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## **A Theological Argument on Trinitarian Relationality, for Marriage and Family and Implications for Social Stability**

By

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### **Abstract**

There are contested views of family and marriage in literature. These views range from socio-cultural, economic (capitalism), philosophical, religious and psychosocial perspectives. This article is centred in biblical theological understandings of marriage and family for Christian practice in Africa. In this article, we argue from a systematic theology standpoint for the potentiality of Trinitarian relationality as a theological thought for reconceptualising marriage and family in Africa. Trinitarian relationality depicts central ideas that connect with God's being and existence in community with the other (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit) and the unity there-in. The concept also connects to God as a relational being in his creative act and his relationship with His creation. In His relationships, God develops particular covenantal agreements first with the people of Israel and in other instances with individuals as depicted in the biblical stories. In each encounter of God's covenantal relationships, are founded instructions, promises that are sustained with, commitment, love, grace, empowerment, intimacy and forgiveness. Marriage and family as a relational institution can be centred on God in a relationship. So the principles of covenant relationship as exemplified by God provides nuances and defensible grounds for rethinking the concept of marriage in Africa. Family is regarded as the basic unit in African societies. If families are dysfunctional, there is a possibility that African society will become dysfunctional also. Thus, the motivation for this article rises from the challenges that marriages and families in Africa face such as: polygamy, divorce, broken homes, cohabitation, single parenting, childhood marriages, domestic violence, poverty and childlessness, and early marriages amongst others. Some of these challenges are related to dysfunctional families. A marriage founded in and with God at the centre will reflect godly attributes in relations with others. It is hoped that a marriage based on God's relational example can provide inferences for practicing and sustaining marriage and family relationship in Africa. For instance that it can be used in schools and theological institutions for training of pastors, counsellors, and teachings in churches in search for perennial marriage and family relationships that are sustainable.

**Key words:** Marriage, Family, Trinitarian relationality, Theology, Africa, sustainable, covenant, commitment, Grace, Love, Forgiveness, empowerment, Intimacy

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### **Introduction**

Marriage and family are contested concepts of discussion in scholarship. There are various views and positions regarding marriage and family, ranging from traditional cultures, religion, philosophies, post-modern thought and psychological approaches (Vorster, 2016). One trending pattern is that marriage and family are concepts that will continue to be shaped by various ideologies overtime. Following this argument lies the future of family and marriage in the Christian tradition and how that shapes societies, nations and institution. It is based on this premise that this article hopes to articulate, conceptualise marriage and family from a theological position to strengthen and provide a basis for Christian practice in Africa. It is also noteworthy that most African governments recognises variety of marriage arrangements and positions regarding them as legal irrespective of the consequences they pose to those getting married. African marriages and families face myriads of challenges, ranging from divorce and remarriage, domestic violence, cohabitation, early childhood marriage and so on. The question that lies to the heart of this article is how Christian marriages and families can handle the challenges that come with marriages and families in this modern era in the midst of global influences?

This article discusses the theology of family and marriage informed by systematic theology designs relevant for the African context. This article is not an effort to explore the various literatures written on African family and marriages, it is not possible within the frames of this article. The article will investigate a theological basis for understanding, articulating, and practicing marriage, and family in Africa. First the article unravels the current conceptions and realities surrounding the family especially in Africa in general and then proffer a view of family that is biblical and centred on God and yet contextual to Africa. Secondly, the article focuses on the family and marriage anchored on God as a relational being tracing the genesis of family to creation in the Trinitarian relationships as embedded in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Trinitarian relationality as way of conceptualising marriage offers a potential and perennial theology of marriage that is centred on God in a relationship that is covenantal, that is, based on love, grace, empowerment, service and forgiveness. This relationship requires the grace to forgive and to be forgiven for a lasting impact. The marriage relationship requires the empowerment to serve and be served for a mutual relationship to develop intimacy, to know and be known. I will then apply this model to the understanding of family in the African context. It is hoped that the inferences made by this article will inform how churches, schools, seminaries, universities and other theological institutions will have a basis to teach, view and handle issues of marriage and family in a theocentric dimension.

