginning. God expects that the love, care, affection and other experiences of marriage should only be expressed and experienced by two people, a man and a woman. Anything contrary to this will only lead to complications and confusions.

***Marriage is permanent, separable only by death.*** The laws governing marriage in many countries “were based on the traditional Judeo-Christian belief that marriage was intended to be a permanent institution” (Kerby, 2005, 135). For example, the Marriage Act of Nigeria states that:

Know ye that, by the public taking of each other as man and wife in my presence and in the presence of the persons now here, and by the subsequent attestation thereof by signing your names to that effect, you become legally married to each other, although no other rite of a civil or religious nature shall take place, and that this marriage cannot be dissolved during your lifetime, except by a valid judgment of divorce, and if either of you before the death of the other shall contract another marriage while this remain undissolved you will be thereby guilty of bigamy, and liable to punishment for that offence (*Marriage Act of Nigeria Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990*).

God's word is unequivocal on this by referring to divorce as “breaking faith with the wife of your youth” (Mal. 2:15). Paul teaches that, “by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage” (Romans 7:2). Marriage laws recognize the assumption of permanence in marriage which is the reason divorce cases are not easily decided, because “the spouse seeking a divorce had to *prove* that the other spouse had committed one of the “faults” recognized as justifying the dissolution of the marriage” (Anderson, 2005, 135-136). Permanence of marriage is recognized during Christian wedding celebration. The intended couple is charged to note that, marriage should not be entered into lightly, unadvisedly, wantonly; but thoughtfully, reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which it was ordained. In addition, couples end their marriage vows with “till death do us part” signifying permanence of their marriage until death.

***Marriage is to fulfil godly purposes.*** In Christian view, marriage is meant to fulfil certain purposes, namely, companionship, procreation, home to nurture children in godly ways, sexual satisfaction, and support of all kinds that one may need from the other. These identified purposes are summed in the need of every human. God responded to these needs by creating a suitable helper whom the man could have face-to-face, in-depth, personal relationship with, “whereby the two are united in an unbreakable union that satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart” (Chapman, 1996, 58). God's answer to man's deepest needs was marriage, which is a union of sharing one's life with another person.

In essence, Christian marriage view is unique because it follows God's principles and standards as found in the Bible. Behaviours and values in a Christian marriage are based on the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice. However, contemporary Christian couples are being confronted with the reality of contemporary job dynamics which in some instances have implications on their marriage relationship. This has led to some couples to be in the category of people separated by job which is the concern of this paper.

## **Factors Responsible for Separation by Job among Christian Couples**

It has been noted earlier in this paper that separation by job among Christian couples is a contemporary phenomenon which should be addressed biblically. Some of the factors that may be responsible for such practice are identified below.

### ***Economic Factor***

It has been observed that “money and work have implications for marital stability primarily because of their symbolic content” (Killeward, 2016, 697) and every couple at one time or the other will face financial issues which must be wisely addressed lest they put pressure on their marriage. Married people generally assume that if they can make more money, they will be able to meet all their expenses (Chapman, (1996, 178). More so, poverty is a major challenge in many homes (Kunhiyop, 2008, 137-138) thus, married couples always seek for opportunities that will improve their personal and family economy. Such opportunities may come from a place other than where they presently reside thereby leading to separation when they accept such opportunities.

### ***Indiscriminate Transfer***

Panisoara and Serban observe that, “a rigid organizational culture, focused mainly on performance and disregarding employees’ needs can create a stressful climate which in turn constitutes a determinant for a high conflict between quality family time and job performance” (Panisoara and Serban, 2013, 22). Many private and government organisations do not always put serious consideration on the family before they effect posting or transfer. Workers are treated as individuals who may be transferred to any place in as much as the interest of the organisation is protected. Such instances can bring separation which may be beyond the control of the couple.

### ***Selfishness and Lack of Respect for the Marital Vow***

Sometimes, when one partner is driven by self-interest without considering the interest of the other partner, this may lead to separation by job. However, it is ethically imperative for couples to discourage self-centredness and encourage selfless attitude that is not self-seeking and self-serving rather shows concern for the welfare of one and another (Ogbuehi, 2017, 324-325). The selfish partner may even pretend to be doing so in the interest of the family whereas the underlining reason is personal ego and lack of respect for the marriage. The partner just wants to have his or her way irrespective of how such action affects the other person. The marital vows implies that nothing will be too strong to bring separation between married couples, however, the practice of separation by job in some instances may mean lack of respect for the marital vow or lack of understanding of the marital vow. Marriage is a bond that should not be trivialised.

