

Family and Faith in a Multicultural Society

Lecture 1

The Erosion of Marriage

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There has never been a golden age of marriage; but Christian teaching has at least given to the world a golden idea of marriage. The common law defined marriage, in Christian understanding, as a union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Progressively, every element of that definition has been abandoned in Australian law. Perhaps the most significant change in recent years has been to give de facto relationships the same status and legal consequences as marriage. There is nonetheless a downside to these societal changes. 40% of children in Australia will reach adulthood with their parents no longer together. Many indeed, begin life without a father in the home. Parents living in de facto relationships are far more likely to break up than those in married relationships. Family instability has had demonstrable and serious impacts upon the mental health of young people. It also exposes children and young people to a much higher risk of abuse. Children need safe, stable and nurturing families. The problem of family instability is one of the greatest challenges of our time.

White picket fences?

Some of you may be approaching these lectures in a sceptical frame of mind. What is a Christian family lawyer going to say about marriage and family life in contemporary Australia? Are we going to be treated to an hour of naïve nostalgia – a trip down memory lane to a time of happy families in houses surrounded by white picket fences? Are we going to be asked to bemoan the loss of Christian values, will we be told that same-sex marriage is the end of civilisation as we know it? Will the lectures end with a robust but fruitless call to return to the way things were 50 years ago when marriage was central to family life and sex outside of marriage was widely understood to be morally wrong, if not infrequent?

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No. These are not my messages; and a return to the past is not my objective. We will remain firmly grounded in the present and the future; but it is a time to take stock of the present status of marriage in Australia and what is happening in terms of family life in this country. And as Christians, we need to look to the future and ask what position we take on sex, marriage and family life in a society that has now rejected every single tenet of Christian teaching on this subject.

No golden age of marriage

So we will be focused firmly on the present and the future; but let me say clearly by way of introduction to this topic that there has never been a golden age for marriage and family life in Australia, or as far as I know, anywhere else. There has never been a time when all families were either happy or safe. There never was a time when family life was free of the scourge of domestic violence or when children were safe from sexual abuse by their fathers, uncles or grandfathers. There never was a time, I suspect, when the vast majority of married men were faithful to their wedding vows and did not stray from them. There was never a time when most people married for love and stayed in love for better or for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness or in health until death parted them. There never was a time when men did not, at least sometimes, behave badly; and there never was a time when women did not, at least sometimes, behave badly as well.

We must never confuse the ideal of marriage with the facts on the ground, the warts and all experience of family life across society and down through the generations. Christian teaching has long emphasised that we are sinful people in need of a Saviour, that we are capable of great evil, as well as great good. If you try to go through life under the illusion that people are basically good you will experience endless disappointment and betrayal.

So no, there never was a golden age of marriage. We should not romanticise the past.

The golden idea of marriage

If there was not a golden age of marriage, there was at least a golden idea of marriage, based upon Christian teaching.

What is that teaching? An excellent summary is in just three sentences of the teaching of Jesus. To quote from Mark 10:6-8:

At the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one.

In this we see the critical order of marriage formation. A man must leave, he must join with his wife, and they must become one. Of course, the wife must do the same. She must leave her father and mother, she must be united to her husband, and become one with him.

In that, there is profound wisdom. The act of leaving is essential. Men and women need to leave behind their family of origin, need to leave their parents and establish something new. And parents need to give their children up to the new family which is being formed in that marriage ceremony. The tradition of the father giving away the bride is symbolic of this important step of letting go, giving up. The mother too must give up her son, allow his new wife to establish her own way of running the household that may well differ in material ways from the way she ran her own household. From two different families of origin comes a new family, neither a replica of one nor of the other, just as the children to be born from that union will have their own individuality.

Consequent upon leaving, the husband and wife must unite. They are now one entity, one unit, and no longer can either the husband or wife think selfishly. No longer is it about his interests, his needs, his desires. It must just as much be about her interests, needs and desires. He must love her as much as he loves himself – and she must love him in the same way.

