

ON MARRIAGE

The traditional view of marriage in the Western world is that of a faithful, trusting, monogamous, loving relationship between husband and wife till death. That view, however, is challenged by the realities of modern life and the loosening of cultural ties. It is my belief that a commitment made on the above understanding between two persons on their wedding day, no longer applies to them in the following situations:

- (a) If, by reason of his and/or her unwillingness or inability to change and grow together they find that they have become incompatibly different people by living different lives with different interests over the years.
- (b) If, because of deceit and fabrication, a partner hid his and/or her real character and identity so that their original commitment was between two persons at least one of whom was an entirely different personality to that to whom the original vows pertained. Or if during courtship there has been a complete misreading and misunderstanding, the one of the other.
- (c) If at least one party wilfully decides to forsake his or her pledge of loyalty and/or fidelity to the naive or unsuspecting partner.
- (d) If, due to senility, or to some mental or psychological impairment, a personality change makes it impossible for the couple to be parties to the original commitment.

Finding myself in any one of the above situations, I would need to review my original commitment so that it was either forfeited, or remade between one or two changed lives. If there could be no longer a physical or mental marital component in the commitment to the relationship, or if it could no longer function as a relationship of openness and mutual trust, the association between the two persons may not even approximate to traditional marriage. It is possible, for example for the association, having lost most of its marital characteristics, to take on an unequal caring or parenting quality if one of the parties has become mentally incapacitated and dependent.

When a commitment to a marriage relationship has had to be radically altered it is most likely that one or both of the parties will be left feeling bereft of a spouse, even if they continue to live together. In the midst of that grieving process it is quite likely that a person could continue to operate in a fantasy world in which they tried to live as though they were still "married". Others might experience unresolved and unnecessary feelings of guilt because they have been unable to live up to what was an old but persistently honoured pledge. But none of us can rationally stick to a previous contract with a now entirely different man or lady. I do not believe that it is in anyone's best interests (except that of the power brokers of morality and puritanical religion) for a person to restrict and curtail his or her lifestyle in honour of a relationship which is dead.

I believe that it is therefore desirable for such persons to start to live again and even possible for them to lay down the foundations for new and precious (even romantic) relationships with other people, while at the same time fulfilling the duty of care and/or respect for the person to whom they are no longer "married" in a de jure sense. I have friends who have found it within themselves to love again with integrity before they have legally separated. They have discovered that the experience of a fully committed, adult relationship of mutual, mature affection with another person has opened up to them. Their new partners respect the different relationship they have been able to work out with their previous spouse, and they have a similar kind of commitment to each other to that which they might have had if they were free to marry. Eric Stevenson