CONCRESCENCE
Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research
A peer-reviewed open access journal • DOI: https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.9

ISSN 1595-9287 (Online)
Vol. 3 • No. 5 • 2026
pp. 102–111

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

DOI: https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.9

Covenant or Contract? Rethinking Christian Marriage in Contemporary Nigeria

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RECEIVED	REVISED	ACCEPTED	PUBLISHED
18 July 2026	28 September 2026	26 October 2026	28 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Marriage remains one of the most valued institutions in Nigeria, binding not only two people but two families and their wider communities. Within Nigerian Christianity, it is commonly framed through a single formula: marriage is a covenant, not a contract. This study questions that formula and contends that the opposition on which it rests is both exegetically weak and, when pressed to its logical end, damaging to the people it claims to protect. Drawing on biblical and empirical sources, African marriage theology, and current literature on Nigerian Christian families, the paper argues that covenant and contract have always overlapped. Scriptural covenants carried conditions and sanctions, and customary marriage in Nigeria has long treated bridewealth as a negotiable, dissoluble bond that is nonetheless sacred. The paper shows that an uncompromising prohibition of divorce does not reliably produce stable homes; instead, it is associated with concealed abandonment, prolonged intimate-partner violence, and a measurable increase in spousal killing. The paper therefore advances a revised understanding of marriage as a covenant that is conditional, protective and attentive to mutual obligation. It closes by outlining what this reframing means for premarital counselling, clergy training and the teaching of marriage in Nigerian churches.

KEYWORDS: Christian marriage • covenant • contract • Nigeria • divorce • bride price • intimate-partner violence

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE • APA 7

Fadipe, A. S., & Oyekola, C. R. (2026). Covenant or contract? Rethinking Christian marriage in contemporary Nigeria. *Concrescence Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research, 3*(5), 102–113. https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.9

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Introduction

Marriage as one of the oldest unions in human history occupies a central place in Nigerian social and cultural life. Across Nigerian culture, marriage founds the family, links kin groups, and carries religious meaning that few other institutions can match. For the Christian majority and the growing Christian populations, marriage is both a civil event and a sacred one, and the language the churches use to describe it has become remarkably uniform. Across Anglican, Pentecostal, Catholic, and mainline Protestant congregations, couples are taught that marriage is a covenant, not a contract. However, in recent times, contemporary Nigerian society has witnessed issues of domestic violence, constant fights,

separations, court cases, threats and, at the most extreme, divorce. While the desire for marriage remains strong among young people, there is the growing thought of marriage being a contract that, once entered, if it is not working, the contract should end. While the church over the years has taught marriage to be a covenant, contemporary times, with the influence of social media, Western writings and patterns, aided by constant abuses that are witnessed in marriage, have made a drastic shift so that today people consider marriage not just a covenant, but a contract. Thus, while the church sees and teaches marriage as a covenant, there is a social wave that sees marriage as a contract. Thus, this paper asks whether the covenant-versus-contract opposition, imported largely from Western evangelical writing and then sharpened in Nigerian pulpits, actually fits either the biblical texts it claims or the lived marriages it governs.

This paper examines the teaching of marriage as covenant. The paper argues that the opposition between covenant and contract, though it feels reassuring, rests on a weak reading of Scripture and, at its strictest, harms the marriages it means to guard. In the biblical sense that Hugenberger (1994) drew out of Malachi, a covenant came with firm conditions and with set consequences when those conditions were broken. A contract, too, was never just a cold deal. Instone-Brewer (2002) showed that marriage agreements in the ancient Near East spelled out duties of care and faithfulness and allowed release when a spouse failed to keep them. Thus, a marriage can be a covenant and still carry conditions. The Old Testament, read carefully, treats it exactly that way. Thus, when we look at the state of marriage in Nigeria, we understand that marital breakdown is rising among Nigerian Christians, the group whose churches preach permanence most insistently. Thus, Yusuf and Yusufu (2020) have noted the alarming divorce figures among Nigerian Christians, driven by childlessness, infidelity, financial collapse, and communication breakdown, while Anaana et al. (2019) add witchcraft fears, the intrusion of money into marriage, and poor financial management to the list. Ademiluka (2024) has furthered the analysis that the blanket prohibition of divorce preached in many Nigerian denominations contributes to a rising incidence of spousal homicide, as partners trapped in unbearable pains and sometimes violent homes choose killing over a separation their church forbids.

