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Martin Luther on Marriage and Family

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This paper describes and analyzes Martin Luther's views on marriage and family primarily from his own writings. Luther elevated marriage and family life to a place of respect and honor in the church and society at a time when singleness and celibacy were celebrated as ways of reaching a higher state of spirituality. Martin Luther's teachings were so radically different from the traditional Catholic views of his days that the church became furious with him and tried almost everything in their power to silence him. Although Luther is known primarily for his views on Justification, but it is his teachings on marriage and family that has been more consequential. Many in the West who have never heard the name of Martin Luther, today enjoy a more biblical view on marriage and family because of his influence. He advocated divorce according to biblical principles, at a time when divorce was almost impossible; he encouraged priests to marry by showing that there was no conflict between their calling and marriage; he denounced celibacy, blaming it for encouraging lust rather than aiding chastity; he restored marriage and family life back to the arena of spirituality and respectability in society. Luther lived out his own advice by getting married and living an exemplary married life. What made Luther so effective was the passionate intensity with which he advocated these reforms. He wrote and spoke with such power and backed up his words with such a bold and courageous life, although living in the shadow of constant threats, that centuries after his death, the power and conviction of his ideas still resonate.

Keywords: celibacy, chastity, LW, WA, reformation pamphlets¹

Introduction

“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 (Francis, December 14, 2011).

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

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¹ LW as used in the footnotes. This is a shortened form for Luther's works, which is the main collection of Luther's writings in English. Luther, M., Pelikan, J., Oswald, H. C., Lehmann, H. T., Brown, C. B.,... Hillerbrand, H. J. (1955-1986). *Luther's works* (55 Vols.). Saint Louis, M.O.: Concordia Publishing House & Philadelphia : Fortress Press.

WA as used in the footnotes and the references. This a shortened form for Luther's works which is the main collection of Luther's writings in German. *The Weimar edition of Luther's works*, also known as the *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA, 1883-2009). But *Weimarer Ausgabe* is a nickname, the official title of this edition is *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*.

celibacy were exalted as a higher and holier state of spirituality². Not until the Reformation were 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 Luther's views and experience regarding marriage and family and hopefully glean from his wisdom, insights that will enable us to strengthen marriage and family during this time of incredible stress.

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 had argued that other than the church, the home was the only sphere of life which the Reformation profoundly affected. (Ozment, 1993b)

Although writers like Cocke, Lazareth and Ozment have written on Martin Luther's views on marriage and family and the author has quoted from them throughout the paper, the author has relied more on the Luther's own writings for the analysis. The significance of this research 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 views on divorce are now commonly accepted views among the Christian community.

Although Luther is known mainly for his teaching on justification by faith, the author would propose that his views on marriage and family are as significant 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 are aware it or not, Luther's teaching on marriage and family has had a significant impact on marriage and family in the Western world. In the light of the crisis facing marriage and the home, the author is arguing that there is an urgent need to reexamine and apply Luther's valuable principles on marriage and family to our present context.

Luther's Early Family Life

Martin Luther was born on November 10th, 1483 in the small town of Eisleben, Germany (Jensen, 1992, p. 43). His parents were Hans and Margareta. Luther's mother, Margareta Hannah Lindeman, was the daughter of a prominent burgher of Eisenach. Luther had three sisters and a brother. Martin was given the name Martin because he was baptized on St. Martin's day. It was said that he had a striking resemblance to his father (Schwiebert, 1950, pp. 103-105). A year after Martin was born, his father moved to the city of Mansfield where he worked in the mines and later he became the owner of a half-dozen copper foundries. Luther's family were clearly of peasant stock but his father's ambitious business dealings advanced the families economic fortunes and made it possible for Luther to get the finest education available (Schwiebert, 1950, pp. 106-107). Luther's parents were devout, God-fearing Catholics, typical of their time and culture. Their religion was superstitious and dominated by a fear of a vengeful God.

Luther's early childhood was not easy and was marked by severe discipline from both mother and father. Luther described an incident where his mother whipped him until the blood flowed for stealing a nut

² 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 was why many men who had married became monks or contemptible priests (*sacrificuli*) after the death of their wives" (LW, 1: 135). See also Sheehan and Farge (1997, pp. 297 – 306).

(Schwiebert, 1950, p. 109). On another occasion he spoke of his father who whipped him so severely that he ran away for a while and was angry with his father (Schwiebert, 1950, p. 109). His discipline did not end at home. Discipline at school was just as severe. Luther once reflected upon early school, "I was caned in a single morning 15 times for nothing at all. I was required to decline and conjugate and had not learned my lesson" (Bainton, 1950, p. 104).

In spite of Luther's strict and disciplined upbringing, he turned out to be a normal child. His views, however, about God may have been influenced by his early experience, teachings about religion and his relationship with his father. Having a strict and judgmental father perhaps made it difficult for him to see his Heavenly Father as loving and merciful.

Marriage and Family Life

Martin joined the Augustinian Hermits in 1505 and took the three-fold vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Marriage was out of the question with taking of such vows. He did not envision his life as a married man, even after he left the monastery and renounced his monastic vows. Unlike many Catholic scholars of the time, he did not denigrate marriage or saw it as lesser form of spirituality. Contrary to many of his critics who believed that Luther left the monastery in order to get married, Luther resisted the idea of marriage for himself but encouraged it for other clerics.

So why was Martin Luther so resistant to marriage? In 1521, he wrote to his friend Spalatin, "They will never force a wife upon me" (Luther, 1521). Three years later seeking to squelch a rumor about his marriage he wrote,

Hitherto I have not been, and am not now inclined to take a wife. Not that I lack the feelings of a man, (for I am neither wood nor stone), but my mind is averse to marriage because I daily expect the death decreed to the heretic". (Thigpen, 1993)

One reason why Luther was averse to marriage was because he felt that his life could be taken from him at any moment. After the Diet of Worms in 1521 where Luther made his emphatic stance against the church, he was placed under a ban and authority had been given to any member of the church to turn Luther over to the authorities. Luther obviously saw no value in getting married and leaving behind a widow and children because of his impending death.

