

Andrews University

## Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Faculty Publications

---

2021

### How Martin Luther Transformed Marriage

Trevor O'Reggio

Andrews University, [toreggio@andrews.edu](mailto:toreggio@andrews.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

O'Reggio, Trevor, "How Martin Luther Transformed Marriage" (2021). *Faculty Publications*. 2253.  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/2253>

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

## How Martin Luther transformed Marriage

*“With my wedding, I have made the angels laugh and the devils weep.”*

Marriages and families are facing increasing pressure because of the stress of modern life. Divorce rates among Christians are equal to those among secular peoples. Christian homes are being broken and disrupted at an alarming rate. Marriage rates in America are at historic lows. People are marrying later or simply not marrying or engaging in other alternative living arrangements.<sup>1</sup>

Christian teaching since the patristic period has postulated a tension between salvation and pleasure: most influential Christian thinkers have nurtured a gloomy suspicion that one cannot be attained without renouncing the other. Similarly the medieval church long remained suspicious, even hostile towards family ties. The church leaders suspected that conjugal affection and parental love often disguised sensual entanglements and worldly values. For this reason the theologians saw little value in family attachments. While Luther never completely rid himself of this tension, he began a movement within Christianity that made it possible to be good Christian and at the same time be happily married and have an enjoyable sex life.

For most of the Christian era before the Reformation, marriage and family were discouraged and even denigrated. Sexual relations were condemned and associated with the evil of original sin. Singleness and celibacy were exalted as a higher and holier state of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Not until the

---

<sup>1</sup> Enjoli Francis, “Marriage Rate Falls to Record Low in U.S., Pew Says”, *Abc News*, December 14, 2011, <<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2011/12/marriage-rate-falls-to-record-low-in-u-s-pew-says>>, accessed February 1, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther speaks of the contempt with which marriage was viewed in his time: “When I was a boy, marriage was considered so infamous on account of impious and impure celibacy that I thought I could not think about married life without sin. For all were convinced that if anyone wished to live a life holy and acceptable to God, he must never become a spouse but must live a celibate and take the vow of celibacy. This is why many men who had married became monks or contemptible priests (*sacrificuli*) after the death of their wives.” Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (Gen 2:22) *Luther Works*, 1:

Reformation was marriage and family restored to a place of honor within the Christian community. One who contributed much to the restoration of marriage and family to a place of honor and respect was Martin Luther, the great German reformer. The purpose of this study is to examine how Luther's view on marriage transformed the institution.

Martin Luther elevated marriage and family life to a place of respect and honor in the church and society. He "placed the home at the center of the universe. His teaching and practice were so radical and so far-reaching, that some scholars have argued that other than the church, the home was the only sphere of life which the Reformation profoundly affected."<sup>3</sup> An analysis of Luther's views on marriage and family will reveal that Luther's reformation was not just theological but also profoundly sociological. His rejection of celibacy as a form of superior spirituality, his elevation of marriage and family life to the arena of spirituality, his moderate ideas on divorce are now commonly accepted views among the Christian community.

Although Luther is known mainly for his teaching on Justification by faith in the theological world, I would argue that his views on marriage and the family were just as significant and impactful for the society at large. Most non-believers have never heard of Justification by faith, but they have all been part of a family and whether they like it or not, Luther's teaching on marriage and the family has had a significant impact on marriage and the family in the Western world. In the light of the crisis facing marriage and the home, I am arguing that there is an urgent need to reexamine and apply Luther's valuable principles on marriage and the family.

---

135. See also Michael M. Sheehan, James K. Farge, *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 297 – 306.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Ozment, "Re-inventing Family Life." *Christian History*, 12(3) (1993) :22.

## The Medieval State of Marriage and Family

Marriage during the time of Luther was one of the seven sacraments which was decided during the council of Verona in 1184. Although marriage was not administered within framework of church liturgy.<sup>4</sup> Although termed a sacrament, marriage was not required to take place in a church or officiated by a priest. The church viewed marriage as gift from God and an act of consent between a man and a woman and therefore church law did very little to regulate marriage<sup>5</sup>. In the early medieval age, daughters were handed over by their fathers to in their husbands in a public ceremony which was then followed by the consummation of the marriage. By the late medieval period however the practice was no longer universally followed and boys and girls as young as fourteen were betrothing themselves to each other without parental consent. A problem arose when some of these young couples would make secret agreement to each other, promise to marry in the future and then validate this with consummation<sup>6</sup>.

