

# The Roles of Christian Counselors in Sudden Death

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**Abstract:** Marriage is core stage of man's living; it's a relationship almost everyone craves for. The sweetness of marriage stems from the fact that two people become one. Then, what happens when there is a sudden demise of a spouse? This question forms the bedrock of this research discourse bringing up a lucid analysis of what marriage actually entails. This work also gives a clear understanding on the devastating state of marriage when death comes in. The quests for a solution brings up counselling with the engagement of this subject matter (death in marriage) to ascertain how Christian counselors (Christian counselors inclusive) can effectively be of help.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Spouse, Counselor, Christian counselor, Death, Bereaved.

## INTRODUCTION

Categorically speaking, the first institution established by God was marriage and it brings a man and a woman together as one; husband and wife. It is on seldom cases that one will find or see adult male and female unmarried. In other words, God instituted marriage; and did it for the purpose of procreation and replenishing the earth, to overcome loneliness. Marriage is a serious stage of man's life; issues come up when one of the partners die. The place of counselling in marriage cannot be neglected because of cases like this.

Bereavement can have a devastating impact on the immune systems of seniors, and may explain why many older spouses soon die after the loss of their loved ones. Counselling the bereaved is a ministry on its own; it takes grace and patience. Thus, this paper addresses what counselling entails, especially pertaining to the issue of losing a spouse (death); revealing the importance and significance of a Christian Counsellor.

## THE CONCEPT OF MARRIAGE: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

From the creation story in Genesis, it is clear that God instituted marriage without the consent of any mortal being. The marriage bond is a covenant between three parties: the man, the woman and God. God's ideal for marriage remains one man and one woman for life in a one-flesh relationship.<sup>1</sup> Suffice to note that God himself established the marriage institution in the beginning. Even more astonishing is that

the Bible indicates that God personally joins together every husband and wife''<sup>2</sup>

God was and still very much interested in the holy union of a man and a woman becoming one flesh by marital covenantal term.<sup>3</sup> However, it should be noted that vices that surface in marriage is a result of the man's fall in the Garden of Eden. Man fell from God's unquantifiable grace and hullabaloo set in. The concept of marriage is not strange in anyway strange to the New Testament. In fact Jesus' first miracle was done at a wedding programme in Cana of Galilee where he attended a wedding programme. The Jewish perception of marriage is neither a joke, nor a child's play;<sup>4</sup> the age of someone regarded as a man starts from 30. Thus, a man who is qualified for marriage is termed and seen as someone who is matured for the stage.

Jesus in the gospel of Matthew 19:6 says, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." The divine ideal for marriage is clearly a lifelong bond that unites husband and wife in a "one flesh" relationship (Matthew 19:5). The marriage bond is a covenant between three parties: the man, the woman and God.<sup>5</sup> God's ideal for marriage remains one man and one woman for life in a one-flesh relationship. Suffice to note that God himself established the marriage institution in the beginning.

Several individuals revealed their views and opinions concerning the subject matter. Johnson and Jones opined that "Marriage can be the most rewarding relationship; however it also brings with it many problems

<sup>2</sup> Brad Van'tHul, *What Does the Bible Teach About Divorce and Remarriage in the Church?* (Divorce and Remarriage.pdf), 1.

<sup>3</sup> R. Lateju, *The Effect of Divorce on Children and Response* (Illinois: Queens Book, 1992), 12.

<sup>4</sup> David Abolarin, *10 Steps Towards Choosing a Life Partner* (Ilorin: Gbemi Press, N.D.), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Kolawole Oladotun Paul, *Broken Home in Nigeria Context* in International Journal of Zambrut, *International Journal of Social, Politics & Humanities ISSN: 2797-3735, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2019, 24.*

<sup>1</sup> Kolawole Oladotun, *Divorce, A Debacle or Panacea? A Rethink from Biblical Evaluation* in Humanities e-book, GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/453861>, 2018; 4 (Accessed on 1st Feb, 2019).

and issues that need to be handled.”<sup>6</sup> From the above definition, the first connotation of Johnson and Jones here presents the fact concerning marriage. The fruitfulness of marriages when it works is explicit; it is an investment that yields result and profits. The second connotation has to do with the obvious reality.