That call to lose one's individual identity in the collectivity of the marriage is now utterly counter-cultural. We are so obsessed with our individual rights and needs that the idea that in some way we should lose our identity in marriage is hard to comprehend; but note, it is not just the woman who loses her identity in marriage, not just the woman who traditionally loses her family name to adopt his. No, he must give up his individualism too, in order to be united with her. Equality is at the very heart of Christian teaching about marriage.

And finally, there is the third element of 'becoming one flesh', typically understood as consummating the marriage through sexual intercourse. In Christian teaching, sex is the crowning joy of an intimate relationship; but it comes last, after the leaving and the cleaving - the uniting of two into one.

This is, of course, an absurd notion to young people in the modern era. Those of us who adhere to those traditional ways are now a relatively small proportion of the population. [81% of all couples who marry have lived together before marriage](#). The idea that sexual intercourse should be the final step of that union, something that occurs after leaving, after committing to one another in marriage, may seem at best quaint; at worst, it is a throwback to a dark past when young women who lost their virginity prior to marriage were deemed

outcasts, forever shamed, whereas men who sowed their wild oats were admired for their sexual prowess and boasted of their conquests.

Yet there is also great wisdom in it, as in all the teaching of Jesus. Saving sex till marriage marks out the exclusivity of that sexual union. You have an intimate bond with one person that you have had with no-one else and promise not to have with anyone else, at least until death brings that relationship to an end.

Marriage and the discipline of denial

That golden idea of marriage was supported by a clear idea of the nature and purpose of marriage, as defined in law. In the famous English case of [Hyde v Hyde and Woodmansee](#), decided in 1866, Sir James Wilde defined marriage as “a union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, as understood in Christendom.” This was a case about whether polygamy could be recognised.

A union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Sir James Wilde made it clear that this common law understanding of marriage had its origins in Christianity. Christianity rejected polygamy. It also rejected divorce by the pronouncement of the talaq or the gett or any other means by which men discarded women for whom they no longer had a use.

That teaching about marriage went against the most primal instincts of men. Lifelong fidelity does not come easily, especially to men. Yet it is critical for the wellbeing of women and children that men will commit themselves to the support of their wives and the nurture of their children long after the bloom of youth has faded, long after the first rush of young love has dissipated, through the hard times as well as the good times. This matters still, even though so many mothers are now in employment, at least part-time. [Men provide less investment in their children](#) when they are no longer in a relationship with the mother.

Marriage involves commitment through all the mundane circumstances of life. That commitment anchors the family, gives it the stability that allows all the members of the family to flourish. It is the discipline of denial that offers the security to bring children into the world - and for women in particular to make those sacrifices necessary to nurture the children in their earliest years.

Rejecting the Christian idea of marriage

In the modern era, this Christian understanding of marriage, this notion of “a union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others” as Sir James Wilde defined it, has

been comprehensively and completely rejected. These changes are well-known; but it is at least worth reviewing what they mean for modern marriages and more broadly, modern family relationships. There has been a huge controversy in recent years about same-sex marriage; but it is important to see that the changes brought about in the nature of marriage long preceded that debate. We had pretty much abandoned the Christian view of marriage as underpinning our national laws, at least a decade earlier.

For life, to the exclusion of all others...

In 1975 in Australia, but a little earlier in other western countries, we abandoned the idea that marriage was a covenant, a union of men and women for life to the exclusion of all others that would be protected in law. Divorce, until 1975, was a remedy for a wrong. The husband who broke the marriage covenant by adultery, or who deserted his wife, or who treated her cruelly, could be divorced by her and would need to pay spousal maintenance, or alimony, for her as a form of damages for breach of that covenant.

That at least, was the theory. In reality, few men could afford to pay spousal maintenance, particularly if they were also paying maintenance for their children. When one goes from one household to two households, inevitably many costs double while the available income stays the same. Divorce often meant penury for women and children even if the man was utterly at fault for the marriage breakdown.