### **Problem Statement**

Family in Africa is regarded as the basic functioning of a society. When family becomes dysfunctional then the African society will also become dysfunctional (Kunhiyop 2008:190). Family in Africa is facing many challenges such as: postmodern thinking that challenges the framework and the system of marriage and family from a single ideal marriage but sees marriages in diversities that exists as if there is not one way of conceptualising marriage

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(Hanlon, 2003:4). In addition, Kunhiyop (2008) from an African Christian ethical dimension identifies dilemmas that the family in Africa faces such as: polygamy, divorce, broken homes, cohabitation, single parenting, childhood marriages, domestic violence, poverty and childlessness amongst others. Kunhiyop (2008) observes that focusing on family from either western or African perspectives have limitations to fully resolving the recurring family conceptualisation dilemmas. He rather advises that a biblical thought on marriage is central to re-establishing family unit in all contexts. It is hoped that an exposition of the theological and biblical foundations of marriage will trigger new gaze and the sacred institution of marriage and family. The study seeks to address the question: Can a perennial and defensible theological basis for marriage and family improve the state of families in Africa? It is the goal of this study that the value of family that is centred on God will inform the practice in the church and theological training engage with theology of Marriage and family.

There is a tendency to think of Africa in its traditional sense when thinking about theology in Africa. However, the concept 'Africa' has gone through various changes and transformation in a way of life and culture, especially how marriage is thought, and practiced. Some of the changes of transformation in Africa that redirect our thinking about the theology of marriage are colonialism, missionary evangelism and globalisation (Turaki, 2020). All these influences seem to have disrupted the African conceptualisation of marriage and family. For instance, Colonialism tempered with African communalism where marriage was a communal affair and was considered sacred such that, virginity was a pride for a family and was celebrated. Today our African marriages are characterised by immoral practices such as adultery and virginity has become relative and old tradition and practice. On the other hand, globalisation has led to commercialisation of marriage, where in some African countries marriage is considered a contract, in which case, properties can be shared or excluded in a marriage contract. So economic factors seems to contribute to the high divorce in Africa where finance and unfaithfulness has become a normal practice.

In some cases the marriages vow, "For better or worse" have become promises of the wedding day and not a marriage lifetime promise and covenant with God in his creation. Another factor that transformed African communalism is the early missionaries' methods of evangelism that found African polygamy as a practice and preached contrary until African became resistant to Christianity but at the same time some preferred to forfeit their second and third wives to comply with the missionaries' pattern of marriage. This leaves a great dilemma when we talk of African theology of Marriage and family. It is my view that when thinking about African theology of marriage, focus on what Grobbelaar (2012:10) terms and theology of Marriage and family "as a way of life...as a missional theology and as a hermeneutic theology."

## **Methodology**

There are different methodologies used in studying family and marriage (the way one interprets the data) one can use, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, ethical and psychological perspectives. This study is informed by systematic theology methodology and methods. Doing a systematic theology research involves a two processes namely data collection, which entails scriptural and dogma-historical references, and theory construction (Smith, 2008:184). The task of this article will be to analyse the data as objectively as possible and develop a model of theology of marriage and family that best accounts for all the data surrounding family and marriage in Africa, elucidating how they fit together with the biblical perspectives (Smith, 2008).

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Turaki (2020:231) notes that doing theology in Africa needs to be centred on “transforming the African mind”. This transformation according to Turaki (2020) demands that we understand the modern African mind which has been influenced by modernism, colonialism and missionary activities. One of the relational concepts connected to understanding marriage and family in Africa in a Christian theological basis is the idea of the covenant. Covenantal relationships are relevant to the African mind and experience. Turaki (2020:42) notes that covenants has the propensity to constitute and propagate Christian theology in Africa. This is because, covenants as in African tradition has sustained and continued the African traditional beliefs. As such, Covenants have also contributed immensely in the continuity and propagation of Christian tradition. Thus, God has continued to relate with his people in covenantal relationships from generation to generation. The choice of Trinitarian relationality is built on biblical covenant relationship as a way of continuing and sustaining Marriage and family relationships that is contextual to the African experience and Christian tradition.

### **Current views on the Theology on Family**

Prominent among most theologians in developing a theology of family is the tendency to pick randomly a collection of New Testament verses in scripture about regulations and household family relationships (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:3; Weaver, 2009). It is insufficient to select verses such as Eph. 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; I Tim. 2:18 and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7 to build a theology of family. These passages indicate that early Christianity’s concern for order in three basic household relationships between husband and wife and between parents and child and between master and slave (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:3). According to Balswick & Balswick (2014:4) it is important to consider the total context of scriptural passages about family life. This is because the total consideration of text provides social, historical and cultural contexts of the time of writing. This does not mean that picking a few New Testament verses is wrong; of course they provide us with rules and regulations that families require for everyday living. The Authors cautions that the difficulty would occur when we make domestic rules into eternal rules which can simply change across the present day without considering the contextual settings (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:4). This way of theologizing, is a manipulation of scripture (Balswick & Balswick, 2014).