Among the stages of man’s life, the marital stage is a vital one because of its duration; spending the whole of one’s life with an “another person.” Danfulani Kore opines that, “marriage is a serious and lifelong venture in God’s sight.”<sup>7</sup> Marriage can be the most rewarding relationship; however it also brings with it many problems and issues that need to be handled.<sup>8</sup> The spouses should support each other in both bad and good times. It is always good to share the problems with your life partner to have a greater bonding and understanding.

Ellywood defined marriage from an ethical perspective. According to him, “marriage is a physical, legal and moral union between a man and a woman living in complete community of life for the establishment of the family.”<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, Sheling explains marriage as a union between a man and a woman with the intention of permanent togetherness.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of marriage is not strange to the African people; in fact, it is an integral part of the values and culture of the African land from ages. Research has shown that a sacred elaborate ceremony is done in the African system to authenticate the habitation and the covenant took by a man and a woman. The significance of marriage in the African setting informs the action of several parents to the extent that they at one time call upon their offspring to ask about their relationship; fiancé or fiancée as the case may be. Some even go to the length of recommending one person or the other for their children.

Marriage in the African world is seen as a sacred ceremony that is vital in man’s life. People are called upon to celebrate this great event; marked with several clergies, guests, singers, relatives among others. Every reasonable parent in Africa wants a happy home for their child; it’s a thing of joy and pride that their children are happily married. The understanding of marriage in this section shows the duration of marriage as ‘forever;’ “till death do us path.” In

<sup>6</sup>E. L. Johnson and S. L. Jones, *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 87

<sup>7</sup>Danfulani Kore, *Culture and Christian Home* (Kaduna: Baraka Press, 1989), 97.

<sup>8</sup>E. L. Johnson and S. L. Jones, *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 87.

<sup>9</sup> Charles A. Ellywood, *Dictionary of Religion and Ethics* (London: Waverley, 1973), 272-273.

<sup>10</sup> E. Sheling, “Marriage,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 192.

the real sense, the appearance of death at one stage (sometimes early, sometimes later) in the marriage becomes a serious debacle to the spouse, children and family as a whole left behind, the situation is inherently unpalatable viewing the hurdles the spouse encounters, this occurrence forms the discourse in the next section of the work.

## DEATH IN MARRIAGE

Over the years, the reality of death has not denied; it is a natural part of life, and so it follows that grief will be a part of the life of every person, to different extents. Thus, no argument and negotiation, death is real.<sup>11</sup> The death of a spouse is one of the unavoidable causes of being single.<sup>12</sup> This is a serious and critical issue for the family. The death of a spouse for female in Africa sometime affects the structure of the family in the sense that some of those women have their husbands as backbone (finance wise especially) and when he is gone; this becomes a serious challenge. In other words, death in marriage brings about several things like; hardship, depression etc.

Depression is defined as “an abnormal state of inactivity and unpleasant emotion, as in manic-depressive insanity” In other words, depression is a whole illness involving your body, mood, thoughts, behaviour, as well as your relationships. It affects the way people eat and sleep, the way people feel about themselves, and the way people think about things. Because of its wide spread frequency among many people, groups, depression is known as the “common cold of mental illnesses”<sup>13</sup>

Depression knows no boundaries- it affects people of any age, race, gender, or religious affiliation.<sup>14</sup> The causes of depression can be physical, emotional and spiritual. However, we often dwell so much on the physical and emotion more than spiritual.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, coping with the aftermath of loss is often extremely lonely and confusing; it

<sup>11</sup> *What is Death?* <https://www.truthaboutdeath.com/blog/id/1585/what-is-death> (Accessed on 2nd Feb, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Seccombe, K and Warner R, *Marriages And Families: Relationship In Social Context* (Belmont: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004), 279.

<sup>13</sup> David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, eds., *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids Mi: Baker Books, 1999), 335.

<sup>14</sup> It should be made clear that depression varies from one level to another and from one person to person. Whenever depression occurs, what is usually seen in the life of the counselee is discouragement, disappointment; fluctuating moods and sadness which shows that something is wrong somewhere.