Young men would pledge marriage, consummate the marriage and then denied having done so, sometimes leaving the girl no longer a virgin and in some case pregnant. These secret betrothals and promises of marriages resulted in thousands of "he said/she said" arguments. "The ecclesiastical courts were overrun with cases of contested betrothal: "girls seduced on alleged promises of marriage, parents challenging the secret unions of their children, bigamous Casanovas accused of secretly promising marriage to two or more women, and possibly the most embarrassing of all, men and women sincerely attempting to make public their private vows, only to be challenged by someone claiming to have been secretly promised marriage by one of the partners".<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Michelle DeRusha *The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk; Katrina and Martin Luther*. (Grand Rapids: Baker books 2017) 137

<sup>5</sup> Diarmund MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2003), 612

<sup>6</sup> Michelle DeRusha 137

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 138

Luther recognized that like so many of the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, this institution was broken, it had fallen into disrepute, and dishonor among Christians and was in need of major reformation. "According to contemporary observers, marriage and the family were in a crisis in late medieval and Reformation Europe. Humanists, reform-minded Catholics, and especially Protestants decried the amount of domestic litigation, particularly that of contested first marriages, and a casual demeaning of marriage and family life they perceived all around".<sup>8</sup>

There were many threats to marriage and family in the laws of the medieval church: On one hand the church encouraged immature and impulsive unions by recognizing as valid so called clandestine marriage that occurred without parental permission and apart from public confession. On the other hand it placed legal obstacles to matured and reasoned marriages between peoples by arbitrarily defining numerous impediments to marriage between people related by various blood, legal, spiritual and familial ties. It became a major goal of new Protestant and secular marriage ordinances in the sixteenth century to end such secret unions and define impediments more realistically.<sup>9</sup> An observer in Augsburg reported in 1534 that marriage there had become a "weak, despised, and rejected estate, which the young, especially men, fled in fear; everywhere women were said to make fools of men (the biblical stories of the downfall of Adam, Samson, and David at the hand of a woman were current), and both sexes looked on the birth and rearing of children with "superstitious dread," . . . Having seen how much effort, anxiety, pain, need, care and work are involved in marriage, they would not recommend it

---

<sup>8</sup> Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled; Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MS.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 2.

to a dog, and to save their children from it, they give them over to the Devil by forcing them into the cloister. Thereby they gain for them an easy life on earth, but they dispatch their souls to hell.<sup>10</sup>

One of the first reforms of Luther was the “desacramentalize’ marriage. He declared that marriage was no longer a sacrament, limiting the sacraments only to Baptism and communion. Ironically this act made the church more deeply involved in marriage, for now couples were required to meet with their pastors to make sure there were no impediments before announcing their public intentions to marriage. Initially the ceremony took place outside the front of the church but as the Protestant Reformation progressed, it moved indoor and couples were expected to recite their vows before the altar in the presence of the pastor, and their family and friends. Now the presence of marriage in the church and the benediction of the minster became a critical part of the marriage ceremony.<sup>11</sup>

Luther also insisted that marital agreements between minors could not be considered valid without the approval of their parents. He writes, “Who would approve my action if after I had reared my daughter with so much expense and effort, care and danger, zeal and toil, and had risked my whole body and goods for so many years, she should receive no better care than if she were a cow of mine that had strayed into the forest where any wolf might devour her”. Luther continues, Every reasonable person must concede, I say that this violence and injustice which could be easily avoided if one prohibited secret engagements”<sup>12</sup>.

Luther also was revolutionary concerning the matter of divorce, where divorce was not an option in the case of an invalid marriage. Luther attempted to modify the Catholic strict non-divorce policy and allowed divorce based on biblical grounds: adultery and desertion. He also allowed divorce for

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> DeRusia 140

<sup>12</sup> LW, vol. 46, 268

physiological deficiencies (e.g. impotence). Some have accused Luther of opening up the door to easy divorce which has resulted in a myriad of problems that have negatively affected society. How should we judge Luther on this issue? Luther in good faith attempted to reform a broken system where the church controlled marriage and refused to grant any divorce even in justifiable circumstances. Marriage was considered as a sacred sacrament and could not be dissolved without the death of one of the spouses. In situations where the church was forced to dissolve a marriage based on its stated impediments (consanguinity, affinity and spiritual relationship) that it established, such dissolution was not called divorce, but annulment. This was an absurd and nonsensical practice and Luther felt that the church's position on divorce and remarriage only encouraged fornication, adultery, and other immoral practices. For Luther, divorce and remarriage according to biblical principles would reduce the level of sexual immorality in society by allowing individuals to be legally divorced and thus be eligible to legally remarry.