Nonetheless, the law at least supported the Christian idea of marriage with its remedy of divorce. It also supported it through the criminal law. Adultery was an offence, known, rather obscurely, as the euphemistically named offence of 'criminal conversation'.

No-fault divorce ended that, and perhaps rightly so because the law was an imperfect instrument for enforcing the idea of marriage as a lifelong union; but it left marriage for life as no more than an internal commitment, a promise that people make to one another which is wholly unenforceable. One person can leave a marriage without the agreement of the other. It takes two to make a marriage, but only one to break it.

So no-fault divorce, introduced in 1975, ended the notion of marriage being presumptively for life. It was replaced with a policy that marriage lasted only as long as both parties wanted it to.

A legal union

Far bigger changes concerning marriage were to occur after 1975. They began slowly, with a limited legal recognition of de facto relationships; but as the law has developed,

cohabitation, living together with someone in an intimate partnership, [has become exactly the same as marriage for legal purposes](#). A legal union, in other words, no longer matters.

This has been perhaps the most important and significant change to the legal regime supporting family relationships in Australia. As understood in Christendom, marriage involved a solemn commitment of a man and woman to live together until death parted them, usually made publicly before family and friends. By the time of Pope Innocent III in the 13th century, the Church taught that it should be in the presence of a priest as a witness. By 1563, the Council of Trent determined in its [Decree Tametsi](#) that for a marriage to be valid there needed to be three witnesses, one of whom had to be the parish priest of one of the parties; and there had to be an announcement about the prospective marriage beforehand, known as ‘publishing the banns of marriage’. Similar provisions were adopted across the emerging Protestant world, but inconsistently. The need for a public commitment was not established in English law until Lord Hardwicke’s Act of 1753.

NSW was the frontrunner in bringing about change in Australia. It enacted new laws in 1984 which provided some limited legal recognition for cohabitation. Over the following 20 years, other states introduced similar laws but they were increasingly indistinguishable from marriage. The trajectory of law reform at both state and federal levels over 20 years has been to insert the words “or de facto” whenever the word ‘marriage’ or ‘spouse’ appears in legislation. Initially this was to address the issues for heterosexual couples who do not marry; later the term “de facto” was extended to include same-sex couples.

The notion that marriage required a legal union was finally abandoned in Australia in 2008. In that year, the Family Law Act was amended to provide, across the country in all but Western Australia, that couples who live together without marriage should be treated for all intents and purposes as if they were married once they had lived together for two years. This followed on from amendments to various state and territory laws over the preceding twenty years or more that had been to similar effect.

After 2008, there was simply no difference, anywhere in Australian law, between a heterosexual couple being married, and living together in a de facto relationship, at least once a period of time, typically two years, had elapsed. These changes had the effect of abolishing any need for a legal union, as understood in Christendom.

Consider now a young couple in Australia who are in love and have begun living together. Let us call them Alex and Chris, for they could be a heterosexual couple or a same sex couple. Let’s assume that they live in Melbourne. Discussion turns on one cold winter’s night to the future of their relationship. Alex would quite like to get married but is not sure how. Chris is not so certain – why does a piece of paper matter?

So they explore their various options. If they decide to marry, they may choose a religious wedding, as long as they can find a minister of religion prepared to marry them. There are some nice old churches with a medieval stone look, if that is the kind of setting that they want.

Alternatively, if they just want something secular, they could purchase the services of a private marriage celebrant who may be able to conduct the wedding, perhaps in some special location. Or they could marry in a registry office. Alex finds the website for the Victorian Marriage Registry which promises ‘elegant civil marriage ceremonies on weekdays and weekends for couples seeking an intimate and simple wedding’ in an old heritage-listed building in the city.