So why then did Luther change his mind about marriage when his circumstances had not changed? He was still under the emperor's ban. He was still considered a notorious heretic and his life was still in jeopardy. Luther's decision to marry may have been influenced by a number of factors. Chief among them was that his parents encouraged him to get married. They wanted grandchildren (Thigpen, 1993). His father was quite displeased when he joined the monastery, but now that he was no longer a monk he probably desired for Luther as normal a life for his son as he could be.

According to Professor Ozment, Luther actually encouraged fathers to remove their daughters from convents. In 1523, he praised Leonhard Koppe for engineering the escape of his daughter and 11 other nuns, among them was Katherine von Bora (Luther's future wife). Luther would compare Koppe's freeing the sisters to Moses' deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage (Ozment, 1983, p. 17). Most of these nuns returned to their families and found husbands except Katherine von Bora. She was in love with a Jerome Baumgartner but their relationship was aborted by his parents who disapproved of it. Katherine found herself alone. Several

attempts were made to marry her off but to no avail. Even Luther himself tried to find a suitable mate for her. It was brought to Luther's attention by Nicolas Amsdorf, Luther's close co-worker, that Katherine was interested in a match with him. Some suggested that Luther was motivated by pity and responsibility for Katherine, and that was why he married her (Cocke, 1973).

Another reason given why Luther might have chosen to marry was to live by example. He had written much on marrying, exalting marriage, calling it a natural and necessary part of life. Since his break from the monastery, he had encouraged former monks and priests to get married. Perhaps he saw an opportunity to practice what he preached (Lazareth, 1960, p. 23). Eventually Luther got married, but it was a very bad time in German history. He married the 26 years old Katherine on June 13, 1525, when he was 42, a difference of 16 years. Germany was in the midst of the Peasant War and that only added to Luther's already dangerous situation. Peasant leaders were using Luther's materials and revolting in his name. Luther was well aware of these developments, yet he entered into marriage nonetheless. Just days before his wedding, he wrote to his friend Spalatin, "If I can do it before I die, I will yet take my Katie to wife to spite the devil, when I hear that they are after me" (Luther, May 4, 1525).

Luther was married in a simple ceremony surrounded by close friends and family. Not all were in agreement with his marriage, notable among them was Melancthon, his closest and most trusted colleague, who did not agree with Luther's marriage. The marriage was not preceded by much courtship and it was very unlikely he was in love with Katherine. After his marriage, he wrote, "God has willed and caused my act, for I neither love my wife nor burn for her but esteem her highly" (Luther, June 21, 1525). Luther may not have been in love with his wife at the wedding but he grew to love her dearly and they enjoyed a happy married life together. In a letter written in 1526, Luther praised his wife: "My Katie is in all things so obliging and pleasing to me that I would not exchange my poverty for the riches of Croesus" (August 11, 1526). Later he paid her this tribute: "I give more credit to Katherine than to Christ, who has done so much more for me" (Bainton, 1950, p. 293).

Near the end of his life, after recovering from a severe illness, Luther declared his love for Katie in these words:

I thought that I would never see my wife and little children again. How much pain that distance and separation caused me! ... Since, by God's grace, I have recovered, I now love my dear wife and children all the more... (Bainton, 1950, p. 293)

Judging from his words, it seems that Luther firmly believed that God's hand was in his marriage and he saw marriage as a way of getting back at the devil, for he knew full well that the devil despised marriage.

What was life like for Luther as a husband and a father? What was his home life like? Luther and Katherine were married for 21 years and in spite of the age difference of 16 years, they enjoyed a fruitful and satisfying family life. The testimony of Katherine at the death of her husband told the story:

Who would not be sorrowful and mourn for so noble a man as was my dear lord who much served not only one city or a single land but the whole world? Truly I am so distressed I cannot tell my great heart sorrow to any one and hardly know what to think or how I feel. I cannot eat nor drink neither can I sleep. If I had a principality and an empire, it would never have cost me so much pain to lose them as I have now that our Lord God has taken from me this dear and precious man. (K. Luther, April 2, 1546)

In their two decades of marriage they had six children. He called them six "little heathens" from God;

Hans (1526), Elizabeth (1527), Magdalena (1529), Martin (1531), Paul (1533), and Margareta (1534). In spite of his prodigious scholarship work, Luther enjoyed the time with his children. Cocke (1973) observed:

He liked to gather the family around him and tell stories, teach songs and games, and say prayers together. Luther wrote letters to his children, which reveal he could enter childish fancy and imagination. His sermons and Table Talk are heavily illustrated with his observations of children's activities (p. 107).

Luther was a stern disciplinarian with his children. On one occasion, he commented that he would prefer to have a "dead rather than a disobedient son" (Luther, WA, TR 5: 489, n. 6102). On another occasion, he forbade his son to see him for three days as punishment for his disobedience. At the end of the period, he required the boy to write a letter begging his father's forgiveness. Although Luther was strict with his children, they never doubted his love for them. Luther and his wife, like so many couples of that time, experienced the death of an offspring. Elizabeth, their first daughter died when she was only eight months. He commented, "I so lamented her death that I was exquisitely sick, my heart rendered soft and weak; never had I thought that a fathers' heart could be so broken for his children sake" (Ozment, 1993a, p. 167). The death of his second child, Magdalene at age thirteen almost devastated Luther and left him so grief stricken that he sobbed openly at her funeral.

The force of our natural love is so great that we are unable to do this without crying and grieving in our hearts...[and] experiencing death ourselves... The features, the words, and the movement of our living and dying daughter, who was so very obedient and respectful, remain engraved in our hearts; even the death of Christ... is unable to take all this away as it should. You, therefore, please give thanks to God in our stead.(Ozment, 1993a, p.167)

Luther's home was a place not just for his own flesh and blood. Many were made to feel welcome at his home. His home was more like a motel for relatives, tutors, students, numerous nuns, and monks. There was a constant flow of guests who were expected to conform to family customs and study the Catechism, pray, and attend family devotions (Cocke, 1973, p. 107). Luther had a gregarious nature and enjoyed good conversation, singing, and fellowship.