One of Luther's major reform on marriage were views on celibacy and chastity. He completely disavowed it as a superior form of spirituality. Some of Martin Luther's views on marriage and the family reflected the late medieval Catholic view. Luther was a child of his time and culture, so it should not be surprising that his early views on the subject would reflect the age in which he was born, but the creativity and originality of Luther becomes obvious, in the way in which he transcended his age. Some of the prevailing views on marriage, family, and sexuality is reflected in the following quote and might have influenced Luther's views. Historian Steven Ozment comments on medieval view of chastity.

"The clergy of the Middle Ages were obsessed with chastity and sexual purity. Augustine portrayed sexual intercourse in Paradise as occurring without lust and emotion. A vernacular catechism from 1494 elaborates the third deadly sin (impurity) under the title, "How the Laity Sin in the Marital Duty. According to the 1494 catechism, the laity sin sexually in marriage by, among other things, having sex for the sheer joy of it rather than for the reasons God has commanded, namely, to escape the sin of concupiscence and to populate the earth."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Ozment, 22.

These ideas on sexuality reached back centuries into the Christian era, when Jerome, writing in the fourth century, compared virginity, widowhood, and marriage. He gave virginity a numerical value of 100, widowhood, 60, and marriage 30.<sup>14</sup> Marriage was obviously not highly regarded, and even sex within marriage done without the intent of procreation was considered “sin”.

Most of the church teachers including Augustine, Tertullian, Ambrose, Aquinas and Gregory the Great considered sexual expression with any passion to be a “sin” “evil”, “befoulment” and not much different from adultery, while virginity and celibacy were highly honored.<sup>15</sup> Jerome warned that “any man who loves his wife excessively is an adulterer”<sup>16</sup> He further stated that “married men and women occupied the second tier, far below the holier, more pure status of celibates “let married women take their pride in coming next after virgins”<sup>17</sup>. These attitudes became entrenched within Roman Catholic teachings, writings and meditation. At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic’s response to the Reformation, upheld celibacy and by its implication its attitudes towards sexuality within marriage being restricted to the conception of children.<sup>18</sup>

Three models of sexuality existed during the time of Luther. The first model saw reproduction or procreation as the primary goal of sex. This was a view championed by the Roman Catholic Church. The second model, called the pollution model of sexuality focused on the impurity and pollution caused by sex. Unlike procreationists, it advocated strong limitations on the marital relations by restricting time, seasons, places and circumstances in which sex is allowed. Hence, pollutionists attach secondary

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Fiona Bowie, “Chastity” in *The Oxford companion to Christian thought*, general editors Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh S. Pyper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108-109.

<sup>16</sup>

<sup>17</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Banner, “Ethics, Sexual” in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, edited by Jean-Yves Lacoste, 3 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1 : 505-509.



importance to procreation, tending to emphasize "nature" as a criterion of sexual morality, not being overly concerned about contraception either.<sup>19</sup>

The third model of sexuality viewed marital sex as a source of intimacy and affection and a symbol and source of conjugal love. Subscribers to this school of thought regarded sexual pleasure more positively than the proponents of the other two models. Writers at different periods during the Middle Ages adopted elements of each of these models of human sexuality in various combinations and with varying degree of enthusiasm.<sup>20</sup>

Which of these three models did Luther subscribe to? Did he embrace elements of these three models at different periods in his life? Did his views change over time? From his writings it appears that Luther embraced all three models at various times. In his procreationist mode, he said the chief purpose of marriage is to have children. On other occasions he seems to agree with the pollutionist model. At other times he speaks positively of sexual pleasure in marriage.