On the other hand, the use of a broad view of relevant biblical references as well as a theology that offers deeper meaning and concrete principles of living in our complex, postmodern world (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:4) is necessary. This view entails “analogical-familial theology” (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:3). In which case, the basis is the theology of family in relationships, on relationality within the Holy Trinity and throughout the Old and the New Testaments description of a Holy God in relationship. The understanding of marriage from the Old Testament analysis indicate marriage as a sacred institution, built on active love and is indissoluble, in which case God is the reference point is understanding marriage as a covenant (Weaver, 2009).

Family is instituted by God for his own glory for procreation and to bring up the children. In creating man and woman, God endowed the family with important precepts and guidelines that govern the family relationships. The members of a family are equal before God in dignity, respect, honour and value. However, God has accorded family member specific roles such as, wife, husband and children. These roles at times are considered by many hierarchal and superior at times. However, God’s intention is for the family to thrive through the various roles. For instance, the husband is the head of the home just as Christ is the head of the church; the husband is commanded to love his wife just as Christ loves the

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church. On the other hand, the wife is commanded to submit to their husbands as unto the Lord. Children are admonished to obey their parents in the Lord because it is right, that in doing this they may experience long-life. Besides the roles (capacities), the family has rights and responsibilities, which enable the family to function in society in terms of freedom, security and friendships. It is within the family relationships that one first learns moral values and how to honour God. Family unit is crucial to the development of community and society. It is within the family that individual learns to care and take responsibility of the young, the old, the sick and the handicapped and the poor (Wanda, 2007:11).

### **Biblical Evidence on Theology of Marriage and Family**

I will consider Balswick & Balswick (2014) model of foundations of family to build a theology of Marriage and family. This model views marriage and family in the Trinitarian relationality. The model explains and considers the process of marriage between a man and a woman as a complex relationship in the sense in which two different people become one, without losing their individuality as a major aspect of marriage. Similarly, they bear children in the process who develop into their own unique selves within the context of unity in an ongoing part of family life. This complexity of keeping different identities yet cling to their sense of belonging (family) is one of intricacy that describes the families in Africa today. They note that Human beings are created by a relational and a triune God to be in a significant and a fulfilling marriage relationship. Scripture presents God as being one, yet composed of three distinct persons right from creation story. Building on the Trinitarian relationship is the foundation for building a theology of marriage.

Rationality reflects the character of God as depicted in the creative act in Genesis 1:26-27-28. The scripture states,

Then God said, “*Let us* make mankind in our image, in *our likeness*, so they that may rule over ...27. So God created mankind in *his own image*, in the *image of God* he created them; *male and female* he created them. 28. God blessed them and said to them, “*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it...* (NIV Trans. Genesis 1:26-27-28)

The italic words above “*Let us*” indicates the triune relationship (God the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit) working together for a common good in creating humankind (male and female) in their own image, in the image of God. The image of God reflected is *united* and *unique*; this is a feature of God that is evident in mutuality throughout scripture where the Holy Spirit has his functions as well as the Father and the Son yet they are one (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:5). Other instances of this unity can be seen in John 10:38; where Jesus says that. “..So that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father,” also in John 16:13-15 when Jesus refers to God’s glory as the Spirit reveals the truth that the Son is of the Father (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:5). This mutual unity that is reflecting in the Godhead should be seen in the family.

The family language used throughout scripture depicts God in a relationship with his creation (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:5). For instance: God as a parent relating to the children of Israel (Psalm 68:5; 1 Chronicles 29:10); Christ as groom in relation to the church as bride (Ephesians 5:25; Revelation: 19:7) and the Holy Spirit, who indwells and empowers believers as brothers and sisters in the Lord (Acts 19:12). God’s actions toward Israel are characterised by compassionate, gracious, loving propensities (Psalm 144:2; 1 John 5:2; Psalm 86:15; Jonah 4:2; Exodus 34:6), He is also pictured as disciplining God (Deuteronomy

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8:5; Hebrew 12:7-10), guiding, giving God (Genesis 28:4; Exodus 1:21; 2 Chronicles 1:26; John 3:16; 2 Timothy 1:7; Daniel 5:18; Acts 13:20; Revelation 1:1), nurturing, respecting, knowing and forgiving. In addition, Jesus welcomes little children (Mathew, 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16), women, the disenfranchised, and his disciples into close, intimate connection. Further, the Holy Spirit prays in and through us when we cannot find words the words to speak (Romans 8:26; Ephesians 6:8).