Luther's relationship with his wife was very good. She was an excellent manager of the home, having a small farm on their estate and managing the financial affairs with prudence.

Katie earned such respect from her husband, whom she excelled in virtually all worldly matters. She became a model housewife and an accomplished businesswoman. To increase their income, she remodeled the cloister in which she and Martin lived so that it would accommodate up to 30 students and guests. She expanded the cloister garden and repaired the cloister brewery. Luther dubbed her the "morning star of Wittenberg", as her day began at 4:00a.m.. (WA, TR 2: 650, n. 2772)³

Thus, Luther was free from many of the cares of domestic life so he could pursue his writing and reformation work without much worry. Luther loved his wife and professed that love throughout his life. He once stated: "There is no bond on earth so sweet nor any separation so bitter as that which occurs in a good marriage" (Ozment, 1993b). Luther wrote repeatedly of his love for his wife as the following statements revealed:

I thank you in the Lord for the hearty congratulations, which you have sent me. I am a happy husband and may God continue to send my happiness, for from that most gracious woman, my best of wives, I have received, by the blessings of

³Katherine rose at 4 a.m. in the summer and at 5 a.m. in the winter to oversee her large household. See Cobb (2001, p. 9); Stjerna (2011).

God, a little son. Hans Luther, and by God's wonderful grace, I have become a father.... My Katie is in all things so obliging and pleasing to me that I would not exchange my poverty for all the riches of Croesus (Luther, August 11, 1526).

He also boasted to his table colleagues in 1531:

I would not trade my Katie for France or Venice for three reasons: first, because God gave her to me as a gift and also gave me to her; second, because I often come across other women with far more shortcomings than Katie, and although she has a few weaknesses of her own, they are far outnumbered by her virtues; and third, because faith serves marriage best through its fidelity and honor. (WA, Br 3: 900; WA, TR 1: 49)

Luther continued in rapturous admiration for his beloved wife:

The greatest gift of grace a man can have is a pious, God-fearing, home-loving wife, whom he can trust with all his goods, body, and life itself, as well as having her as the mother of his children. . . Katie, you have a good man who loves you. Thank God, and let someone else be empress. (WA, Br 3: 900; WA, TR 1: 49)

As Luther lay sick and contemplated the possibility of separating from his family, his feelings of tenderness and love for his family poured out with intense emotions in the following words.

Oh, how passionately I yearned for my family as I lay at death's door in Smalkald. I thought that I would never see my wife and little children again. How much pain that distance and separation caused me! I believe that dying people must know the greatest natural love and affection of all, as when a man remembers his wife and a parent thinks of his children. Since, by God's grace, I have recovered, I now love my dear wife and children all the more. No one is so spiritual that he does not feel this natural love and affection; it provides great strength to the bond of fellowship which exists between a man and his wife. (WA, TR 4: 4786)

Medieval Concept of Marriage and Family

Some of Martin Luther's views on marriage and 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 greatness and originality of Luther was, he went beyond his age. What were some of the prevailing views on marriage, family, and sexuality during the late medieval period that might have influenced Luther's views? Ozment (1993b) commented 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. (p. 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 (Ozment, 1993b, p. 22). Marriage was obviously not highly regarded.

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 (Bowie, 2000, pp. 108-109). These attitudes became entrenched within Roman Catholic teachings, writings and meditation Even 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 (Banner, 2005).

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 was allowed. Hence, pollutionists attached secondary importance to procreation, tending to emphasize “nature” as a criterion of sexual morality, not being overly concerned about contraception, either (Brundage, 1990, p. 6).

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 (Brundage, 1990, p. 5).

Which of these three models did Luther subscribe to? Did his views change over time? Did he embrace elements of these three models at different periods in his life? 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 was to have children. On other occasions he seemed to agree with the pollutionist’s model. At other times, he spoke 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 feeling good is probably wrong (Brundage, 1990, p. 7).

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 a good Christian and at the same time be happily married to and have an enjoyable sex life.

Luther’s Theological Understanding of Marriage Before and After his Protestant Conversion

While still a celibate priest, Luther wrote extensively on marriage. He viewed married life, among so many other things in the church, in need of reform. Luther’s writings on the subject would play a significant role in restoring marriage to its rightful place. The church made marriage and family a matter of low priority. Singleness and celibacy superseded marriage in spiritual excellence. It is an irony of history that it took a celibate monk who would eventually get married to restore the honor and dignity of marriage. You did not have to be married to know that marriage was under assault. Luther recognized this when he described marriage as “universally in awful disrepute”, with peddlers everywhere selling pagan books that treat nothing but the depravity of womanhood and the unhappiness of the state of marriage (Luther, 1522). With such low esteem of marriage no wonder people saw singleness as a better alternative than marriage.

One of Luther’s earliest works on marriage was a sermon he gave on the second Sunday after Epiphany in 1519 based on the Bible passage in John 2:01-11, the wedding at Cana. This was a revised version by Luther of a sermon he had preached earlier.

Luther described marriage as God's special gift to man. It was not man's idea but God's and he was the best matchmaker. Luther counseled those who wanted to enter the estate of marriage to "earnestly pray to God for a spouse" (Luther, 1519). Marriage was no accident but was created for man. The woman was given to the man as a companion in all things but particular to bear children. Luther warned of how Sin has corrupted marriage so that people enter into it not for companionship or procreation but to fulfill their lust (Luther, 1519).

Luther described three types of love and identified "the love of man and a woman as the greatest and purest of all loves" (Luther, 1519). The three kinds of love are: false love, natural love, and married love.

False love is that which seeks its own as a man loves money, possessions, honor and women taken outside of marriage and against God's command. Natural love is that between father and child, brother and sister, friend and relatives. (Luther, 1519)

He described married love as "a bride's love, which glows like a fire and desires nothing but the husband. She says it is you I want, not what is yours. I want neither yourself nor your gold; I want neither. I want you." But Luther acknowledged that even this pure love had become corrupted by sin. He described the temptation of the flesh so strong and consuming that "marriage may be likened to hospital for incurables which prevents inmates from falling into grave sin" (Luther, 1519). Luther had a clear grasp of how difficult it was to live a chaste life outside of marriage and he continually spoke of the difficulty of chastity. It was difficult in Luther's day how much more so today in the sex-saturated society where sexual messages blared out at us from everywhere.

