

## CHAPTER 24

### OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

#### ***Monogamy***

“1. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time.”

The Bible teaches that a man is to have only one wife, and a woman only one husband (Prov 2:17; 5:15-21; Matt 19:3-5). This is specified as one of the requirements for church office in 1 Tim 3:2.

Although the Old Testament patriarchs and leaders sometimes had many wives (for example, Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, David, Solomon), the Bible never gives its approval to this arrangement. In each case sorrow and tragedy came from it. The NT consistently opposes the practice. [See the good article by R. K. Harrison, “Polygamy,” *New ISBE* 3:901-902.]

When Christianity enters a pagan culture, it often faces the question of polygamy. Often it takes several generations before this practice is eliminated within the church. It is important that, while seeking to obey God’s order for the family, Christians should also act honestly and honorably toward those they have wronged.

#### ***Purpose of marriage***

“2. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.”

This section lists the main purposes for marriage:

- Mutual help of husband and wife (Gen 2:18, 20)
- Increase of mankind with legitimate children (Gen 1:28; 9:7)
- Increase of the church with a holy seed (Gen 18:19; Mal 2:15 [KJV, NIV; not NASB])

- Prevention of fornication (1 Cor 7:2; 1 Thess 4:3-5)

As can be seen, marriage has many justifications. The Roman Catholic teaching that the begetting of children is the only good purpose of marriage, is wrong. This false idea is what leads that church to deny the use of all forms of birth control—because, they say, birth control destroys the only purpose of marriage. Most Bible-believing Protestants would oppose only those forms of birth control that destroy a newly formed person who has been already conceived. All aspects of marriage are appropriate, even when children cannot be conceived.

### ***Conditions of marriage***

The next two sections deal with the factors which limit marriage, and who can be married.

### **Unequal yokes**

“3. It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry who are able with judgment to give their consent; yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. And, therefore, such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, Papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life or maintain damnable heresies.”

Our Confession says that “all sorts” of people ought to marry. Marriage is not to be limited to people of only one class, one race, or one religion. Marriage is an institution designed by God for the whole human race (1 Tim 4:3; Heb 13:4).

Neither the Bible nor our Confession prohibits marriage between people of different races, and the Bible gives several examples of that practice, two of which were ancestors of Christ (Moses and the Cushite in Num 12; soldiers in Deut 21:10-14; Rahab and Ruth in Matt 1:5). At the same time, the Bible warns against marrying those of another race who are pagans and would lead to other gods (Deut 7:3; Neh 13:23-28).

Our Confession does add the clause “who are able with judgment to give their consent.” This matter of judgment enters into marriage. Normally it is best for husband and wife to come from a similar background, as each must adjust to the other in marriage. Also, in many societies, the children of racially mixed marriages find themselves ostracized by both races. These factors do not make interracial marriages unbiblical, but they may make them unwise in certain situations. Christians may give advice and counsel to one another, but we should not judge one another about these decisions.

More important is the fact that marriage should be only in the Lord (1 Cor 7:39). Christians should not marry non-Christians; to do so not only invites sorrow, but also disobeys God’s Word. This truth needs to be kept in mind when young people date and develop close friendships.

Furthermore, since we are to marry only in the Lord, our Confession states that Christians should not marry Roman Catholics, heretics, or those notoriously wicked (Deut 7:3-4; 1 Kgs 11:4).

### **Consanguinity**

“4. Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden in the Word; nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man, or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together as man and wife.”

The law of God strongly condemns all forms of incest (1 Cor 5:1). Also, the Old Testament law defined the nearness of relation that made marriage illegal (Lev 20:19-21). These laws had two benefits: they protected closely related men and women from the thought of marriage, with consequent strained relations and possible incest; and they strengthened the genetic makeup of the people by encouraging marriage between different family groups. During the later middle ages the royal families of Europe intermarried so much that their bloodline was weakened, and many were infirm or insane.

### **Conditions of divorce**

The final two sections deal with the causes and procedures of divorce.

#### **Adultery a just cause for divorce**

“5. Adultery or fornication, committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.”

In biblical times and during the time of our Confession, the engagement of a couple to marry was much more legally binding than it is now. But even with that legal bond, the bond could be dissolved by the innocent party if the other party was found to commit fornication or adultery (cf. Matt 1:18-19).

After a couple has been married, the Bible mentions only two grounds for divorce, adultery (treated here) and desertion (treated in the next section). Jesus stated that to divorce someone and marry again was to commit adultery, except in the case of sexual immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9; “fornication” in the KJV). The word translated in the KJV “fornication” is in the Greek *porneia*, which means any sexual unfaithfulness—whether before or after marriage. In the Old Testament adulterers were put to death, and the innocent party could remarry. In the New Testament adulterers were not put to death, but the same principle has applied: the innocent party can remarry, as though the adulterer were dead (cf. Rom 7:2-3).

## **Procedure in divorce**

“6. Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.”

The only legal cause for divorce other than adultery is willful desertion (1 Cor 7:15). Otherwise, those once married should be kept in that estate (Matt 19:6). The ease with which people obtain divorces is an affront to God’s law, and is harmful to our whole society.

When the innocent party decides to obtain a divorce (and often the marriage can still be saved), then he or she should proceed in an orderly and legal fashion (cf. Deut 24:1-4). Everything should be done in a public manner, and the innocent party should behave in a manner above reproach during that interval. Sometimes, since the state has recently given up stating the grounds of divorce, it is necessary for the church session to grant an ecclesiastical divorce, stating the biblical grounds and the person’s right before the Lord and the church to remarry.

In our days of declining morals, the Christians must provide the example in society of holy and decent marriages. In that way we can help be “the salt of the earth.”