In contemporary Nigeria, marriage is not a single thing but a series of stages, all geared toward one end: the union of man and woman. Today, a couple in Enugu or Osogbo usually passes through three distinct rites: the customary ceremony with its bride price and family negotiations, the statutory registry marriage governed by the Marriage Act, and the church wedding with its vows and blessing (Enemali, 2026). Each rite rests on its own logic. Custom frames marriage as a union between two families, sealed and, where necessary, dissolved through bridewealth. The State frames it as a civil arrangement or contract subject to law. The church frames it as a covenant and as a sacrament. To ask whether Nigerian Christian marriage is covenant or contract is therefore to ask a question the lived institution has already answered: it is both, layered and sometimes contradictory. What the pulpit binary does is flatten that layered reality into a single moralised choice, and then attach to that choice a doctrine of indissolubility that the texts do not clearly support.

The covenant-contract distinction and its biblical troubles

The theological argument for understanding marriage as a covenant is strongly based on Malachi 2:14, where the prophet condemns unfaithful husbands and describes the wife as a companion and partner "by covenant." Hugenberger (1994) develops this argument extensively, maintaining that Malachi 2:10–16 presents marriage as a covenant in a full sense, including a binding oath. Hugenberger argues that the "one flesh" expression in Genesis 2:24 has covenantal significance even though the word "covenant" is not used explicitly. He points out that Scripture contains examples of covenants that are recognised through their structure and obligations without always being formally described as covenants. However, an important difficulty arises from the claim that marriage as a covenant must therefore be indissoluble. Hugenberger's own discussion recognises that biblical covenants can be broken. A covenant is not, by definition, incapable of violation. His study identifies numerous biblical examples of broken covenants and treats divorce as a serious breach of the marital relationship rather than as something that is conceptually impossible. Therefore, the argument that "marriage is a covenant" does not necessarily establish the

further claim that "marriage cannot end." Covenants in the ancient Near Eastern context contained obligations and sanctions precisely because they could be violated. Their binding character did not depend on the assumption that violation was impossible. This issue becomes clearer in Instone-Brewer (2002), who examines biblical divorce and remarriage in the context of ancient Near Eastern marriage practices. He argues that biblical marriage also had a contractual dimension involving specific obligations. Drawing particularly from Exodus 21:10–11, he identifies obligations relating to food, clothing and conjugal rights, together with consequences when these obligations were violated. From this perspective, divorce could function as a legitimate response to serious failure to fulfill marital obligations. Instone-Brewer also interprets the divorce certificate in Deuteronomy 24 as providing legal protection for the woman by establishing a clear end to the marriage and allowing her to remarry without being treated as an adulteress. His interpretation has been criticised by Lauer (2014), who argues that Instone-Brewer introduces contractual concepts into the Pentateuch that are not explicitly present and broadens the biblical grounds for divorce beyond those accepted by Reformed confessions. Although this debate remains unresolved, it demonstrates that serious biblical scholarship recognises a contractual dimension within the biblical understanding of marriage rather than treating contract as necessarily opposed to covenant. However, the problem becomes more apparent when the distinction is applied to contemporary Nigerian Christian preaching. In some preaching, "contract" is presented as conditional, temporary and based on self-interest, while "covenant" is presented as sacred, unconditional and permanent. This creates a sharp opposition between the two concepts. However, the historical and theological evidence does not support such a simple distinction. Palmer (1972), writing from a Catholic perspective, observes that Christian marriage was discussed largely in contractual terms for much of Christian history and argues that covenant language represents a relatively newer framework that gained renewed importance in the twentieth century. His work, titled "Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant?", rejects a strict either-or distinction. Similarly, Witte (2012), in his study of the historical development of marriage in Western Christianity, shows that sacramental, contractual and covenantal understandings of marriage have often existed together. The modern revival of covenant language was not necessarily intended to eliminate the legal dimension of marriage but to bring together its sacred and social dimensions. Palmer therefore understands marriage as a social reality, a legal relationship and a covenantal relationship. Brooks (2000) likewise concludes that Christian marriage combines elements of social contract, spiritual covenant and personal commitment. Giving absolute priority to one concept while rejecting the others can therefore provide an incomplete understanding of Christian marriage.