Another option, if they don’t want to marry, is to register the relationship. In Victoria, and in a number of other States, couples can enter into a ‘registered relationship’. A registered relationship has the same effects as marriage for the purposes of the law of that jurisdiction. So how exactly is a registered relationship different from a marriage at a registry office? You go to the same Registry Office to register. You just skip the “elegant ceremony”. All very prosaic – just sign the form, much like registering a car, for example. So much cheaper; but also no promises of everlasting love, for better for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health. Just a relationship for the time being. Registration, but no covenant.

Or Alex and Chris can forget about any form of marriage or registration and just live together, The legal effect is exactly the same, certainly after two years.

In Australia, then, whether Alex and Chris choose to marry, have a registered relationship, or live together as a couple without formalising or registering their relationship, the effects are almost exactly the same. All roads lead to Rome.

The message of our law is that marriage doesn't matter.

These changes to the law both followed social changes and contributed to them. Initially, cohabitation was typically a short-term thing. People lived together for a while before marrying. That remains the case for some; but increasingly, a de facto relationship has become an alternative to marriage, even for those who want children together. Now [35% of children are born outside marriage](#). The percentage is greater in other countries. [In several countries in northern Europe, over 50% of all children are born outside of marriage](#).

Marriage has declined very substantially as the basis of family formation. In 2017, Australia [had the lowest number of marriages per 1000 population](#) ever recorded. It was less than

half the number who married in 1970, and a lot of those who marry nowadays are forming a second or later marriage.

...of a man and a woman

In 2017, the *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms)* Act was passed following a nationwide plebiscite, described for certain legal reasons as a postal survey. That allowed same sex couples to marry.

There was of course, a massive cultural conflict over same-sex marriage leading up to the vote in 2017. There were those who saw it as a body blow to the Christian understanding of marriage, an understanding shared by the other great Abrahamic religions as well as by smaller religions that have some historic points of connection with the Christian faith.

There is no need to revisit the issue of same-sex marriage now. That debate is done and dusted; I do however, want to make one observation about it. For the most part, the battle over marriage equality was about equality rather than marriage. Going back a couple of decades, there were a lot of gay and lesbian people who completely rejected the idea of marriage. In the late-1990s, we hosted a visiting professor from Scotland at the University of Sydney. He gave a staff seminar entitled, '[Marriage is for heterosexuals. May the rest of us be saved from it](#)'.

That position changed, and there was a strong and successful campaign for marriage equality. However, the strong push to allow same-sex marriage did not, for the most part, indicate any reversal of the trends away from marriage over the last two decades. Promises of a great boon for the wedding industry, rivers of gold flowing from a large number of rainbow weddings, went unfulfilled.

In the first year after legalisation, 2018, there were [6,538 same-sex marriages](#) in Australia. What is that as a proportion of all couples eligible to marry? In the 2016 census, there were [just under 46,800 same-sex couples](#) living together. Of these couples, [3,142 had been married overseas](#), which leaves around 43,500 who were eligible to marry in 2018. About 15% of all those same-sex couples who might have married in 2018 actually did so. 85% did not.

Now it may be that some have simply delayed marriage. We don't have data yet for 2019 for the country as a whole. Queensland data indicates that there were [1031 same-sex weddings in Queensland in 2019](#). That compares with [1292 couples in 2018](#). Only [174 same-sex couples have wed in the first quarter](#) of 2020, before the pandemic shutdown,

indicating that the stream of same-sex marriages is slowing very considerably. That is less than 4.5% of all weddings in that quarter.

My point is that while for some couples, getting married was indeed very important to them, the enactment of same-sex marriage did not herald a new golden age for marriage, a renewed interest in and commitment to the idea of legal union. There has been no rush to the registry office.

Is there a downside?

Of course, many still believe that the sexual revolution, no-fault divorce and all the other changes are a great liberation. Marriage has been given a bad press in the progressive movement, being associated with patriarchy and a traditional division of roles between men and women. For many, the demise of heterosexual marriage, at least, is a wholly good thing.