Another instance that shows God and a relational God is seen in the establishment of a covenant relation between God and the nation of Israel which has become the foundational focus in developing a theology of the family. The general understanding for family here is the sense of belonging by qualification of love, not necessarily a blood relationship (Balswick & Balswick 2014:5). On the other Hand, (Balswick & Balswick 2014:5), illustrate using MacLean theory of covenant relationship as a metaphor for marriage and family relationships. This they outline in seven ways:

1. people are social and live in community;
2. the basic unit of family and of covenant is a dyad;
3. people living in community experience struggle and conflict as well as harmony;
4. people living in covenant must willing to forgive and be forgiven by one another;
5. people living in covenant must accept their strong bond to one another;
6. people living in covenant accept law in the form of patterns and order in relationships and;
7. People living in covenant have a temporal awareness as they carry a memory of the past, live in the present, and anticipate the future

(Balswick & Balswick 2014:5)

The above metaphor depicts marriage and family as involving: Firstly, social and community context, meaning that for a community of people to engage in some way requires socialisation that recognises their community with the other requiring some form of commitment. Secondly, is the idea of family as a unit and a covenantal relationship that requires a two way active communicative process from both partners in the relationship, as a unit guided by agreements that needs a sense of reciprocity, assimilation, accommodation and adaptability. Thirdly, since marriage and family involves more than one person, there is the question of difference. That is, different personalities becoming one, in which case is a possibility of conflict and disagreement. Should this be the case there is a need to nurture love actively in building this community through communication yet recognising the authority and Sacredness [God] that brings their marriage together.

Fourthly, a couple needs to build their marriage with the understanding of what bound them together in the first place, as a point of reference of any action that may jeopardise their first intention for marriage, calling for commitment and recognising Gods authority in it. As such love is provoked. Fifthly, marriage relationship requires particular guiding principles, rules in form of law in order to manage and enjoy the diversity that comes with it. Then the sixth way in which marriage and family can be sustained is through understanding of a covenantal relationship as a foundation that can make it thrive through seasons and times. I will use the concept of covenantal relation to unravel the meaning of marriage and family and propose a theology of family relationships that involve four sequential but not linear stages of covenant namely: grace, empowerment, and intimacy. This theological position will be dissected in the understanding of marriage relationships and their adaptation in which commitment, assimilation, accommodation, adaptability, Authority of God and communication and necessary in building this intimate relationship (Balswick & Balswick,

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2014). In line with the above discussion is a theological framework that will inform this study:

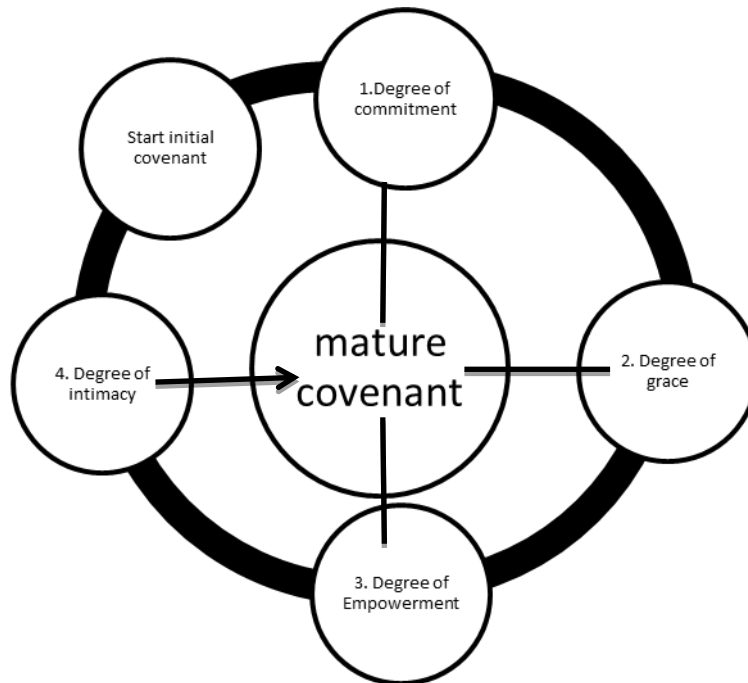


Figure 1: A theological Model for Family Relationship (adapted from Balswick & Balswick, 2014:7)