<sup>15</sup> Robert C. Anderson, *The effective Pastor: A practical guide to the ministry* (Morely Dress chiceces 1995), 142.

is not unusual to feel depressed.<sup>16</sup> The sudden departure (death) of a spouse causes depression for the victim either male or female. As a result, a man that is depressed may develop loss of interest in his work. If the depression continues or persists, it becomes more of relational issues whereby relationships with others tend to devolve or become strained because individuals in this category begin to pull away and noticeably withdraw from friends and family due to melancholia state of mind.<sup>17</sup>

In the same vein, the researcher noted some things that make sudden death in marriage traumatic:

1. Shock: this may include denial and anger in the mind of the victim; overwhelmed with the occurrence and finding it very difficult to accept and relate with the reality.
2. Numbness: This might include a detached feeling about death.
3. Psychological struggle: this could include hearing the voice of the departed, catching glimpses of them or preparing to call them. Because of the memories that cannot easily be forgotten.

In view of this, some victims even die days, months or some years after the death of their spouse; this in turn explains the severity concerning the sudden death of a spouse in marriage. It is clear that death in marriage can be traumatic; thus, the next section reveals what counselling actually entails, since it is the thermostat engaging this trauma (sudden death in marriage).

### WHAT COUNSELLING ENTAILS

Counselling is the provision of assistance and guidance in resolving personal, social, or psychological problems and difficulties, especially by a professional.<sup>18</sup> Counselling can be for one person or a group (typically couples and families) and may be delivered through a number of methods, from face-face dialogue, group work, telephone, email and written materials.<sup>19</sup> Counselling is largely a voluntary activity whereby clients must wish to change and collaborate willingly with the Counsellor.

Counselling is also said to be a variety of procedures systematically undertake by a Counsellor to promote specific change in the behaviour of a client, which is relevant to goal established between the clients and

Counsellor.<sup>20</sup> The traditional African society with its more communal and mutual support systems in gradually disappearing and in some urban areas of African it has almost disappeared. People no longer build their home together as a community, instead, many home have high walled enclosure. Life is becoming more and more a life of every man for himself or himself and the devil takes the hindmost.

Collins defines counselling as “a process that attempts to provide encouragement and guidance for those facing losses, decisions or disappointment.”<sup>21</sup> A quick look at this definition may cause one to erroneously conclude that counselling is only meant for individuals needing help facing challenges in their life. However, Collins use of the term decisions may not necessarily refer to problems. There may be positive decisions that may drive one for counselling such as moving from one city to take up a better paying job in another.

In the height of the race of modern life, the devil indeed taking a very large share of not only those who take the hindmost, but also those who think they are front runner.<sup>22</sup> Counselling in the traditional African society was accomplished informally through families, neighbors, friends and peers and the strong; sense of becoming to a community supported the life of each person. In some cases, professional counselling was accomplished through the mediums, seers, medicine men and women and other specialization servants of people. Counselling is benefiting or important because it allows for two way communication.<sup>23</sup>

The Lierop definition of counselling offers a more comprehensive view of what counselling is. He says “Counselling is helping people face their lives, to find answers to their lives and to grow and develop to maturity.” In a more recent definition Gladding defines counselling as a psychological specialty that aims to facilitate personal and interpersonal functioning across the lifespan.

From these definitions it is clear that counselling is both solution and growth focused. Counselling in general may thus target persons who need help to solve problems in their life or to help them move on into their next stage of development. The second key thing that emerges from these definitions is that counselling is a process. This means it is not a one day affair but takes some time to achieve the set

<sup>16</sup> David G. Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A Short-Term Structured Model* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 76.

<sup>17</sup> Margareth Stroebe and Wolfgang Stoebe, *Bereavement and Health: The psychological and physical consequences of partner loss* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), np.

<sup>18</sup> C. Anderson, *The effective Pastor: A practical guide to the ministry*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A Short-Term Structured Model*, 77.

<sup>20</sup> JAY LEONARD STEINBERG *THE CO AS AN APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST* (LOS ANGELES: ARDENT MEDIA, 1974)63-64.

<sup>21</sup>W. Dryden, and Feltham, *Brief Counselling, A practical guide for beginning practitioners* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1993), 176.

<sup>22</sup>Clyde M. Narramore, *Counseling Youth at the Church, School and Camp*, 10.