### ***Improper Planning/Failed Plan***

This usually happens for those whose spouses are in another country. The plan may be that one of them will relocate first while the other continues to make arrangement to join the other. Sometimes, the plan does not work out as envisaged. James warns about being presumptuous in one’s plan without considering God and other unforeseen circumstances (James 4:13-16).

### ***Career Development***

There are certain careers that require adequate time if one hopes to grow in career development. Some considers separation by job as a sacrifice to pay for them to build their careers, especially when their careers require them to leave home. For example, Ayandokun (2013) reflects on the challenges she

faced in raising her last child without the presence of her husband who was overseas for six years for career development. According to her, it was easier when the two of them were together in raising the first three children than when she had to do it alone for the last child.

### *Nature of the Job*

The nature of some jobs makes separation from home inevitable. For instance, those working in the military, other security agencies, international organizations, like UNICEF, UNESCO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and so on are prone to frequent travelling. Sometimes, some categories of oil and construction workers may also find themselves being moved from place to place as the circumstance of their job requires. These factors come with certain challenges which have implications on the general health of the marital relationship. Some of these challenges are reflected on below.

### **Challenges of Separation by Job among Christian Couples**

Managing a stressful job and also dedicating quality time to family is definitely a major challenge in many Christian homes. Managerial or principal positions are being attained not only by the male partners but also by their female counterparts. Hence, couples face the challenge of having happy private lives and doing their best in order to succeed in both professional and personal lives. Apart from these general challenges, separation by job comes with its own challenges which are identified as follows.

### *Marital Unfaithfulness*

Marital unfaithfulness is an affair which “consists of two people who become involved in an extra-marital relationship that combines sexual lovemaking with feelings of deep love” (Harley 2011, 20). Anderson (2005, 124) notes that, “women who are employed full-time outside of the home are more likely to have an affair than full-time homemakers.” This is to attest to the fact that separation by job makes married couples to be more prone to the temptation of adultery. Major issues in the marriage discourse in 1 Corinthians 7 are sexual satisfaction and immorality. The seductive statement of the wayward wife in Proverbs 7 reveals how separation by job can contribute to marital unfaithfulness.

### *Divorce*

Divorce is when married couples decide to dissolve their marriage, that is, when they no longer want to be husband and wife for any reason and thereby decided to end their marriage. Although, divorce usually follows a legal process to be official, however, Gary and Barbara Rosberg have identified that, “it is possible for a couple to be legally married and yet totally separated in heart” (Gary and Rosberg, 2002, 37). Divorce do not suddenly happen, it is a gradual disconnect in the love life of the couple. Separation by job increases the possibility of a divorce because distance creates discouragement, discontentment, discord, and disconnect.

### *Effect on the Children*

Parenting requires the presence and participation of both the husband and the wife. This fact has been alluded to earlier in the case of Ayandokun (2013) who expressed the difficulty in single-parenting her last child when the husband was overseas for six years. The importance of both parents’ involvement in their children’s life is captured in the comment below:

The very fact of who parents are in the structure of the family gives them authoritative power. That power can be used in a positive way to convince kids to make the effort, to win, to succeed, to respect their fellow man, and to be people of honesty and integrity. Parents can choose that route, or they can choose to leave their kids to themselves and the influence of a negative world (Ziglar, 1993, 269).

Any decision in a marriage context affects all the members of the family in one way or another. Children are expected to receive nurture, training, protection, care, and discipline that come from both parents. When either or both parents are not available because job has separated them, the children miss out of some of the necessary features of a proper godly upbringing.

### ***Economic Effects***

Although economic effect is not immediately considered when married couples decide to be separated by job, it is nonetheless a factor. Whereas, the decision may have been taken in order to improve their economic power; on the other hand, doing a comparative cost effect analysis of the decision, one may realize that there are still financial gaps to fill. For example, the cost of keeping two homes in terms of rent, utilities, feeding, repairs, community responsibilities, transportation, and so on may be taking much from the finance the couple intends to make. Unless, where an employer is responsible for all the aforementioned, the separation by job will have economic effect on the family when the financial implication is properly analysed.

### ***Health Effect***

This includes spiritual, physical, mental and emotional health of the people involved in separation by job relationship. Orthner and Rose (2009, 394), in *Work Separation Demands and Spouse Psychological Well-Being* have been able to establish a link between work separation demands and physical and emotional health of spouses. They refer to the effect of work on family as spill over with negative effects on family and personal well-being. In essence, many mental issues, aggression, violence and physical health could be as a result of the stress people experience at work which may be aggravated by the fact that couples are not living together. The husband and wife are to provide comfort and succour for one another in the period of stress and health, but separation by job would not allow that to be possible. Other effects may include physical and spiritual attacks since the other partner is not present to provide support and protection during dangers. The Bible emphasizes that two are better than one because they will be able to resist attacks together and provide support for one another in many ways. Such a relationship leads to a great reward (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

### ***Christian Ethical Response to the Challenge of Separation by Job***

A biblically related example of separation by job is the case of Moses (Exodus 18:1ff). Moses may have asked his wife and children to remain with Jethro, his father in-law while he faced the demand of the task of bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. Jethro, having heard that the Israelites were out of Egypt brought Moses' wife and children to him. It may be interpreted that job separated Moses from his wife temporarily but they reunited again after an improvement in the initial circumstance that separated them. Another Old Testament law stipulates that, "if a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For a year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married" (Deuteronomy 24:5).

