

Archbishop William Temple on pastoral and official responses to controversies surrounding marriage

Now to me it seems clear that what our Lord has done for us is to lay down certain principles for application which are themselves expressive of a spirit in which we are to live, but that He always leaves to us the question how those principles are in fact to be applied. And I propose to discuss for a few moments the extraordinarily difficult question of the attitude, both of the Church officially and of Christian people individually, to marriage and the complications that may arise concerning it, precisely because this is just now so controversial and because we are all of us engaged in trying to think out more clearly what our line of conduct should be ...

There is no doubt about the Christian principle of marriage in general. It is the principle of lifelong union of one man with one woman to the exclusion of all others.

I think that if you take the various passages in the New Testament which deal with marriage and the relation of the sexes, you will find that the one principle which finds expression in them all is that physical union can only be right when it is accompanied by and is the expression of a personal union so close that of its nature it must be lifelong, and that anything less than that is always **short of the ideal**.

It is, for example, a quite necessary inference, as I think, from the language of St. Paul upon the subject, that sexual irregularity before marriage makes true marriage forever impossible. And if that is the necessary deduction from his language, then, of course, **we have to notice that the Church has never felt able to apply that standard in practice. That is rather important in view of the subsequent questions that must arise concerning its action when other departures from the ideal have taken place.**

When we turn to our Lord's own teaching there are two points to which I want to call attention. The first is what I have already said, that **the only true principle is that of strict and absolute monogamy**. But the second is that Moses is quite certainly not censured for having made a concession to the hardness of men's hearts. The censure is for the hard hearted men, and not for Moses, who had to take some steps for dealing with a situation where **men had already departed from the ideal**.

Now the business of the Church ... is always to bear witness with the utmost clarity to the true ideal ... Moreover the Gospel seeks to carry us by its appeal to a level which is demonstrably unattainable by means of coercion ... The State, then, will make its laws, having regard to the best social welfare which it seems likely that it can promote by the means at the State's disposal (even coercion). But the Church, all the more because here the State is taking care of the immediately practicable, should find some way at least, of bearing a quit unambiguous witness to the ideal with which it is entrusted.

The Church should decline the use of its own Marriage Service in the case of any person who has a partner to a former marriage still living, and this should, in my judgment, be applied quite equally to the so-called innocent party, partly because of the impossibility of truly assessing moral guilt in the matter. But what are we to say about the occasional and undoubtedly hard cases, some of those most grievously hard? Here it would seem to me that the Church must still give its witness to the true ideal principle. But I should not find myself at liberty to say, dogmatically and universally, to everyone whose first marriage has been unhappy, that under no conceivable circumstances can it now be right that they should contrast another so long as the former partner lives. I should feel bound to throw all my general advice that way. But is a person I knew to be a sincere Christian should say to me, "I know, of course, that this is not ideal; I know that my former marriage was a mistake, but it was that one which was the mistake; it was then that we were

joined together not by God and I believe that I am now right in the sight of God in marrying this other partner where I feel quite sure of my ground," **I should say, "The Church can not approve that; but this is not necessarily to condemn it."** If the Church has done its utmost to confront the individual conscience with the prima facie claim of the true principle, I do not think it can then rightly pronounce judgment upon the action of that conscience afterwards...

[Question 1] But then, when an irregularity that it is impossible to condone takes place, how are ordinary Christians to behave? As usual, by attempting to strike the fair balance between rigorism and laxism ... the circumstances in which it can be right for a Christian to withhold friendship on account of some moral lapse must be very few, for to do that will, in most cases, mean letting someone who most needs moral help be left to the society of people unable to provide it. **If we have any responsibility for one another's spiritual welfare we cannot, as a rule, meet that responsibility by methods of ostracism ...** such action will have the effect of merely making the offending person resolute in his resistance to moral claims. You will merely put his back up.

On the other hand, if you do not resort to that, you are responsible for seeing that you do not give the impression either to the parties concerned or to the community generally that you regard the bad conduct as trifling; what is asked of us, as I think, is something very much more difficult either than merely to continue friendship or merely to abandon it, and that is to do that thing of which St. Paul speaks ... which most of us find nearly impossible, to "speak the truth in love."

It costs a good deal to explain to someone that one has disapproved his conduct though one is still ready to be of any service to him that one can, and it is peculiarly difficult to do that in such a way as not to seem, or even to be, a prig. But a Christian has over and over again to take the risk of seeming priggish and to protect himself from actually becoming so by the discipline of his own life, which keeps him morally humble.

[Question 2] Then, once more, there is the question of the church's pastoral care of those who have been at some stage guilty of irregularity. This mainly devolves upon the responsible officers of the Church particularly the bishops. The kind of problem presented to one may be illustrated in this way: Here is a man who has undoubtedly broken off a marriage through infidelity. The woman whom he has married is now -- perhaps was at the time -- a good woman, spiritually minded. She has influenced her husband; children have been born and are growing up. The time comes for their Confirmation. Are their parents to be allowed to accompany them to Holy Communion? Can it be right that in such circumstances, when there seems to be a real desire to be going on the right way, for the sake of upholding a general principle you should say that those children are to be exposed to the tremendous pressure of temptation involved in a situation where they are bidden to be regular in their communions and the parents are prohibited from coming? Personally, I have never felt able, in such a case as I have described ... to take that line. I know there are some who say one ought--who say sharply, "The two people are living in sin. There is an end of it." **But we are all living in sin.**

[Summary] There are at least three points to be considered;

- (1) the permanent maintenance of the true principle;
- (2) the pastoral care of the individuals chiefly concerned, which may include the assertion of the true principle against their wishes as well as the assistance of their progress in Christian living;
- (3) the witness before the contemporary community alike to the permanent principle and to the spirit of charity in its application ...

This illustrates with particular vividness the kind of method that I think must be adopted as the Christian approaches any problem of applied ethics. He knows what his ideal is; he must find some way of bearing witness to it by speech or action or both. But then he has also got to take the tangled and vitiated situation and try to do the best he can with it. And if he is successful in finding a way of doing something that really helps the parties concerned, while he also bears his witness to the principle, he has probably got as near to the right line of action in that instance as he can come.

Explanation

Temple explains that we should not change the standards of the Bible which remain clear. So too, the church, and especially its bishops, should be clear in describing the principles of the Bible.

He then encourages us to be humble enough to recognize we are all sinners, and so, we must live in charity and in service of those who have not lived up to the ideals of the Bible. That would include all of us, after all.

Finally he tells us the true challenge is to do both, and to do them publicly so that the community can see that we are keeping the highest ideals, and being charitable to those who have not yet lived up to them.

Temple's overall sense of grace lead him to explain throughout his teachings that the love of God is something so great that it has the power to transform our lives. In place of a religion based on fear, or rules, or rituals, the love of God we see in Jesus on the cross (for instance) will lead us away from the other disordered loves of our life. The love of God becomes sweeter to us over time and so draws away from the other sinful choices we have made in the past. It is up to the Church and to ordinary Christians in their daily life to receive that love and exhibit it so others will seek it in their own lives.

Temple's description of how Christians respond to a controversial issue in his day I believe answers how we meet them in our own. And if anyone can claim to represent the Anglican way, it would seem to be this most noted Archbishop. Instead of only listening to the loudest voices in our listening process, how about we also listen to some of the best voices speaking for the Anglican Church?