However, there are many downsides to this shift away from marriage as the foundation for family life in Australia. To put this into context, there is widespread agreement amongst experts that children do best in [safe, stable and nurturing families](#).

Safety is, of course, a foundational need, and this should be understood in relatively broad terms. Children need to be protected from both physical and sexual abuse, and from exposure to domestic violence; for [even witnessing or being aware of violence](#) perpetrated on the mother can have traumatising effects and leave children feeling profoundly unsafe.

[Children who grow up in unsafe environments, or who are victims of child sexual abuse](#), are disproportionately represented in statistics for adolescent and adult offending, indicating a clear and important connection between safety, emotional wellbeing and the inculcation of values concerning responsible citizenship.

Stability is also very important for children. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) defines the stability children need as “the degree of predictability and consistency in a child’s environment. It encompasses consistency in who children relate to as well as the nature of their interactions with caregivers, others in their environment, and the environment itself.”

The breakdown of the parents' relationship is a primary source of instability in children's lives. If parents break up, family routines are disrupted, and changes typically occur across a lot of different domains - where children live and go to school, the relationship with the parent who no longer lives with the children, and levels of financial stress. Parental separation is an important factor to address [in terms of the life chances of children](#).

A nurturing family is the other important ingredient if children are to have an upbringing that is emotionally healthy. Research indicates that children [do best with a parental style which is authoritative](#) without being either authoritarian or permissive. It combines boundary setting with emotional closeness.

The tragedy of the erosion of marriage is that it has meant that far fewer children, than a generation ago, grow up in safe, stable and nurturing families.

Stability

Take stability. The decline in the stability of families may be seen in an analysis of the [likelihood of experiencing birth into a lone-mother household or experiencing parental separation before the age of 15](#) in different birth cohorts between the 1940s and the 1980s.¹ As Table 1 shows, in the cohort born between 1946 and 1955, nearly 9% had been either born to a single mother or experienced parental separation by the age of 15. For the cohort born between 1981 and 1985, the figure was 25% - nearly three times as high. There was a substantial increase both in the proportion of children born to single mothers and those who experienced parental separation. Children born between 1981 and 1985 also spent three times as many years of their childhood living in a step-family as those born between 1946 and 1955.²

Table 1: Cumulative Percent of Children ever living in Lone Mother Family by Birth Cohort³

% ever living with lone mother			
Birth cohort	By age 15	At birth	Due to parental separation
1946-55	8.9	2.6	6.3
1956-62	11.0	3.2	7.8
1963-75	18.0	3.0	15.0
1976-80	22.2	3.8	18.4
1981-85	24.9	6.5	18.4

Data published in 2015 indicates how much family stability has deteriorated even since the 1980s. By the time that the youngest child in a family is 15-17 years old, [40% have parents living apart](#).

Why is this? The problem is not the rate of divorce. That has remained stable or declined over the last couple of decades. [There were 2.7 divorces per 1,000 people in 1998 compared with 2.0 divorces per 1,000 people in 2018](#). A reason for that is a [decline in marriage rates](#). A decline in marriages per 1000 population is likely to mean a decline in divorces a decade or so later.

Part of the explanation for the increase in children experiencing their parents living apart is a growth in the proportion of children born to lone mothers. In 2005, the latest data we have, [13% were born to lone mothers](#). This compares with 3.8% of children born between 1976 and 1980, demonstrating the extent and rapidity of social change, notwithstanding the widespread availability of contraception and abortion.

Couples with children who live in de facto relationships have much higher rates of breakdown. The odds of a de facto couple with children breaking up is more than seven times as high as a married couple who had not lived together before marriage, and more than four times as high as those who had lived together but went on to marry.⁴ Marriage matters. It has a profoundly stabilising influence on relationships.