Therefore, it is God's desire and biblical truth that married Christian couples should live together and not be separated by anything. As a Christian ethical response to the challenge of



separation by job among Christian couples, the paper submits that every Christian couple should seek to understand the biblical standard of a Christian marriage, which will inform and help them to make a moral decision when faced with the challenge of separation by job. Christian ethical responses to the challenge of separation by job are identified below.

***Christian marriage requires the cleaving together of the couple.*** The marriage narration in Genesis 2:24 is that, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” In other words, marriage requires the unity of the husband and the wife. O’Donovan (1996) specifies that husband and wife should be united physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It takes time and efforts “to mold two absolutely different, independent persons into one unit” (Minirth, 1991, 16). Christian couples should consider the important purpose of cleaving before they opt for separation by job because separation by job may affect the essence of marital bonding or cleaving.

***Christian marriage is a covenant and not a contract.*** The concept of covenant is clearly portrayed in Christian marriage. God takes active interest in whatever goes on between a man and his wife. Adeniji (2017) defines marriage covenant as “a vow, a promise, or an agreement between two parties.” Another way of looking at a covenant is “two parties are bound to one another, not on the basis of a contract where the mal- or non-performance of obligations nullifies the relationship” (Brooks, 2000, 127). This means that a covenant is not expected to be broken. Any decision, including separation by job, should take into consideration the covenant relationship of marriage.

***Christian marriage is a relationship of commitment and not convenience.*** The marriage vows stipulate that marriage is for all seasons, hence, it is based on commitment and not convenience. Commitment is an affirmation of hope, a refusal to give up. According to Bill and Hybels (1991, 216) commitment is “a disciplined willingness to fix our sights beyond the problem at hand and focus on the reality of future reconnection.” The Bible admonishes Christian couples to be committed to one another in giving and receiving love, affection, respect, and care (Ephesians 5:21-33). Financial or personal convenience should not be a factor for allowing job separates couples. Christian couples should look beyond immediate gratification or seeming convenience or inconvenience, and be committed to themselves and to the building of their homes against all odds.

***Christian marriage is a calling and not a career.*** By calling, the writer means, a sacred vocation one receives from God, while career refers to one’s secular vocation. The idea of Christian marriage being a calling is clear in the New Testament. For example, no one may be qualified to serve in the church unless they have an exemplary spouse and family (cf. 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). Christians should see their God-given roles as a calling, hence, being a wife or husband or parent is a calling and the Bible provides specific guidelines on how Christians should fulfil such callings. This view of being called into a relationship will greatly shape how Christians see their marriages and their roles. This view will also guide Christian couples whenever they have to make a decision on separation by job.

***Christian marriage is based on spiritual conviction and not on carnal concerns.*** After Abraham’s servant had narrated how the Lord had directed his way, Rebekah’s family still expressed some concerns which made them ask her, “Will you go with this man?” She responded with a strong conviction, “I will go” (Genesis 24). Similarly, Solomon and her bride expressed a strong conviction when they declared, “Many waters cannot quench love: rivers cannot wash it away” (Song of Sol. 8:7). Each Christian couple should always base their decisions about separation by job on spiritual

conviction having sought the face of God in prayer. At any given point, the couples' spiritual conviction should be stronger than their carnal concerns.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has discussed the reality of the challenge of separation by job among Christian couples in contemporary time by identifying some of the factors that are responsible for the phenomenon. The paper established that this phenomenon has ethical implications on the life and health of the married couples and their children. Biblical view of marriage should be properly considered when Christian couples are faced with the option of separation by job. The paper therefore recommends that:

1. Couples should critically consider their options and decisions biblically before taking decision on separation by job. They should always remember that being married is a calling from God which requires commitment from both parties. Their convictions should be stronger than their concerns because marriage is a covenant in which God is interested.
2. Christian couples should strive to maintain the sanctity of marriage irrespective of their views about separation by job.
3. When and where separation by job is unavoidable due to contemporary economic realities, couples should make effort to keep their marriage intact and not allow career to spoil their marriage relationship.



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