The 4 Phases of the model of a theology of marriage

**Covenantal: to Love and to be loved** – the dominant theme of covenant is that it is absolute commitment demonstrated by God to the creation (Balswick, 2014:8). The fact that the concept of covenant has a rich heritage in Christian theology; the biblical meaning is somewhat battered by the modern idea that commitment is no more than a contract. There are several instances in scripture the covenant is found for instance: in Genesis 6:18, God told Noah, “But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark.” God instructed Noah to take his wife and sons and daughters-in-law, along with all living creatures and Noah does everything that God commands. Elsewhere God makes another covenant to Abraham in Genesis 9:9-10, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you”

From the two accounts of God inaugurating a covenant with Noah and with Abraham we can learn two things: first that we see that God is not offering either of them any choice in the matter. Rather he inaugurates the covenant entirely on His action. Second, God’s offer is not based on whether Noah or Abraham keep the bargain, in other words God’s promises to them was not contractual. However, God demands a response. The covenant that God proposes is unwavering and genuine. Third, even though, the covenant is not conditional the advantages are determined by their reaction. Both Noah and Abraham are given a choice to respond if they are to gain from the covenant. Both of them responded to the covenant and they both received the Lord’s blessings. Fourth, interestingly, God extended the covenant to their families from generation to generation. Neither Noah nor Abraham predicted obedience from their descendants; this is a further evidence of the unconditional nature of the covenant.

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The Old Testament account in the book of Hosea conveys the central theme of the covenant relationship between God and the children of Israel.

The cycle follows that the children of Israel rebelled from God and get into all kinds of difficulty. God pursues them with a love that will not let them go, offering reconciliation and restitution when they respond and then comes the blessing of being in a relationship with God.

The life of Jesus is the supreme expression of unconditional love. It is noteworthy that Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 in response to the Pharisees and the scribes' criticism of him sitting with sinners. Elsewhere in scripture, Jesus is recorded showing unconditional love to those who rejected him and the Father for example in John 4:10-13; 1John 4:19. There are many other instances of God's unconditional love.

From the foregoing, Marriage and family can be viewed centrally to God's covenantal love that is unconditional and beneficial. In this way, marriage can be conceptualised not as a contract but as unconditional love where every individual responds to this love as a sign of the benefits that comes with it.

**Grace: To forgive and to be forgiven** – the unconditional love of God that is offered as a covenant and not a contract is done in the Lord's grace. Grace is a relational concept that when applied to the family promises longevity. Balswick and Balswick (2014) use the concept of grace (unmerited favour) and apply it to marriage. That is, marriage and family as a covenant relationship with God requires grace for the strength to stand. Family relationships require environments of grace to forgive and to be forgiven. Without grace, families and marriages are prone to crumble. A marriage built on contract leads to legalism but one built on grace leads to freedom (Balswick & Balswick, 2014:12). Christ came to humankind through grace to redeem and offer freedom, and forgiveness (Romans 10:4). A family that lives a life of unconditional love in grace is likely to accept the family with the structures, responsibilities, rights, forms and patterns that come with it. In this way families develop a culture of building relationships in love, forgiving and accepting forgiveness with one another.

**Empowerment: to serve and to be served** – unconditional covenantal marriages built on grace, is also able to empower each member of the family. Empowerment here is used as described by Balswick and Balswick (2014:14) to mean the ability to serve others thereby helping another person to empower themselves. An example of empowerment can be illustrated by Christ's own action as found in John 10:10 "I came so that they may have life and have it abundantly". Christ died in sacrifice to empower us. Jesus' sacrifice enables us freedom from sin, and has enabled us to become His children (John 1:12-13). This principle of empowerment is applicable to the family at parental and community level. Families are called to live sacrificial love for one another by serving each other to enable each member grow to independence. Parents need to help their children to grow and become what God wants them to be.