The Catholic canonical tradition further supports this integrated understanding. Canon 1055 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* describes marriage as a "matrimonial covenant" while also recognising its contractual character, holding that between baptised persons a valid matrimonial contract is inseparably also a sacrament (*Code of Canon Law*, 1983, c. 1055). Thus, covenant and contract are not treated as mutually exclusive categories. The same tradition holds that it is the consent of the parties that establishes the marriage (*Code of Canon Law*, 1983, c. 1057), and such consent carries a contractual dimension even though, within sacramental marriage, it also has theological significance. The distinction between covenant and contract should therefore not be understood as a choice between permanence and conditionality. Covenant does not necessarily mean that a relationship cannot be violated or terminated, just as contract does not necessarily imply a lack of commitment or faithfulness. The biblical understanding of marriage contains obligations, commitments and consequences for their violation. A more balanced theological account should therefore recognise the covenantal and contractual dimensions of marriage rather than treating them as mutually exclusive categories.

African Traditional Marriage and the Covenant-Contract Distinction

Marriage in African culture is distinct from the Western-oriented form of marriage. Hence, when the Western debate between covenant and contract is considered alongside African traditional marriage, the distinction between the two becomes less clear. Mbiti (1969, 1991), whose work significantly influenced African religious thought, describes marriage as a central institution of African life and as a point of connection between the departed, the living and the unborn. For Mbiti, marriage is not simply a relationship between two individuals but also a bond between families and communities. The couple

therefore becomes part of a wider network of social and moral obligations. In this context, bridewealth represents an important symbol of the relationship rather than simply a purchase price. Magesa (1997) develops a similar understanding by presenting African marriage as a sacred rite of passage concerned with the continuation and preservation of life. Marriage is therefore understood as both a communal and religious institution rather than merely a private relationship between two individuals.

This understanding challenges the strict separation between covenant and contract found in some contemporary Nigerian Christian teaching. African traditional marriage can be understood as covenantal because it establishes a sacred and communal relationship, but it also has contractual features because it involves negotiated obligations, bridewealth and recognised procedures for ending the marriage. Among the Igbo, Ademiluka (2021a) and Diala (2014) note the importance of bride price in validating marriage and its return as a recognised means of dissolving the union. This reflects a contractual dimension: the establishment of the marriage involves defined obligations, while its dissolution follows an established procedure. Nevertheless, traditional marriage cannot be reduced to a mere contract because it also carries religious, social and communal significance.

A similar pattern can be observed in Yoruba traditional marriage. Thus, Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelure (2023) describe Yoruba marriage as a union involving two families in which bride price contributes to the legitimacy of the marriage and establishes certain rights and obligations. At the same time, practices such as prostration, blessings from elders and communal feasting express the social, moral and symbolic dimensions of the union. Popoola and Adetunji (2026), in their study of Yoruba wedding practices in Osogbo, observe that practices such as prostration and symbolic dowry can express values that are compatible with Christian ideas of humility and covenant, although the commercialisation of bride price and some ancestral practices may raise tensions with Christian teaching. This suggests that African traditional marriage cannot be classified simply as either covenantal or contractual. Its different dimensions need to be examined critically.