In this sermon, Luther agreed with the theologians of the church in calling marriage a sacrament. He would later reverse himself on this issue. Here, he described it as "an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest, holiest, worthiest and noblest thing that ever existed or will ever exist: the union of the divine and human nature in Christ" (Luther, 1519). He considered the fulfillment of lust within marriage as legitimate but reprehensible when expressed outside of marriage.

Luther also described marriage as a covenant of fidelity. The basis of the marital relationship was mutual self-giving and a promise of faithfulness to the other. Luther believes that this promise should be more than just words spoken to each other. He encouraged children to seek their parents' counsel in choosing a life partner (Luther, 1519).

Luther also described that the chief purpose of marriage was to produce children. He however warned that it was more than just producing children, but it was rearing godly children. He described it in the following way: "They can do no better work and do nothing more valuable for God, for Christendom, for all the world, for themselves, and for their children than to bring up their children well" (Luther, 1519). He called it a kind of spiritual vocation, greater than all the good works of the church. In classic Luther, he said, "For bringing up their children properly is the shortest road to heaven. In fact, heaven itself could not be made nearer or achieved more easily than by doing this work. It is also their appointed work" (Luther, 1519). Addressing the issue on the other side, Luther said, "By the same token, hell is no more easily earned than to spoil children, let them curse and swear, let them learn profane words and vulgar songs and just let them do as they please" (Luther, 1519).

In Luther's world there was no place for negligent, indulgent parents. He inferred that the salvation of parents depended on how parents reared their children. This sermon by Luther was his earliest reflection on marriage and it provided us a valuable insight on this subject. He was still very catholic in seeing marriage as a

sacrament. Although unmarried and a celibate priest he was a keen observer on marriage providing valuable counsel on love in marriage, selecting a mate, the meaning of marriage, and parenting advice on child rearing. I wonder if Luther received criticisms from married folks and parents about his own lack of experience in the matters he gave advice on.

While Luther wrote many positive things about marriage, he also described marriage similar to the way in which he described the role of the political order “to restrain greed and wickedness”. He saw marriage as a kind of remedy against sin. Marriage acted as a kind of restraint against the flood of human sensuality and immorality (LW, 1 : 134). Marriage was necessary because of the weakness of the flesh after the fall: “Is it not a great thing that even in the state of innocence God ordained and instituted marriage? But this institution and covenant are all the more necessary since sin has weakened and corrupted the flesh” (LW, 1 : 134).

This view of Luther is problematic because it suggests Luther’s view of marriage as kind of force to ward off evil and thus makes it highly superstitious. Is marriage primarily to satisfy the sexual desires of the couple? Is it designed simply to prevent a person from falling into sin? What about during the marriage when a couple cannot engage in sexual intercourse? While sex is an important part of marriage, it is not always possible especially at times when one or both cannot perform. Hence Luther provided what I consider a negative reason for getting married.

In his Large Catechism, he commented on marriage when he dealt with the Sixth Commandment (Catholic numeration). He called the commandment a hedge and protection for marriage, it sanctioned and guarded it. Marriage was the first institution of God, honored by God. Married life is no jest or presumption; it is an excellent thing and a matter of divine seriousness (Luther, 1529a). For this reason, marriage should not be despised or held in disrepute but adored and sanctified and not only placed in equality with other estates but precedes and surpasses them all. It is not a peculiar estate but the most common and noblest estate, which pervades Christendom and extends through the entire world.

Luther asserted that marriage is an honorable and necessary state solemnly commanded by God and it was designed that all men and women who are able should be married, with some exceptions:

When priests, monks, and nuns resist God’s order, they despise and forbid marriage through they abstain from the act, their hearts are full of unchaste thoughts and evil lust and continual burnings and secret suffering which can be avoided in the married life... All vows of chastity out of the married state is condemned by this commandment and free permission given to abandon unchaste life and enter married life. To remain in monastery life is to sin and more. (Luther, 1529a)

Luther encouraged young people to change their views on marriage and get to like it by restoring the honor of marriage, and immoral practices would decrease all over the world. He described love as having harmony with each other, having mutual respect and cherishing each other with faithfulness (Luther, 1529a). This counsel may not be relevant today but in Luther’s age when marriage was despised by many, this counsel was significant and was aimed to restore the honor of marriage among the youth.

In his Small Catechism 1529 illustrated, Luther wrote a small marriage booklet for the simple pastor, in this booklet, he called marriage a worldly business and that the church should not attempt to order or govern anything connected to it. In other words, it is a civil matter, but the church should be willing to bless and pray for the couple before the church or in the church(Luther, 1529b). Although marriage was a divine creation, it was a civil matter, but he considered it more spiritual than monasticism and therefore should be considered seriously by the youth(Luther, 1529b).

Freedom to Marry

In one of Luther's famous Reformation pamphlets, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), Luther explicitly encouraged priests to get married, thus repudiating their vows of celibacy. Luther writes, "Priests should be free to marry and not to as they choose," because "God has not bound them and no one else ought to bind them" (Luther, 18 August, 1520). Freedom was one of the great theological themes of Luther's writing and he applied it here to the religious workers of the church who had taken the vows of celibacy relative to marriage. Luther saw no contradiction between the divine calling of God and marriage. This idea was revolutionary for its time, for it was overturning a well-established tradition within the Catholic church.

In another one of Luther's Reformation pamphlets, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther repudiated marriage as a sacrament, which of course placed him in direct conflict with traditional Catholic teachings. Luther appealed to the Scriptures by showing that the chief text in Eph 5:31 upon which the sacramental nature of marriage established was based on a faulty translation of the Greek word *mysterion* as the word sacrament. The original Greek word had nothing to do with sacrament and simply meant mystery. Luther showed that by the definition, a sacrament was a word of promise, a sign of grace, so that marriage could not be a sacrament. Since marriage was also valid among non-believers, Jews, Turks, and others, it could not be a sacrament. It could not possibly be called a sacrament of the new law since it was not the exclusive possession of the church (Luther, 1520). Having removed the sacramental badge from marriage, Luther concluded that it was the civil authorities and not the ecclesiastical authorities that had authority over marriage. However, he was insistent that couples should seek out the church to receive blessings and guidance for their marriage.