This is consistent with the overseas evidence. [Data from the Fragile Families study in the US](#) found that parental separation by the time the child was 3, was five times greater for children born to cohabiting than married parents. Differences in financial wellbeing and family characteristics between cohabiting and married parents explained some of the difference, but after controlling for race, ethnicity, education, economic factors, family characteristics and an extensive set of other covariates, parents who were cohabiting at their child's birth still had over two and a half times the risk of separating compared with parents who were married at their child's birth.

Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study in Britain, initially comprising a cohort of 18,000 mothers who gave birth during 2000 or 2001, are similar. Again, after controlling for confounding factors, cohabiting couples are consistently 2 to 2.5 times more likely to split up compared to their married counterparts, across all income groups, by their child's fifth birthday.⁵

More recently, [Bzostek and Berger](#), analysing data from the Fragile Families study, have found that “children born to unmarried urban parents overwhelmingly experience family structure transitions by age 9, with approximately one-half experiencing two or more transitions and approximately one-quarter experiencing three or more transitions by that

time”. Children of unmarried parents, in other words, are born into relationships with a high likelihood of instability.

In summary, the explanation for the massive increase in the proportions of Australian children who do not reach the age of 15 in an intact family with both of their biological parents is two-fold. First, more and more children are being born to single mothers who are neither married nor living in a cohabiting de facto relationship. Secondly, as the proportion of the population who live together outside marriage has increased relative to the married population, and as more and more de facto couples have children outside marriage, so the chances of the parents still being together by the time the child reaches 15 have substantially diminished.⁶

Mental health

There is now a lot of evidence that the instability of family life is having an adverse effect on the mental health of children and young people. While adverse trends are not observable in every study, there is some compelling evidence now that adolescent mental health problems have been increasing significantly over time. Yes, teenagers have always suffered from depression, other forms of psychological distress, and illnesses such as anorexia; but just not in the numbers we are seeing now.

Why? Of course there are many reasons. This is a complex subject and I don't want to be simplistic at all; but [the evidence suggests that family breakdown](#) is a significant contributing factor.

[One important study](#) was published in 2010. In this US study, researchers conducted the most comprehensive analysis to date of data collected through the widely used Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) test. The researchers examined data collected from college students between 1938 and 2007. They found that each generation had experienced poorer mental health than the previous one. At least five times as many college students in 2007 as in 1938 had measures indicating psychopathology on the various elements included in that test. These included measures of hypomania, schizophrenia, psychopathic deviation, paranoia and depression. On many of these measures, by 2007, the increases were dramatic. This substantial increase in mental disorders was clear even after controlling for a greater willingness over time to acknowledge the presence of mental health issues. The researchers noted that their findings might actually underestimate the increase in psychopathology, given the numbers of Americans taking antidepressants.

The researchers found that the increase occurred steadily and irrespective of economic crests and troughs. The researchers found that the divorce rate was positively and significantly correlated with scores on *all* of the clinical scales.

Evidence of the association between declining mental health and family stability can also be found in Australian data. Consider the results of the [Second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing](#), published in 2015. It illustrates the extent of the problem. The researchers conducted surveys with parents in 6,310 households. They also got data from 2,967 young people aged 11-17.

20% of adolescents had high or very high levels of psychological distress. The figures were almost twice as high for females (25.9% and 14.8% for males). More than one in 10 of the 12-17 year-olds had self-harmed at some time in their young lives. Self-harm was roughly twice as high in females compared with males. Females aged 16-17 years had the highest rates of self-harm, with nearly 17% having harmed themselves in the previous 12 months. Those figures were reflected in the proportion who had considered suicide.

The researchers estimate that 14% of children and young people aged 4-17 had had a mental disorder in the previous twelve months, with rates especially high among male children. 2.1% of children and young people were assessed as having a severe disorder, but that varied with age. Among 12-17 year-olds, the figure was 3.3%. The researchers identified an association with family structure.