The implication is that African Christians already inherit a conception of marriage that combines covenantal and contractual elements. Therefore, presenting Christian marriage as "covenant rather than contract" may create an unnecessary opposition between concepts that African traditional marriage has historically held together. Traditional marriage is both relational and obligatory, sacred and social, communal and regulated by recognised conditions. This suggests that the Christian understanding of marriage in Africa should not automatically reject the contractual dimension but should critically examine how covenant and contract can function together. In particular, the existence of recognised conditions for dissolution raises an important question about whether covenant should necessarily be understood as indissoluble. However, African traditional marriage should not be idealised. The same bridewealth practices that have historically expressed family and communal relationships can also create problems when they become excessive or commercialised. Ademiluka (2021a) argues that high bride prices in some Igbo contexts can contribute to a sense of male ownership and expose women to mistreatment. Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelure (2023) similarly argue that aspects of Yoruba bridewealth practices can reinforce male dominance. Emecheta's (1976) *The Bride Price* also illustrates how economic and cultural expectations surrounding marriage can restrict women's freedom and wellbeing. African traditional marriage should therefore not be treated as a model to be accepted without criticism. Its communal and relational dimensions may provide valuable resources for understanding marriage, but practices that promote inequality, ownership or abuse must also be critically rejected. The African context therefore provides an important basis for reconsidering the covenant-contract distinction. Rather than treating covenant and contract as mutually exclusive categories, African traditional marriage suggests that a marital relationship can involve sacred commitment, social obligation, legal recognition and conditions for dissolution at the same time. This broader understanding can contribute to a more balanced theological and philosophical account of marriage in contemporary Nigeria.

The Nigerian evidence: bride price, divorce and the cost of indissolubility

The question of marriage in contemporary Nigeria raises concerns amid the theological debate and cultural understanding of marriage. In today's Nigeria, there is a high rate of marital instability,

threats and violence, even among Christian couples and some have ended in divorce (Yusuf and Yusufu 2020). These issues are sometimes caused by poor communication, personality disorders and self-understanding, jealousy, family hatred, extramarital affairs, finance, lack of support, childlessness, etc. Okoye and Ugwu (2024), in their examination of ethical challenges in contemporary marriages, identify tensions arising from the interaction between communal values, changing gender roles, modern individualism and Christian teachings on marriage, including the reduced involvement of parents and extended family in partner selection. These tensions create difficulties for couples and challenge traditional understandings of marital permanence. While marriages in Nigeria are breaking down, it must be noted that the available statistical evidence may not fully capture the extent of this breakdown. Reporting data compiled by Divorce.com, *allAfrica* (2024) placed Nigeria eleventh among twenty-six countries surveyed, with a reported divorce rate of approximately 2.9% in 2023. However, these figures primarily record formal divorces. In contexts where Christian teaching strongly discourages divorce and customary law may require the refund of bride price before a customary marriage is regarded as dissolved, some couples may separate without completing a formal process of dissolution. Consequently, a marriage may continue to exist formally while the relationship has effectively ended. This possibility suggests that official divorce statistics should be interpreted with caution when assessing marital instability in Nigeria. Eze et al. (2024), in their study of marriage, further demonstrate the complex interaction between Christianity and traditional practices in contemporary Nigerian marriage. Their findings suggest that traditional and Christian understandings of marriage continue to influence marital relationships in significant ways.

Economic conditions, however, affect marriage and marital stability. Financial difficulties can place considerable pressure on couples, particularly where one or both spouses struggle with unemployment, inadequate income, rising living costs or financial dependence. Persistent economic hardships contribute to disagreements over household responsibilities, child care, education, housing and other basic needs. In such circumstances, marital conflict becomes more difficult to manage, especially when couples lack adequate financial resources or social support. The Nigerian context makes this issue particularly important because economic pressures often interact with cultural expectations concerning marriage. The financial demands associated with marriage ceremonies, bride price and other customary obligations can place significant burdens on couples and their families. Amakor (2018) observes that economic difficulties and unemployment leave many young Nigerian men unable to meet the financial requirements associated with marriage ceremonies and bride price, a situation that contributes to delayed marriage, non-marriage and financial pressure within existing unions. When the economic requirements of formal marriage become difficult to meet, some individuals may resort to cohabitation or informal unions. This raises an important question: does a theological emphasis on covenant adequately address the economic circumstances within which many Nigerians form and sustain marriages? The prosperity gospel introduces another dimension to this problem. Atoi et al. (2022) and Nwadialor and Nwokocha (2023) examine how some forms of neo-Pentecostal prosperity preaching present faith in strongly transactional terms, linking religious commitment and giving with expectations of material and marital blessings. This creates an interesting tension when churches simultaneously reject the idea of marriage as a contract while using contractual or transactional language in other areas of religious teaching. However, it should be noted that economic hardship does not necessarily cause marital breakdown, nor should financial difficulties be treated as an excuse for irresponsible behaviour within marriage. However, persistent economic insecurity can intensify existing tensions and reduce the capacity of couples to respond constructively to marital problems. This is particularly significant where one spouse is economically dependent on the other, since financial dependence may limit the ability to seek assistance or leave a harmful relationship. A balanced understanding of marriage must therefore recognise that marital stability is influenced not only by theological commitments and personal virtues but also by the social and economic conditions within which couples live.