In 1524, Luther wrote a small tract entitled "Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children and that Children Should not Become Engaged Without Their Parents' Consent". In this tract, Luther sought to answer a number of questions concerning parental authority in marriage. Canon laws at that time asserted that parental consent was not necessary for a valid marriage. Luther's tract addressed three questions:

(1) Did a parent have the authority to prevent his child from marrying a particular person? (2) Forbid his marrying at all? and (3) Force him into a marriage distasteful to him? Affirmation on the first question, emphatic no to the second question and the knottiest problem is question three which could go either way; A child was bound to obey parents but a child in good conscience may disobey tyrannical parents (mutual consent is important). (Luther, 1524)

Parents have neither the right nor authority to compel children to marry (may have right and authority to prevent one). Parental authority is limited. A father oversteps and exceeds his authority and becomes a tyrant when he forces a marriage. The same principle is applicable when he hinders his child's marriage or lets the child go ahead on his own without intention of helping him in the matter. Children should not marry or become engaged without the knowledge and consent of their parents, according to the 4th commandment (Catholic numeration). There are no examples in Scripture of couples entering in an engagement of their own accord. Secret engagements are condemned. Parental authority should not be used to force celibacy. On the other hand, parents are duty bound to get good spouses for children. (Luther, 1524)

In his commentary on *the Sermon on the Mount* (1532), Luther addressed issues pertaining to marriage in Matthew 5:31-32. Luther's question was, "What is the proper procedure for us nowadays in the matter of marriage and divorce?" Should it be left to lawyers and subject to the secular government? Marriage is secular and outward and Christians are not governed by compulsion and punishment. It is different for the Christian who is governed by the word of God. Christians should not be divorced but patiently bear the good and the bad in the relationship. However, Luther asserted that this advice only applies to the believer (Luther, January

1532). “We have no right to make marriage a free thing, as though it were in our power to do with as we pleased, changing and exchanging” (Luther, January 1532).

Luther asserted that, “marriage is not thought of as God’s work and ordinance but his will is ignored”.

We are to put up with the difficulties in marriage and many see marriage as human and secular state which God has nothing to do with. When they get tired, they want a divorce because they are looking for a more comfortable way but they get twice or ten times as much discomfort in their new state. Marriage is life and no station in life is free of suffering and pain caused by you, your spouse, children, outside the home and all sorts of accidental trouble. If we want our marriages to be successful we must call upon God for help. (Luther, January 1532)

According to Luther, the legitimate cause for divorce given by Jesus is adultery. According to Matt 19:9 and Lev 20:10, adultery was punishable by death. By adultery, a man separates himself not only from his wife, but also from his life and he has no right to either of these. Luther concludes: “We neither commend nor forbid such divorce, but leave it to the government” (Luther, January 1532).

Luther encouraged the believers to stay together, if the guilty party humbled himself and repented. The innocent party should be reconciled and extend forgiveness. Sometimes it is hopeless, especially when the guilty party continues flagrantly committing sin. In this case, the innocent party has all rights to divorce (Luther, January 1532). Luther’s point is clear, the sin of adultery does not have to lead to a divorce, forgiveness and reconciliation should be the first option,

Additional cause for divorce is desertion according to Paul in 1 Cor 7:13-15. If a partner leaves home and nothing is heard from him for years and later shows up, the innocent party is not obligated to take him back (man who neglects to care for wife and kids). (Luther, January 1532)

Luther not only explained the grounds for divorce but set forth principles on Divorce Prevention: Learning patience in putting up with the faults and troubles of life, especially with the wife knowing that no situation is ever preferred or ideal in life. When there is trouble with your body you care for it even more, much less your wife who is a greater treasure. Following Paul’s counsels in Roman 12:4-5 and 1 Cor 12:12-26, accepting the faults of others, sympathizing with them, forbearing and doing everything possible to help them(Luther, January 1532).

For Luther the doctrine of forgiveness of sin was the most important of all for marriage and for our relationships with others.

In an important tract entitled, *On Marriage Matters*, written in 1530, Luther outlined important principles on marriage within the new Protestant lands. In the aftermath of the separation between Catholics and Protestants, Luther felt there was a need to clear up certain confusion among the clergy and civil authorities regarding marriage. Issues were as follows: How binding is an engagement? Does the validity of a marriage require witnesses? Is divorce permissible, and on what grounds? Luther sought to address these issues in this pamphlet.

Luther using arguments from Scripture, law and common sense, addressed these issues in five points:

(1) Secret engagement should not be made; (2) Public engagement takes precedence over secret engagement; (3) Of two public engagements the first is valid and punishment should be imposed for the second; (4) Intercourse with another man or woman after engagement is adultery and should be punished as such; and (5) Forced engagement, i.e. engagement imposed upon young people against their will and without their consent is not valid. (Luther, 1530)

He also laid down principles concerning divorce, and impediments to marriage. Luther spoke not only

from theory but from the experience of his own marital troubles.

Marriage is a public estate and must be entered into and recognized publicly (This is a point he has made repeatedly in an attempt to discourage secret engagements) and thus must be established by at least two witnesses, Matt 18:16. Secret engagement was one in which the knowledge and consent of those who have the right and authority to establish a marriage are excluded, that is the parents or their representatives. Luther denounced the church's claim on binding secret engagements based on Matt 19:6 (Luther, 1530, p. 310).

Luther counseled those that are already married based on a secret engagement, that their marriage is valid, and they must remain together and do not divorce. This counsel was for those not yet married, (future engagements). He blamed the clergy for these secret engagements that resulted in marriages and described them as robbing parents of their authority and making children too free (Luther, 1530, p. 279). Luther was adamant on the role of parents in the marriage of their children.