12-month prevalence of mental disorders in 4- to 17-year-olds by sociodemographic characteristics

FAMILY TYPE	%
Original family	10.4
Step family	18.3
Blended family	20.2
Sole parent or carer family	22.4
Other family	23.7

Correlation is not causation, and so we have to be careful how we interpret this; but there is a vast mountain of evidence to support the fact that family stability is incredibly important to children's wellbeing. Leading American expert, Prof. Paul Amato, for example, [has written](#):

“... Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with two continuously married parents are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood. Although it is not possible to demonstrate that family structure is the cause of these differences, studies that

have used a variety of sophisticated statistical methods, including controls for genetic factors, suggest that this is the case.”

Conflict, mental distress and family structure

Undoubtedly, a significant contributor to the disproportionate distress of children and young people whose parents live apart is the conflict that they have experienced between their parents prior to separation. There was a time when the prevailing view amongst experts was that it was better for children if their parents separated than to continue to live in a high conflict family. Such a sanguine view [is no longer so widely held](#).

One reason is that parental conflict does not necessarily end on separation. Indeed, conflict and violence may be exacerbated by separation. Some violence by one parent against another [only begins when the parents have separated](#).

Separation creates different sources of conflict between parents from the kind of conflict that occurs when parents live together. There may be arguments about property settlement or parenting arrangements in the aftermath of separation, leading to litigation. There may be ongoing arguments about child support; different approaches to discipline, diet and bedtimes in each home may be a source of friction, without parents feeling they need to reach agreement on these matters as they would in an intact family. There can be unresolved issues about the breakup that cause continuing tension and hostility. New partners may arouse feelings of resentment or jealousy; and as parents lives move in different directions, there may be serious conflict concerning a primary caregiver’s desire to relocate either within Australia or overseas. These ongoing conflicts take their toll on children.

Conflict between the parents is likely to be particularly harmful if children feel that they are caught in the middle, asked to act as messengers or spies, or experience one parent denigrating the other. It can also be very harmful if one parent attempts to recruit the child as an ally in his or her battle with the other.

Conflict in single parent families and stepfamilies

[Young people report significantly higher levels of conflict in stepfamilies and lone-parent families](#) than in intact families. Stepfamilies in particular create new sources of tension. Living in a stepfamily is not easy. In addition to all the challenges of marital or quasi-marital relationships, stepfamilies involve numerous pressures and tensions from raising children who have different parents. These children are likely to have a parent living elsewhere, with whom the children have a continuing relationship. Numerous issues can arise in terms of forming a single family unit, including discipline, issues about financial provision for the

different children, and difficulties in relationships between the children. There can also be issues of resentment of step-children and competition for time and attention. Children from stepfamilies [are less likely to complete year 12](#) at school than children in intact families or with a lone parent.

Children's safety

The loss of family stability in turn has effects in relation to children's safety. Children, and [especially girls, are at much greater risk of sexual abuse](#) from the presence of men living in the household who are not biologically related to them than from their own fathers. For example, [Diana Russell's landmark study of 930 women in San Francisco](#) found that one in six girls who had grown up with a stepfather were sexually abused by him. In contrast, one in forty girls were abused by their natural father. Similar results have emerged from other studies.

There is also a much greater risk of child homicide. [One research team, for example, reported:](#)

"Extrapolating from available data, the results indicated a considerably greater risk represented by stepfathers than by genetic fathers. At least five times as many children live with genetic fathers, while the raw frequencies of filicide were roughly equal in the two groups. A most liberal estimate for the prevalence of stepmothering (5%) also suggested that stepmothers represent a substantially greater risk of filicide."

There is a [much higher likelihood of child protection services needing to be involved](#) with a family if the children are not living with two married biological parents.