The relationship between divorce theology and domestic violence is an even more serious concern because a strong emphasis on marital permanence can have serious consequences when it is applied without sufficient attention to abuse and personal safety. A theological commitment to preserving marriage is meant to protect the family and encourage reconciliation, but it can become problematic when

it treats staying in the marriage as an obligation regardless of the circumstances. In cases of persistent physical, psychological or sexual abuse, the question is no longer simply whether a marriage should be preserved but whether the protection of the person should take priority over the preservation of the marital relationship. Ademiluka (2019a) examines the interpretation of Malachi 2:16, particularly the common English translation, "I hate divorce," which Nigerian churches frequently use to support an absolute prohibition of divorce. His interpretation challenges this use of the text. He argues that the passage should be understood within its wider context of marital betrayal and the abandonment of wives, rather than as a simple and absolute condemnation of every form of divorce. In a related study, Ademiluka (2019b) examines 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 in relation to intimate-partner violence and argues that Paul's discussion of separation provides theological grounds for recognising situations in which separation may be necessary. From this perspective, a general commitment to marital permanence should not prevent the protection of individuals from serious harm.

The issue therefore becomes particularly serious when marital conflict results in severe or fatal violence. In such situations, the emphasis on preserving marriage may become ethically problematic if it leads victims to remain in relationships where their safety is seriously threatened. Although marital conflict does not inevitably lead to violence, persistent abuse, unresolved conflict and social pressures that discourage separation can create conditions in which violence may continue or escalate. This raises an important theological question about whether the preservation of marriage should remain the overriding concern when the dignity and safety of one of the spouses are at serious risk. From this perspective, protecting human life and dignity should be considered an essential part of Christian marital ethics. A theology of marriage that emphasises permanence, reconciliation and forgiveness must also recognise the moral responsibility to protect persons from serious harm. Consequently, separation in circumstances of persistent and dangerous abuse should not automatically be understood as a rejection of the Christian meaning of marriage. Rather, it may represent an ethical response to a situation in which the fundamental obligations of mutual care, respect and protection have been seriously violated. As Ademiluka (2024), drawing on the work of Okpala and Shontan (2019), examines spousal homicide, argues that restrictive attitudes toward divorce may constitute one factor that increases the vulnerability of individuals trapped in abusive relationships. Where a person believes that leaving a marriage is religiously unacceptable while remaining in the relationship has become unsafe, the absence of socially and religiously acceptable alternatives may intensify the situation. The problem is therefore not necessarily that the doctrine of marital permanence directly causes violence, but that an absolute interpretation of permanence may make it more difficult for victims of abuse to seek protection and separation. Shelley et al. (2026), in their phenomenological study of clergy in Nigeria and Cameroon, similarly demonstrate how religious beliefs about marriage, together with cultural and patriarchal assumptions, can influence how clergy understand and respond to intimate-partner violence.

Thus, the relationship between covenant theology, marital permanence and marital wellbeing requires careful reconsideration. A strong theological commitment to the permanence of marriage does not automatically produce stable or healthy marriages. Where permanence is interpreted without sufficient attention to abuse, abandonment, economic hardship and other serious marital problems, it may contribute to the concealment of marital breakdown or make it more difficult for vulnerable spouses to speak out or even seek protection. The Nigerian evidence of abuses and domestic violence therefore supports a more balanced understanding of marriage, one that takes marital commitment seriously while also recognising the dignity, safety and wellbeing of the persons within the marriage. Such an approach challenges the assumption that the preservation of the marriage institution must always take precedence over the protection of the human persons who constitute it. Thus, the preaching that marriage is covenant and therefore cannot end does not reliably produce permanence. It produces concealment, suffering, and sometimes death, while the permanence it promises slips away into the dark.