Luther suggested that punishment should be meted out to fornicators by the state. Private betrothal took precedence over the public, especially when the partners have secretly had intercourse. Marriage was not a shady business that was to be carried on dark corners. Private arrangements must yield to secret arrangements. Public engagement was equivalent to marriage in the sight of God and the world. Honor and virginity were more highly valued in Luther's culture than the fruit of the womb. Marrying strangers was not encouraged since there should be public testimonies to their character. Chastity should not be chosen because it merited higher reputation but that one may have peace and opportunity to devote oneself to God's word and prayer (Luther, 1530, p. 299).

In his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7* (1523), Luther provided more useful information on how to deal with sex in marriage, reasons for divorce and the nature of chastity and celibacy. Luther stated in his opening paragraph that he was interpreting this passage of Scripture to refute the interpretation given by some to support celibacy and condemn marriage. He was also giving counsel to someone to go ahead and get married without further delay. He undertook this task as a divine mandate to expose chastity as from the devil with the hope that youth will commit less fornication by getting married instead of falsely glorifying chastity.

Luther began by questioning the wisdom of those who oppose marriage. He attacked those who designate marriage calling them smart alecks, sophisticates, principle fools and blind men who "fill the world with their foolish and blasphemous scribblings and screeching against the married state". These same men advise others against marriage but are unable to do without women (because they are created for marriage), indulge themselves with whores. Luther cites Johann Schmid of Constance as an example who writes books discouraging marriage but himself is a notorious whoremonger. Luther's burden was that the only way to stop fornication was through marriage. He said woman is made for either marriage or fornication.

Luther interpreted Paul to mean that chastity is not some higher state of spirituality and keeping men and women or boys and girls separate will not necessarily keep them more chaste. Chastity cannot be conjured by us; it is a gift from heaven and must come from within. Outward chastity should not be forced upon young people and let them believe that there is some spiritual value in bearing this suffering. Luther calls this a "sinful suffering, that one cannot bear in good conscience for itself is sin and wrong" (LW, 28: 11). There is no escape for this suffering except through marriage. For Luther celibacy was a beautiful, delightful and noble gift for him to whom it was given to have the will and desire for celibacy. Without this gift of celibacy, it is better to marry. For Luther, if you cannot be happy living a celibate life, then it is far better to be happily married(LW, 28:12).

Luther expounding further on Paul spoke of conjugal rights to each other. “It is a right, yet it should occur voluntarily and this is because within the marital relationship no one rules over his own body but serves his partner which is the way of love”(LW, 28: 13) . Luther called adultery the “greatest thievery and robbery on earth, for it gives away the living body, which is not ours and takes another living body which is also not ours” (LW, 28: 13).

In addressing Paul’s counsel on how and when couples should refrain from sex. Luther declared that no one has the right to tell the couple what to do. They should do it by mutual consent and be ever mindful that prolonged withdrawal can lead into sin. Luther presented this argument also to show Paul’s lack of confidence in chastity because of his knowledge of human nature and the devils tricks (LW, 28: 13).

Paul’s counsel on marriage here was that marriage should be a free choice, “therefore he [Paul] commands no one to marry but leaves it to the individual”. But why then does Paul said, “I wish all were as I myself am?” Luther asked the question, “Is this not spoken against matrimony as though he wants no one to get married?” Luther interpreted Paul as saying, he wished everyone had the great gift of chastity so they could devote themselves fully to God, free of domestic cares, but Paul also recognized that this is a special gift. Not everyone has been granted the gift. Luther called chastity and marriage gifts of God but that chastity is the nobler gift. Yet chastity and marriage are equal before God (LW, 28:16, 17). Luther then went to chide those who glorify the celibate state as a more glorious state than marriage. He called them both gifts from God; one is a common gift to all, while the other is a gift reserved for the few (LW, 28: 17).

According to Luther, Paul would go on to praise marriage and show how wrong it is to call marriage a secular state while calling the monastic order a religious order. Luther called for a reversal of this idea, because he considered marriage a more religious state than the monastic order, because “religious” suggested inner life of faith... where the spirit rules and marriage fit this better than the so-called religious orders (LW, 28: 17, 18). Here Luther does not confine marriage to some secular or mundane order, but makes it an activity of faith.

Luther explained further by elaborating that marriage by its very nature that “teach and compel us to trust in God’s hand and grace and in the same way forces us to believe”. while the religious order tempts men to settle themselves in “temporal and outward things...and do not have to have faith and trust in God” (LW, 28: 18, 20). Luther claimed that marriage should not exclude anyone from being a priest or a bishop. The apostles of the early church were married. Christ called married men to his service (LW, 28: 22, 24). In other words, being married is not at odds with God’s call to service.

Luther ridiculed the church’s definition of bigamy (marrying consecutively). Paul gave himself the right to remarry, which would make him a bigamist in the sight of the church. Widowers/widows may remarry (LW, 28: 25). Luther sarcastically remarked that, “It is a shameful pretense to confess marriage a godly thing and a holy sacrament and then not permit such a godly thing and holy sacrament to stand beside the holiness of priests” (LW, 28:25). Because the flesh is full with desire, marriage is a necessity, “For his flesh rages, burns and fructifies just like that of other men unless he helps and controls it with the proper medicine, which is marriage. God suffers this raging passion for the sake of marriage and its fruits” (LW, 28: 26).

Luther listed a number of reasons why people got married:

(1) Money and property; (2) Sheer immaturity; (3) Seek sensual pleasure and satisfy it; (4) Beget heirs; and (5) Paul’s reason: NEED. Need commands it; nature will express itself in God’s command be fruitful and multiply, not outside marriage, and so everyone because of this need must enter marriage if he wants to live with good conscience and in favor with God. (LW, 28: 26)

Luther remarked,

When there is not a special gift of God, one must be aflame with passion or marry, if not married, one is still unchaste because the heart is unchaste even though the body may not be. Chastity becomes a way of earning salvation. Those who are married get rid of the burning. Christian is free to remarry if spouse separates or prevents Christian spouse from leading a Christian life. (LW, 28: 28)

In 1522, Luther preached a sermon entitled *Living as Husband and Wife* (LW, 28: 28) (sometimes called the *Estate of Marriage*), which is divided into three parts. Part one discusses sex as God's creation and whom to marry, part two discusses divorce and new marriage, and part three discusses what it means to live as husband and wife.