Ramifications

The ramifications of this are considerable, and not just for the mental health of children and young people. The instability of family relationships affects us all. The inability of so many to form and maintain stable relationships is likely to lead to a much greater level of loneliness as people age. This is a problem particularly after they have left the workforce, since work provides some degree of community. Relationship breakdown affects people's finances. It can have devastating impacts upon people's wealth and capacity to care for themselves in retirement. Women with the care of children who do not repartner after a relationship breakdown are especially vulnerable.

It even affects people's sex lives. The sexual revolution was meant to lead to a much freer attitude to sex, more availability of sex with more partners. The old joke was that the only people who are not having sex are married people. The real picture though, is much more complex. A satisfying sexual relationship involves a continuing partner. [Sex and the City](#)

presents one view of the world but it is probably not what most people experience. The evidence from many countries is that [people are having less sex than they used to](#).

Another ramification is in terms of fertility rates. People are waiting much later than 30 years ago to marry or form de facto relationships in which to bear children. If those relationships prove unstable, then women of child-bearing age may find themselves without a partner or struggling as a single parent at a time when they would like to have more children than they have.

The repercussions of family instability flow throughout the society.

Family stability and faith

So what about the churches? I wish I could say that these trends in western society are merely secular trends, that the churches are unaffected by them; but we all know that isn't true. In our churches too, the idea of marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life to the exclusion of all others, is not universally held. Indeed, adherence to the traditional Christian teaching on sex before marriage has probably declined sharply, even among otherwise quite committed Christian young people.

What about family stability? There is [some data from the US](#) to suggest that divorce rates among evangelical Christians are not lower than the rest of the population. However, [more finely grained research](#) shows that if both members of the couple are committed to the faith and pray together, marital satisfaction is very much higher and divorce rates much lower.

Still, we cannot be at all complacent. I will return to this in the third lecture; but to foreshadow what I will be saying there, I believe it is essential that as church leaders, we work to re-evangelise the flock, to persuade Christians afresh of the wisdom of Christian teaching on sex, marriage and family life more generally. We need to support safe, stable and nurturing families in the society as a whole; but on this issue, the effort must first be to strengthen family life within the community of faith.

Summary

We are living in a society which has almost completely abandoned Christian teaching on marriage. None of the elements of marriage as understood in Christendom, and as defined at common law, now survive. The notions of permanence and exclusivity were abandoned 45 years ago. Marriage still involves a legal union, to be sure, but the same legal effects follow without a legal union, at least once a couple have lived together for two years. And of course, it is no longer necessary that marriage be the union of a man and a woman.

Australian society, like other western societies, is charting its own course with a rather confused idea about what marriage is and why it is that de facto relationships should be treated as equivalent to marriages. While these changes, which began with the sexual revolution in the 1960s, are typically presented as a liberation, we are now experiencing the downsides. The consequences of family instability are enormous; but particularly so for children.

The challenge for public policy is to work out how better to support children with safe, stable and nurturing families. Notwithstanding all the other problems that are important and which attract attention, such as climate change and racial injustice, the problem of family instability is one of the greatest challenges of our time.

¹ D de Vaus and M Gray, 'The Changing Living Arrangements of Children, 1946-2001' (2004) 10 *Journal of Family Studies* 9-19, 15.

² Ibid, 16.

³ Table reproduced from De Vaus and Gray, *ibid*, tbl 2.

⁴ P Butterworth, T Oz, B Rodgers and H Berry, *Factors Associated with Relationship Dissolution of Australian Families with Children*, Social Policy Research Paper No 37 (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008) p.29, tbl 9.

⁵ H Benson, 'Introduction' in H Benson and S Callan (eds), *What Works in Relationship Education: Lessons from academics and service deliverers in the United States and Europe* (Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, 2009) 11-20.

⁶ In addition, [a very small number of children](#) are born to female same-sex couples, using donated semen. There are also a few same-sex male couples with children through surrogacy, fostering or adoption. However, the numbers are so low that they do not affect the analysis of trends across the population described herein. Many children living with same-sex couples were born into heterosexual partnerships that ended in separation or divorce.