<sup>23</sup>Douglas Wanjobi Waranta, *Caring an Sharing* (ATEA, 1995), 5.

out goals.<sup>24</sup> In this process, the Counsellor seeks to encourage or guide counsees to face challenges in their life as they grow and develop into maturity. Counsellors also help clients explore and understand their worlds and so discover better ways of thinking and living.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the researcher previews some other definitions, which includes: helping clients to understand and clarify their views of their life space, and to learn to reach their self-determined goals through meaningful, well-informed choices and through resolution or problems of an emotional or interpersonal nature.<sup>26</sup> Work with individuals and with relationships which may be developmental, crisis support, psychotherapeutic, guiding or problem-solving.<sup>27</sup>

More so, the task of counselling is to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of giving more satisfyingly and resourcefully.<sup>28</sup> A principled relationship characterized by the application of one or more psychological theories and a recognized set of communication skills, modified by experience, intuition and other interpersonal factors, to clients' intimate concerns, problems or aspirations.<sup>29</sup> A common factor in most counselling situations is that the client is demoralized, distressed or otherwise in a negative state of mind about something.<sup>30</sup>

#### THE ROLES OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELLORS TO THE BEREAVED

Ministering to the bereaved is one of the most difficult yet rewarding responsibilities faced by a Christian Counsellor. The bereaved are often very receptive to counselor's care, comfort and counsel. A caring Christian Counsellor who is properly trained and equipped to minister to the bereaved can be an invaluable resources to grieving people who are going through difficult experiences and hard moments.

Over the years, Christian Counselloral counselling and therapy is expected for people who are bereaved. Also, depression is inherently a result of losing loved ones.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup>J. Steil, *Marital equality: its relationship to the well-being of husbands and wives* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 76.

<sup>25</sup>H.M. Burks, and Steffle, *Theories of Counseling* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 115.

<sup>26</sup>W. Dryden, and Feltham, *Brief Counselling, A practical guide for beginning practitioners* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1993), 176.

<sup>27</sup>Burks and Steffle, *Theories of Counseling*, 115.

<sup>28</sup>[http://changingminds.org/disciplines/counseling/what\\_is.html](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/counseling/what_is.html) (Accessed 3rd June, 2018).

<sup>29</sup>McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*, 90.

<sup>30</sup>S. L. Ceren, *Essentials of premarital counseling: Creating compatible couples* (Ann Arbor, MI: Loving Healing Press, 2008), 83.

<sup>31</sup>Ceren, *Essentials of premarital counseling: Creating compatible couples*, 84.

Depression is an illness that affects a physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual response to the events of our lives and that impacts our body mind and spirit. Far beyond the stated need of counselling during grief moments; it's an opportunity to re-examine our lives, goals, expectations, and our actions. In therapy, a person in the dilemma of losing a loved one can develop new strengths and perspectives which lead to a renewed enthusiasm for life and the challenges it holds.

Considering the understanding of marriage from the preceding part of this work, it is clear that couples function as a team; thus, the death of a spouse can present complicated difficulties for the bereaved person.<sup>32</sup> These issues go beyond having to handle their grief since the surviving spouse may need immediate help handling basic day-to-day responsibilities.<sup>33</sup> Depending on how the couple divided their responsibilities, the surviving spouse may quickly need to learn about finances, home or automotive maintenance, or domestic chores. Transportation and child care may present immediate problems. In short, the loss of a spouse presents a host of issues that must be dealt with.

It is important that a Christian Counsellor be patient, compassionate, and understanding when helping someone grieve the death of a spouse. The person is not only handling all the things that two people used to take care of, but they have lost the life companion. Regardless of age or the tenure of the relationship, each person grieves differently.<sup>34</sup> But the role of the Christian Counsellor is vital in the sense that support, an understanding ear, and be patient is exercised. Counselling for victims is vital to the sustenance of such individuals. The Counsellor must be sensitive in order to know where the person's needs lie.<sup>35</sup>

One of the hallmarks of a Christian Counsellor is sympathy and empathy for someone who is grieving. If the counselee's needs are spiritual, then the following suggestions are helpful: In case of sin, there must be confession of sin to God; the Counsellor should help the counselee in dealing with any other matter of guilt. This is to help the counselee to strengthen his relationship with God or man that goes sour. Therefore, counselling in this regard is important in the contemporary African societies because modern life has become so stressful and lonely. In a personal counseling, the Counsellor does most of the listening, and the counselee can express himself or herself, clarify his thinking and consider various solutions.

Generally, people who are bereaved find it difficult to hold themselves, several of them seems to get to the

<sup>32</sup>Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's New Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing company, 1977), 721.

<sup>33</sup>Ernest White, *The Way of Release* (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1963), 95.

<sup>34</sup>Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's New Testament*, 722.