**Intimacy: to know and be known** – The covenantal relationships that is both characterised by unconditional love, grace and service is also one that requires intimacy. God as a relational God has made himself known to humankind through his word and longs for a relationship with the humankind (Romans 8:26-27). Relationships mandate communicative actions to thrive. Families and marriages cannot thrive if there is lack of communication among family members. This communication needs to be both vertical (with God) and



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vertical (family relations), without which intimacy is thwarted. For families to grow closer in relationship with God and with one another, they need to be vulnerable in their communication with one another for relationship building.

### **Contemporary Significance of the Trinitarian relationality model to the theology of Marriage in Africa**

Perhaps the significance of the Trinitarian rationality for families today is that God is a relational God. He designed and created marriage and family for His Glory. Every member of the family is created in God's image. God is a relational being who entered into covenant with His people. The covenants he made are unconditional and is characterised by love, grace, service and empowerment. We can learn from the covenants that God instituted marriages as a covenant and not a contract. This way of understanding marriage requires marriage partners and families to exercise grace, being able to forgive and be forgiven have the capacity to heal and create bond among family members. In addition marriage and family needs to be demonstration of service to one another and to God in which case develops intimacy is builds through communication among family members. This understanding of marriage has the ability to lead marriages into mature covenant with God and with marriage partners. The unconditional covenant love is the foundation for family communication and sincere sharing without threat or rejection.

In Africa today, Marriages are dissolving at higher rates. The love that couple experience in the first two years of their marriage sometimes diminishes when they realise that there is nothing more magnetic in their marriage lives. It is imperative that the couple learn the art of love in spite of. God demonstrated this unconditional love in the Trinitarian relationship. Despite the fact that Man sinned and fell short of God's glory, he was faithful to redeem us. In his plan, he entered into a covenant with Abraham, Noah and ultimately redeems us through His Son Jesus Christ. This is a clear demonstration of pure love- loving unconditionally. In this manner shall family love and marriage be exemplified? The African couple needs to reflect on the unconditional love of God and on the truth that marriage is instituted by God to draw a motivation to love because Christ first loved us.

Our spouses and children though united as a family are unique. Consequently, family members needs to seek to intimately know our spouses and children's love languages in the relationship to develop the sacrificial and conditional love demonstrated by God. In so doing, we will be able to forgive one another. Family as a social unit of community (Church) in Africa needs to thrive. This cannot happen unless the church family understand the complexity of community and the conflicts that may arise in the relationships. Accordingly, the church must demonstrate the unconditional love by forgiving each other, thereby being the salt and light in Africa.

In addition, Family and marriage should be seen as a place of service. In African hierarchical society, there is a tendency that some members of the family play subordinate roles or are considered superior or inferior. For instance wives are confined to the home front even though some have careers. So are the children. It is paramount that the pattern of marriage that God desires calls for service. Each family member should have their priority as service to one another. Each family member should consider the other as a project of service. Christ himself demonstrated servant leadership. Service is not possible unless the family members will seek to communicate and know each other. This means that spending time together with family members is essential if the African family is to draw closer to serving each other. So the bottom line is that the marriage problems experienced in Africa and mentioned earlier can be resolved when we understand that our marriage and family is

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constituted by God for his glory and that he has offered an example in the Trinitarian and covenantal relationship.

Many marriages fail because of a couple's incompatibility. For this reason, couples need to seek genuine premarital counselling to enable them understand what marriage means, its purposes, challenges, conflicts and how to handle this marriages. As such, premarital counselling needs to provide space for the couple to discover their personality compatibility, cultural difference, faith development as well as their commitment, and communicative abilities which they will need to assimilate and accommodate one another as they develop healthy attachment for a sustainable marriage relationship.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The theology of marriage that is built on Trinitarian rationality has the tenacity to durable marriages that are not only founded on contract but also in the unconditional covenantal love relationship with God. When marriages are central to God's intention and purpose, then marriage and family will be focused on God. In analysing Biblical basis for marriage and family relationships I have recommended: 1.) Marriage commitment should be based on mature covenant love; 2) marriage and family life should be founded and sustained in an environment of grace, which incorporates tolerance and forgiveness; 3) the possessions of family members should be used to empower one another and 4) family intimacy should be centred on the understanding that models care, understanding, communication and communication with others. These four features of the family are not one time occurrence but should be a continual practice that characterises the family and marriage in Africa.

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