In Luther's preface, he expressed a fear of preaching on marriage because once involved in the subject it becomes a lot of work for him and others. What does he mean by this? Luther affirmed sexuality as something well created by God. Our physical anatomy speaks to our sexual identity. Unlike many of this time, Luther affirmed the essential goodness of the body as something created by God for a divine purpose. Such a view represents a marked departure from the prevailing Christian view of humanity where the body is denigrated. Luther made it clear that marriage is for male and female, thus ruling out same-sex marriage. He called God's divine mandate to be fruitful and multiply a natural and necessary thing. Luther gave no indication here that sex is unnatural, dirty, perverse or immoral when conducted within the proper context. The sexual drive is powerful and it says it abides and rules within us and we can ignore it or we will be "bound to" commit heinous sins without an end. Luther denounced vows, covenant and pledges relating to chastity before God (LW, 28: 28).

In the second part of the pamphlet Luther addressed the 18 prohibitions of the types of individuals that are prohibited to get married. He found only one valid prohibition that has to do with the unfitness of husband and a wife for marriage based on natural deficiencies.

Luther's View on Divorce

The second part of the pamphlet also deals with the issue of divorce and remarriage. He gave three valid grounds for divorce based on his understanding of Scripture:

- (1) Husband and wife not equipped for marriage because of bodily and natural deficiencies;
- (2) Adultery, Matt 19:3-9. The innocent party can remarry. If adultery is private, there are two options: Spouse may rebuke his wife privately or keep her if she changes, or divorce her. Public divorce so as to remarry must take place through the investigation and decision of civil authority, so that adultery may be manifest to all. The guilty party may be put to death by the state according to Bible (to prevent temptation), or go to a far country and there remarry if unable to remain chaste. But it would be better to put him to death lest a bad example be set (LW, 45: 30);

Luther addressed people who found fault with his solution of exile and blamed the government for failing to punish adulterers. "God will judge, who can prevent all wickedness. If innocent party decides to keep guilty, the guilty should be publicly rebuked" (LW, 45: 33);

- (3) Failure to fulfill conjugal duties (wife's problem). "If you will not, another will; the maid will come if the wife will not". Husband should warn her twice than take her to the church. If she still refuses, get rid of her. Esther 1:12-17; 1 Cor 7:4-5(LW, 45: 33).

The third part of the pamphlet deals with living as husband and wife. Marriage had fallen into awful disrepute. Books on the depravity of women and unhappiness of marriage estate proliferated. Man cannot live

without women. Men and women are work of God (order of creation). Luther wrote:

Do not criticize his work, or call that evil which he himself has called good.... For this reason young men should be on their guard when they read pagan books and hear the common complaints about marriage, lest they inhale poison. For the estate of marriage does not set well with the devil, because it is God's good will and work. (LW, 45: 37)

Luther argued that the devil has contrived to have negative things written about marriage to frighten man away from this godly life and entangle them in a web of fornication and secret sins. Proverbs 18:22 say that he that finds a wife finds a good thing while the world says "brief is the joy, lasting is the bitterness".

Witte concluded that, according to many contemporary observers, Luther's alarm over the decrepit estate of marriage and marriage laws was certainly not unfounded.

Germany suffered through decades of indiscipline and immorality in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Prostitution was rampant. High clerics and officials of government regularly kept concubines and visited the numerous brothels in German cities. The small fines of such activity discouraged few. (Witte, 1987)

Luther gave a fourth ground for divorce, this is a situation where a couple cannot get along together, but this time, remarriage is not in the card, because either the couple must remain unmarried or also become reconciled. In the case of an invalid wife who becomes incapable of fulfilling her conjugal duty, the husband ought to stay with his wife (LW, 45 : 35).

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 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.

Luther's View on Sex

Luther had much to say about sex, some of it was crude and earthy. He described much about sex as a procreative function and as an outlet for man's passions and desires reflecting some of the traditional views of his times, although at times he spoke of sex in more affectionate tones. As a student of the Catholic and Augustinian theology, he was affected by the views of the sinfulness of sexuality (even in marriage).

The old Adam who fell in paradise and is inborn in us—that infamous bag of worms we carry around our necks—never ceases to plague us with his evil lusts and desires to commit sin and adultery. But one can control sin in the estates of marriage, virginity, and widowhood. Yet even marriage is not all pure. A married couple cannot sleep together without shameful desire even though they both want to live together blamelessly. Only when we grow old does this lust subside. But, for the sake of marriage, God does not reckon this as sin. He chooses to adorn marriage by not calling such sins sinful even though they are. Because God closes his eyes to this sin, it is forgiven in marriage. (Lazareth, 1960, p. 213)

Luther had difficulty ridding himself of the evil connotations associated with sexuality. Much of his writings reflected a one-sided view of sex and he seemed to be reactive against Catholic celibacy. Sexuality seemed to be associated with man's sinful, carnal nature. Time and time again Luther spoke of marriage as a kind of remedy for the sinful, lustful desire of man. "Marriage is a mighty dike to hold back the destructive flood of human sexuality—a remedy against sin" (LW 1: 134). Luther interpreted Psalm 51 as an indication that our natures are corrupt from birth. He wrote:

As it says in the 50th [51] Psalm, all man's flesh and blood is corrupted through Adam since we are all conceived and born in sin. Nor are man's sexual relations sinless in marriage either. It is only that God embellishes them out of grace because the order of marriage is his own personal handiwork, and he preserves all the good which he has planted within it even in the midst of all the surrounding sin. (Lazareth, 1960. p. 21)

There is not much of the celebratory dimension of sex in Luther's writings. There is little emphasis on the unitive and intimate function sex plays in the marriage. Luther downplayed the role of pleasure in sexual intercourse in the marriage, except on a few occasions.

