

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH XXIV: 4-6

(Reading: Matt.5:17-34; 19:1-12; 1 Cor.7:10-24)

What Christian Marriage Isn't!

The first three Articles of this 24th Chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith spelt out quite clearly what Christian marriage is. It is between one man and one woman; it is only involving those two; it is for the mutual help of those in it; it is so that children may be born out of it; it is for keeping immorality and diseases away; and it is to be between those of life-minded faith. This is what Christian marriage is.

Now, in the Articles 4 till 6, we turn to confessing what Christian marriage is not. Already the way Article 4 starts shows us this change. It begins, "Marriage ought not to be...."

Who You Can't Be Married To

So, we see, in Article 4, WHO YOU CAN'T BE MARRIED TO. For the article goes on that marriage cannot be "within the degrees of consanguinity and affinity forbidden by the Word."

Doesn't that make you wonder? What's this "consanguinity and affinity" business?

Well, "consanguinity" describes a relationship which is by blood. And "affinity" describes a relationship which is through marriage. So there are certain people you cannot marry.

This is what the current Australian Marriage Act upholds. While the Green's Proposed Homosexual Marriage comes out of secular humanism, the existing law comes out of our Christian background. Thus you will find that presently a man cannot marry an ancestor or descendant. Neither can anyone marry a brother or a sister, whether he or she is a full-blooded or half-blood sibling. This also includes adoptive relationships.

These are all considered within the degrees of a blood relationship which risks inbreeding or an emotionally unhealthy type of relationship. The ordinary person may simply say that even thinking of such relationships are "sick"!

These are all considered within the degrees of affinity which are considered to be impure types of relationship. This all follows biblical law, as we find, for example, in Leviticus 18. There it is made clear who may marry who.

Throughout history these have been known as "natural restrictions". One commentator writes that "the idea of laws against incest is to provide safeguards against genetic problems which have emerged since the early days of the human race and to guard the freedom and purity of family life by ensuring the integrity and intimacy of family life is realised."

There is an argument made against this, however. Perhaps you have even realised what it is. Because there are those that say the first marriages couldn't have been like this.

That is true. Adam's children must have married each other. The explanation for this is that it depends on divine provision. Until there was a wider population base the way to propagate the human race was by a certain in-marriage. But once it had moved beyond this it was a duty to marry outside your family.

It happened again with Noah and his family. After that, though, marriage was done beyond the immediate family unit. This is what Leviticus reminds us of. And so when liberal

Christians today dismiss the Law and say it holds no binding on us New Testament Christians they do so at the risk of serious physical and psychological problems. In fact, it has been liberal thinking within the Church which has led to the present sad state of affairs regarding marriage in the Church. But that's something we'll come back to a little later.

Let's be clear here, however, that there are prohibited "natural relationships". 1st Corinthians 5 condemns one such incestuous situation. And by so doing, it affirms the Law's abiding standards in this.

Of course, all this becomes washed away by what the world today calls "love". Because it's not love - it's "lust"! And when sensuousness rules, as it does in our day, laws can quickly become changed to suit this way. Suddenly thousands of years of safeguards are thrown out the window. It's as though our leaders have themselves fallen in love with the idea of being in love. As indeed they have.

When The Marriage Falls Through

And that brings us to our second aspect. For Article 5 deals with WHEN THE MARRIAGE FALLS THROUGH.

Notice how this Article speaks in a definitely legalistic way. There is an innocent party, and so there must be a guilty party.

You see, to destroy the marriage bond through breaking the one flesh union is a terrible thing. It cannot be seen in any light other than a bad one. The apostle Paul in 1st Corinthians 6 verse 16 is quite clear about this. He declares there, "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.'"

This is why if we want to see where the present situation of homosexual marriage came from we need look no further than the weakening of the marriage bond with no-fault divorce in the 1970's. As soon as it became a matter of what one felt like at the time and not what one ought to do right, everything else was always going to fall away. Our society has come to such a low point that the worst crime of all is to hurt someone's feelings.

Ask the two pastors who in our own State of Victoria presented seminars about Islam. It didn't matter one iota that their presentations were factually correct. It didn't matter that they were doing it in an open and fair manner and for reasons consistent with their faith. Two Moslems who came to their meeting to get something against them felt hurt. That is a modern-day hate-crime. And so those two ministers were found guilty. Subsequently, though, a court of appeal rejected that decision.

It's a sad day when the only standard is that there are no standards. But it's the day which will inevitably come once any standard in God's Word is diminished in any way whatsoever. This is why the Church herself must maintain Christian marriage.

Now, the liberals in churches have been saying that the dissolution of the marriage contract is a matter for the civil courts. The grounds upon which divorce can be allowed are specified for them in the laws of the state. Well, we've seen where they have brought us to!

Those liberals have even re-written the Confession of Faith to reflect this. They have their own version. The bottom line for them is that there is no bottom line. "The love of Christ" becomes their catch-cry. As one of their slogans promoting homosexual marriage goes,

“love doesn’t discriminate and neither should the law.” And they certainly show this by having practising homosexuals in church office.