Marriage as Covenant: Commitment, Protection and Honesty

From the ongoing discussion, understanding marriage solely as an unconditional and indissoluble covenant raises important theological and ethical difficulties. While the covenant model rightly

emphasises the seriousness, permanence and sacred character of marriage, it must also account for the responsibilities that such a covenant places on both spouses. A more adequate understanding should therefore recognise that marital commitment is inseparable from fidelity, mutual care, protection and respect. This calls for a reconsideration of how covenant is understood and applied within the Nigerian Christian context, particularly in situations where the marital relationship is seriously undermined by abuse, abandonment or persistent breach of marital obligations. It should be stated clearly that this work does not mean that the church should simply embrace divorce or reduce marriage to a contract that can easily be cancelled. The language of covenant expresses something important that should be preserved: marriage is a sacred relationship entered into before God and the community, and it carries obligations that go beyond an ordinary agreement. The problem, therefore, is not the covenant idea itself but the tendency to equate covenant with absolute indissolubility while neglecting the obligations and remedies also present in biblical covenant relationships. What is needed is a covenant theology that understands marriage as conditional in the biblical sense, protective in pastoral practice, and honest about the responsibilities that marriage places on both spouses.

A conditional covenant is not necessarily a contradiction. As Hugenberger (1994) shows, biblical covenants contained obligations and could be broken. Although covenant violation was serious, the possibility of breach was recognised, together with consequences and appropriate responses. Instone-Brewer (2002) similarly identifies marital obligations relating to food, clothing and marital faithfulness and argues that their serious violation could provide grounds for divorce. A Nigerian covenant theology that takes these aspects seriously would present marriage as a solemn commitment made before God, while also recognising conditions such as fidelity, provision, protection and mutual respect. When one spouse persistently and seriously violates these obligations, particularly through violence or abandonment, the covenant has already been seriously breached by that person's actions. The responsibility should therefore not be placed entirely on the spouse who leaves a dangerous marriage. As Ademiluka (2019a, 2024) argues from his interpretation of the biblical texts, this perspective shifts attention to the conduct that has undermined the marriage in the first place.

The protective dimension in marriage follows from this understanding. If marriage is a covenant that creates obligations for both spouses, then those obligations must include the protection of each other's dignity, safety and well-being. Marriage should not be understood only as a bond that requires spouses to remain together; it should also be understood as a relationship in which both parties are expected to care for and protect one another. This is particularly important where marital relationships involve persistent abuse, violence or other serious forms of harm. In such circumstances, the preservation of the marriage should not take priority over the protection of the person. A covenantal understanding of marriage should therefore provide moral and pastoral resources for protecting vulnerable spouses while still affirming the seriousness of marital commitment. Ademiluka's (2021b) interpretation of Ephesians 5:22–33 is relevant in this regard. The passage is sometimes used in Nigerian Christian settings, especially during weddings to demand the submission of wives, while insufficient attention is given to the husband's responsibility to love his wife sacrificially. But the husband's love is presented in terms of Christ's self-giving love for the church rather than domination or control. From this perspective, the passage should not be used to justify abusive forms of patriarchy but should be understood as placing serious moral responsibilities on the husband. A church that emphasises mutual care, self-giving and responsibility would promote marriages that are more worthy of preservation. Where preservation is no longer possible because the relationship has become seriously harmful, however, a protective covenant theology should give priority to the safety and dignity of the vulnerable spouse. The intercultural study by Popoola & Adetunji (2026) also suggests that Nigerian Christian marriage rituals already contain communal and covenantal meanings that can support such an understanding.