The exaltation of sexual abstinence implies a rejection and disapproval of pleasure, of recreational sex, and above all promiscuity. Western Christianity has historically accepted (and at some level, most of us still maintain) an unarticulated allegiance to an ascetic ideal of sexual morals: the less sex, the better, and the more the worse. Implicit is a belief that virtue demands self-control and self-control means a rejection of pleasure; whatever feels good is probably wrong.<sup>21</sup> Luther must be credited with reconnecting sexuality with spirituality. It was now possible to be spiritual and holy while engaging in sex within the boundaries of marriage without guilt.

---

<sup>19</sup> James Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

### **Lessons from Luther on Marriage and the Family**

Luther's revolutionary teaching on marriage and the family, undergirded by his exemplary marital life, altered and changed marriage and family forever. Marriage has fallen on hard times. In America, it is at an historic low. Americans are losing confidence in marriage and are resorting to other living arrangements. Cohabitation is on the rise; single parenting is increasing; and remaining unmarried, for whatever reason, is becoming more attractive to many. Some are even questioning the necessity and relevance of marriage. Marriage for some is considered a trifling matter to be entered in without any preparation and to exit with the least annoyance.

Luther's unequivocal affirmation is needed today more than ever. Luther calls marriage an order of creation, God-appointed, legitimate union of man and woman, necessary for the human race. He affirms the permanency, relevancy, and necessity of marriage. Marriage is never out of style or old-fashion as long as there are humans living on the earth. He describes it as the most serious and important matter in the whole world, because it is the source of human society and of the human race. Nothing in life excels it in worth.<sup>22</sup>

Luther's focus on premarital preparation, and the need for those contemplating marriage to seek the counsel of their parents and to pray to God, is especially necessary when so many rush into marriage unprepared and are forced to abort their relationship long before it has time to mature, because they did not engage in the necessary work of preparation.

Luther's concept of marriage as a vocation is a wonderful idea that needs to be recaptured by postmodern Americans. The excessive demands of work, church, clubs, organizations, schools and a myriad of other responsibilities has squeezed marriage. There is never enough time for all the pressing

---

<sup>22</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (Genesis 18:19), LW 3 : 221.

demands of life. Invariably marriage and family suffer because many people do not see them as priority. If we see marriage and family as a vocation and worthwhile in value as any career, perhaps we would invest the time and energy needed to ensure its success.

Luther's spirit of flexibility in dealing with the thorny issues of divorce, annulment, and remarriage, provides a wonderful template for Christian leaders dealing with similar issues. Luther attempts to balance his counsels by staying away from the rigid legalism of no divorce while not succumbing to the equally pernicious extreme of easy divorce. Using common sense reasoning and biblical counsel, and the extenuating circumstances of each case, he attempts to forge a path that will not be too burdensome for the parties involved without compromising the word of God.

Luther counsels that marriage is a remedy against sin is still good counsel for Christian young people to prevent them from committing sexual sins. But because it gives a negative reason for marriage, it is inadequate and must therefore be supplemented by more positive reasons. Getting married to satisfy one's sexual desires may work for awhile, but what about during times in the marriage when sex is not possible for any number of reasons? There are more positive reasons that must be emphasized such as affection, companionship, friendship, having and rearing godly children, giving and receiving love.

Many of Luther's ideas are still very relevant for those contemplating marriage and those already married. His counsels are not just the theological musings of a former monk turned reformer, but are counsels deeply rooted in the word of God and undergirded by a rich and rewarding marital experience, where Luther was always trying to learn and to share that knowledge with his followers.

Conclusion:

Martin Luther's views on marriage and the family revealed a radical departure from the traditional Catholic views of his times. He elevated marriage and family to a place of honor and respectability at a

time when the single life and celibacy were celebrated as a higher state of spirituality. He denounced celibacy as cause for lust rather than an aid to chastity. He advocated a moderate view on divorce at time when divorce was almost impossible. He provided counsel to couples and those contemplating marriage. He encouraged priests to marry and followed his own advice by getting married. Just as he had done with the doctrine of grace that had been perverted and corrupted by the church, Luther devotes no less energy to the restoration of marriage and family to its biblical foundations. One of Luther's most important contribution is, he removed the sacred from the church and placed it in the family so that the mundane activities of cooking, child rearing, housekeeping took on a sacred nature.

Luther recognized that not only was the theology of Catholicism in need of serious reform but also the institution of marriage and family, and in his irascible and earthy style he went about that reform with a passionate intensity revealed in the power of his pen and the courage of his life.