<sup>35</sup>Ernest White, *The Way of Release*, 94.

length crying all day thinking that will bring the dead back to life, but unfortunately not! Another role a Christian Counsellor must play for grieving people is to simply be available.<sup>36</sup> It is not possible to bring back the loved ones that are dead; but one can support and comfort the bereaved while going through the grieving process. A Christian Counsellor must identify the grief and the Counsellor must make known that his intention of helping and supporting in any way they need help. In other words, Christian Counsellors identify with the believed and show care, love and support to the bereaved.

It is appropriate for Counsellors to visit the bereaved before and after the funeral. Ideally, Christian Counsellors should visit the family for consolations before the funeral and days after the funeral. The research posits that a Christian Counsellor should be careful of the things he does and say when with the victim; because the actions and statements of the Counsellor can help the victim or make the situation worse. These actions are mentioned and discussed below:

1. Don't push for details: Christian Counsellors should allow the bereaved talk about their loved one. A Christian Counsellor should be a good listener. In several instances, the research discovered that elderly spouses, in particular, will likely want to talk and tell stories about the departed spouse. Thus, it is expected of a Christian Counsellor to encourage the bereaved to share their memories, possibly by putting them down on paper or on tape.<sup>37</sup>
2. Don't take control of the situation: Christian Counsellor may be tempted to take over all the planning activities. Depending on the situation, this may be appropriate but the Counsellor must be sure to consider the feelings of the person who is grieving; He or she may need to maintain control in order to work through grief.
3. Don't bring up other people's losses: Christian Counsellors should let the spouse focus on his/her loss. Trying to relate what the person is going through to yourself or someone else might not be helpful and may give the impression of minimizing the way the person is feeling, which might be offensive. In line with the actions of Christian Counsellors, the research opined that certain words should not be uttered: "Think about how lucky you are that you have children, You have to be strong now for your children (or business), do you think you'll get married again?, Are you going to move?, You look great. I'm sure you'll find someone new."

<sup>36</sup> The experience of comfort is not the same in everybody. Perhaps for one person, the feeling that comforts him most is to know that people are praying for him. Other grieving people don't want to be left alone. There are people who want truths to hang on to, and those truths are like handholds for them to grab a hold of. \

<sup>37</sup> *Helping Someone Grieve the Death of a Spouse*, [https://www.funeralwise.com/grief/spouse\\_cope/](https://www.funeralwise.com/grief/spouse_cope/) (Accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2019).

The highlighted actions and statements in the preceding paragraph reveals efficacy of a Counsellor's action and speech. Of a truth, a Christian Counsellor is expected to be a good Christian Counsellor because he is God's representative; He must help and influence people immeasurable. Therefore, the role of the Church in relieving the grief of victims cannot be overemphasized. Although, while relieving the victim, God must be honored; therefore, the Counsellor must pray and allow the Holy Spirit to guide him. The use of the Word of God is essential to instruct in the way of victory and fellowship with God (1 Jhn 1:9).

It is of great importance that the Christian Counsellor should teach the grieved on grief.. Christian Counsellors should not be afraid to address the topic that everybody has to face, but nobody likes to talk about.<sup>38</sup> As Christians we should be able to talk about death and grieving with much more ease because we know this isn't our final destination. Thus, Christian Counsellors need a good coordinating system in their place of work so that they're not the only ones providing support at that point in time.

In addition, Christian Counsellors should not use the grieving process for the sole purpose of evangelism; but evangelism might present itself during this time of Christian counsel oral care.<sup>39</sup> As the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ triumphed over death, freeing those who trust him from slavery to the fear of death (Heb 2:14 – 15). The minister's task is to help the family live in this truth.

#### CONCLUSION

Marriage is an important commitment to a person. Therefore, losing a life partner is one of the biggest losses one can experience. The support and understanding of a Christian Counsellor is integral to helping victims through the grieving period. Counselling has different goals depending on the life situation but the greatest priority is for the healing of affected soul. In view of this, the role of a Christian Counsellor is significant in approaching this vice and its responsibility is caring for the weak, weary, and wounded; it is incumbent on the Christian Counsellor to provide them with the God-giving resource to enable the bereaved identify and take the right decision.

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<sup>38</sup> Z. Susan, *Complicated Grief and How the Church can Help*, <https://www.careleader.org/complicated-grief-church-can-help/> (Accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Alvins Evans, *Making the Gospel Relevant to the Bereaved* (Chicago: Hills Books, 2010), 81.

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