Well, love does discriminate. It does choose between different ways. And it chooses what the law says - the Law of the Lord!

Jesus makes a clear reference to this in Matthew 19. He even clarifies it there, in verse 6, by saying, “Therefore what man has joined together, let man not separate.”

So when He speaks about the grounds for the dissolution of the marriage bond it can only be because of adultery. He makes it so tight that in verse 9 He says that anyone divorcing for any reason apart from adultery is themselves committing adultery.

Scripture puts up a strong fence around marriage – and rightly so. The Lord knows the heart of man. That’s why it’s the affairs of the heart that need to have clear boundaries.

That’s why adultery is a sin.

But let’s also realise that adultery covers a wider area than that unfaithfulness in marriage.

Article 5 starts with what to do when there is adultery committed by someone who is engaged to be married. You remember, that’s what Joseph thought had happened to Mary when she became impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1 tells us of how Joseph was going to quietly put an end to their future together. Until, that is, the angel told him otherwise in verse 20.

We have looked in Article 4 at WHO YOU CAN’T BE MARRIED TO. Then in Article 5 we saw WHEN THE MARRIAGE FALLS THROUGH. They are both Articles concerning what we cannot do.

Article 6, though, brings into this area how we can personally respond. In the words of a third aspect to our text, this is about WHAT YOU OUGHT TO DO.

What You Ought To Do

What you can do was illustrated in a particular incident that occurred in New Zealand. A few years ago the then Leader of the Opposition made reference to the easy availability of the Domestic Purposes Benefit for young unmarried mothers. He also raised the light penalty - if there was any imposed at all! - on the fathers of the children involved.

So the television current affairs programs did their usual thing. They took certain statements in the speech right out of context and created quite alarmist scenarios. They naturally got the government minister involved to respond.

On one particular program they also had a mature-age Domestic Purposes Beneficiary. There she was, sitting on the lounge suite with a child on either side of her. It was quite obviously a lounge that was worn and old.

She answered questions about how the DPB, though not much, made the difference after she and her husband found that it was time to part. She said that while they got by it was hard. You know how reporters interview these days - there has to be that over-riding emotionalism present.

The television interviewer then said something which obviously stunned her. She asked her what would have happened if there had been no DPB for her to fall back on. It was quite evident she hadn’t thought about that.

But her answer was clear. It went like this, “Well, I suppose I would’ve had to have stayed married to my husband.”

Doesn't that put a different light on things? Anything that gives an excuse to get out of what God has laid out for us is quickly grabbed. But it only ever was an excuse. In Article 6 we acknowledge that. For this is what it means by saying that "Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God has joined together in marriage...." You see, studying arguments is making excuses. While no-fault divorce has been with us for forty years yet people are still trying to justify why they or someone they know has divorced.

But you could say here that this is what it's like out there. This is about the 34% of all marriages that end up in separation and divorce. We're members of a church!

For Christians, though, the percentage can be just as high. Apparently, in America, it is even one per cent more than the general population! And the reasons they have for divorce are just the same!

You'll hear about emotional hardship and incompatibility. And like that woman in the interview nobody bats an eyelid. Why - personal happiness is what it's all about these days! And if we have a few kids that get really mixed up, or families becoming quite broken up well, that couldn't be anything as bad as if I had to stay with the guy!

Would it? I mean, you didn't even have to try? Anyway, what about this "wilful desertion" thing in Article 6? Doesn't that show that God expects break-ups? He sees that sometimes it doesn't work out.

You know, at a first reading, it can seem like this. But the Confession here is speaking about what we read about in 1st Corinthians 7. There the situation is of a person who becomes a believer after marriage with an unbeliever. In verse 15 there the apostle says that if the unbeliever leaves then, because of that faith, the believing spouse is not bound. And all that is in good order - whether through adultery or wilful desertion. It's not a matter of someone individually feeling that because that's happened they can go off and straight-away get married to someone else. That's only after extensive and open counselling, and with the elders agreeing.

And then there's a process to go through legally. The laws of this land mean that you cannot marry at least within one year of filing for divorce, and that's only when it has been handled through a court of law. You can even do this on-line now - without lawyers!

One hundred years ago there was hardly any divorce. It was shunned upon by society. So families stayed together and to varying degrees they had to learn to get along together. And they could.

What's changed? Who says that husbands and wives can't work things out together? It's clear that where there is counselling before the wedding the marriage has a lot higher chance of succeeding.

And especially why can't Christians, led by God's Word and His Spirit, have all they need to carry out their marriage vows? They have the help of wise counsel. But most of all don't they come together in prayer?

This is where we meet the most encouraging statistic of them all. Because earlier we heard that the rate of divorce for Christians generally is the same, if not a bit worse, than the rest of the population. But where a Christian couple read God's Word and pray together, then the percentage for divorce changes right around. For where a believing husband and wife are open before the Lord together there is less than one per cent who end up divorced!

You see, as you have laid yourselves before the Lord in your marriage ceremony so you must keep laying yourself before Him time and again. It's in such humbleness that He can use us for greatness.