Nigerian marriage exists within several overlapping frameworks, including customary, statutory and ecclesiastical forms. These forms often operate together in the experience of many Christian couples, rather than as completely separate systems. A couple may, for example, enter into a customary marriage, meet the requirements of civil law, and then celebrate a church wedding. Each of these forms carries its own expectations, obligations and social meanings. The church should therefore recognise that its

covenantal understanding is not the only framework through which marriage is understood and practised. Enemali (2026) argues for an integrated approach that recognises these three dimensions as legitimate aspects of African Christian marriage rather than treating them as competing forms. Similarly, Aina (2025), in proposing a synodal and Afro-theological approach to Nigerian Catholic marriage rites, argues that African customary forms can carry sacramental and covenantal meaning rather than being treated merely as cultural additions. This approach provides a more realistic understanding of Nigerian Christian marriage and creates room for a serious discussion of practices such as bride price. If bridewealth can become, as Ademiluka (2021a) argues, a source of ownership and abuse, the church should be willing to address its misuse. It can affirm its symbolic and communal significance while rejecting the idea that the payment gives a husband ownership over his wife. A critical examination of bride price is therefore necessary alongside the church's criticism of the contractual understanding of marriage.

A further concern, however, must be acknowledged in this discussion. Allowing divorce, even on limited grounds, may create concerns about where the limits should be placed. In a context where divorce is strongly discouraged, there might be the fear that permitting it in cases of abuse or abandonment could eventually lead to divorce being accepted for less serious reasons such as dissatisfaction or incompatibility. This concern should not be dismissed, because criticisms of Instone-Brewer, including Lauer (2014), raise a similar concern about subjective grounds for divorce becoming increasingly broad. The response, however, is that the covenant understanding itself can provide an important limit because marriage is a serious and sacred commitment; its dissolution should not be treated as a response to ordinary marital difficulties or temporary dissatisfaction. Rather, serious grounds such as persistent violence, abandonment or sustained marital unfaithfulness should be distinguished from the normal conflicts that can occur within marriage. The covenant perspective can therefore provide both commitment and protection. It prevents marriage from being treated as a temporary or easily cancellable arrangement while also recognising that a covenant carries serious obligations for both parties. The aim should not be to replace covenant with contract, but to recover a fuller understanding of covenant that includes commitment, responsibility, mutual care and appropriate responses to serious breach. In this way, covenant theology can continue to affirm the permanence and seriousness of marriage without requiring individuals to remain indefinitely in relationships characterised by serious violence that can lead to death.

Conclusion

The question raised in this paper should not be understood as a choice between covenant and contract. A more adequate understanding of marriage recognises elements of both. In biblical texts, African customary practices and the contemporary Nigerian legal context, marriage involves a sacred and relational commitment as well as binding obligations and recognised responses to their violation. The tendency in some Nigerian Christian contexts to equate covenant with absolute indissolubility, particularly through a narrow interpretation of Malachi 2:16, requires reconsideration. As discussions have shown, such an approach may create difficulties when it fails to give sufficient attention to marital abuse, abandonment and the protection of vulnerable spouses as seen in Nigeria today. This paper therefore argues for a covenantal understanding of marriage that retains its sacred character while also recognising its protective and conditional dimensions. Such an approach would help premarital education to present marriage as a serious commitment involving mutual responsibilities rather than as a relationship in which difficulties can simply be ignored. As Yusuf and Yusufu (2020) suggest, adequate preparation for marriage should take account of the realities that couples may encounter in their marital lives. It would also require clergy to respond responsibly to cases of abuse. Since clerical beliefs can influence how domestic violence is understood and addressed (Shelley et al., 2026), pastoral teaching should emphasise both marital commitment and the protection of persons from serious harm.

A balanced covenant theology should also engage honestly with the economic and cultural realities of Nigerian marriage, including the practice of bride price. It is difficult to reject contractual understandings of marriage while ignoring the contractual and economic dimensions that may accompany some customary marriage practices. This does not require the rejection of bride price as a cultural practice, but it calls for critical reflection on practices that may turn a symbolic marital obligation into a form of

economic control or ownership. In this respect, the sacred, social and obligatory dimensions of marriage should be understood together rather than treated as mutually exclusive. The argument of this paper, therefore, is not for a weaker Christian understanding of marriage but for a more comprehensive one. Marriage should remain a serious and enduring commitment, but its permanence should not be interpreted in a way that ignores serious violations of marital obligations. A covenant that recognises mutual responsibility, protection and accountability provides a more balanced framework than one that places the entire burden of permanence on the vulnerable spouse. For the Nigerian church, developing such an understanding is important not only for theological reflection but also for responsible pastoral practice and the protection of persons within marriage.

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Declarations

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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