Luther's View on Celibacy

As I have pointed out previously, much of Luther's counsel on marriage addressed situations during his time. One of the most important areas was how celibacy and chastity were seen as badges of spiritual superiority for Christians. Time and time again Luther came back to this issue. He wanted to make it clear that celibacy was not equivalent to sexual purity (chastity). Having taken the vow of celibacy himself as a monk, he was well aware of his own attempts of chastity, he was also a living eye witness to many of his companions' lives. Luther claimed that celibate men still lusted and many even had concubines. In fact, Luther argued that marriage was the best state to remain chaste. The idea was that within marriage one could express one's sexual desires within a legitimate context without guilt or sin (although he wavered on this point at times). Luther therefore discouraged celibacy and encouraged marriage because he saw celibacy as a part of the devil's strategy to cause men to sin more than if they had not taken the vows.

The world says of marriage: "Brief joy and long sadness"... But Christians believe that it is God himself who instituted marriage. It is he who brings a man and wife together and ordains that they bring forth children. For God does not lie and he has given his word in order that men might be certain that the estate of marriage is well-pleasing to him in its nature, works, suffering and everything that belongs to it. (Lazareth, 1960. p. 219)

Although Luther at times had a negative reason for marriage and called it "a remedy against sin", both personally and socially, he emphasized a positive dimension. He described it as an opportunity for man to engage in the noblest and most precious work of them all, which is the rearing of children in the knowledge and love of God (Lazareth, 1960. p. 219).

Historian Martin Marty observed:

The law of celibacy...was so deeply etched in the minds of the faithful and so strongly did the church leaders insist on it that to question it and to promote clerical marriage struck very close to social foundations of the church and government...to violate the rule of celibacy as many clergy did was one thing. To set out to abolish it was another, a rare and extreme consideration. (Marty, 2008, p. 102)

Luther denounced lawless clergy who went whoring or kept concubines because he believed that celibacy was an unnatural state for human to live in. Luther's attack on celibacy, even calling for its abolition was

source of deep anger and concern for the Catholic Church hierarchy.

The elevation of celibacy and the denigration of sex have a long history in the Catholic Church. Augustine viewed sexual congress as necessary for child bearing but intrinsically lustful (Marty, 2008, p. 107). Many priests struggled with their vows as celibates as can be seen from the testimony of the following:

Thus am I entangled: on the one hand, I cannot live without a wife; on the other, I am not permitted a wife. Hence, I am forced to live a publicly disgraceful life, to the shame of my soul and honor and to the damnation of many who have taken offense at me [that is, by refusing to receive the sacraments from his hands]. How shall I preach about chasteness and against promiscuity, adultery, and knavish behavior, when my own whore goes to church and about the streets and my own bastards sit before my eyes? (Ozment, 1983, p. 6)

In response to criticisms leveled against him for encouraging the breaking of celibacy vows, Luther replied in a lengthy treatise entitled *On Monastic Vows* in 1521. In it he made the following points: (1) Vows are not grounded in the word of God; (2) Vows are contrary to faith; (3) Vows are in opposition to evangelical freedom; (4) Vows are in opposition to the commandments of God; (5) Vows are irrational (LW, 44 : 243-400).

In Luther's revised *Commentary on Galatians* in 1535, he addressed the issue of marriage and celibacy. Luther affirmed marriage by calling it part of God's natural order and the state of marriage is chief in the world after religion. He rejected those who reject marriage but instead keep concubines. Everything in nature from the animals to the plant exhibit maleness and femaleness as part of their natural make-up. Luther encouraged those who cannot live chastely to get married.

Luther also agreed with Augustine who said that a marriage without children is like a world without the sun. "All human laws should encourage the multiplication of families". He called the state of matrimony the chief thing in the world after religion (Hazlitt, 1875, p. 298). He listed the following points that should be considered by those contemplating marriage:

(1) God's command; (2) Christ's confirmation of it; (3) Gift or present of Christ; (4) First blessing; (5) Promise that is made hereunto; (6) Communion and fellowship; (7) Example of the holy patriarchs; (8) Tempered laws and ordinances; (9) Precious benediction and blessings; (10) Examples of the wicked; (11) Threatenings of Paul; (12) Natural rights; (13) Nature and kind of creation; and (14) Practice of faith and hope. (Hazlitt, 1875, p. 299)

Luther's View on Women

While Luther's honored and elevated marriage, he veered little from the contemporary views about the subordination of women. He seemed to focus more on the male sexual drive and his need to satisfy himself by entering his wife. He supported the conjugal rights of both and encouraged both to find pleasure. In a hypothetical situation, he counseled that if a man who had been denied sex by his wife, he could turn to his handmaid or some other woman for sexual relations (Marty, 2008, p. 108). Because he respected the rights of the woman also, he balanced that advice with its counterpart. A woman who was married to an impotent man, but who desired to have children with her husband's consent, could have intercourse with another man, for example her husband's brother. In such a situation they were advised to keep their relationship secret and ascribe any children from this relationship to the "so-called putative father". "Such a woman would be in a saved state and would not be displeasing to God" (Marty, 2008, p. 108).

One of the most persistent criticisms of Luther by his enemies was the view that he left the priesthood in order to get married and that he encouraged others to practice sexual license. In other words, Luther was a lustful degenerate who could not control his sexual desires and encouraged others in their immorality. Were

these criticisms truthful and valid? The following is an example of what critics wrote concerning Luther:

Mohammed granted men permission to have many wives and to put them away at will and take others. This man (Luther) in order to win the favor of the monks and the virgins dedicated to God and the priests who are guilty of lustful desire, preaches that vows of perpetual continence are not lawful and binding and that evangelical liberty permits them to marry. (Pope Adrian VI, November 25, 1522)

How did Luther respond to this criticism? Luther's response must be seen on two levels. The first level is what he wrote to refute his critics and secondly how he lived his life especially on the area of sexual conduct. Any survey of Luther's writings leaves no impression whatsoever that he encouraged sexual immorality. Time and time again he spoke out against sexual immorality. His great burden was for Christians to live in purity before God, not as celibates but as happy married couples. He was criticized primarily because he rejected the church's view of sexual chastity and celibacy preferring instead marriage (Lazareth, 1960, pp. 200-201). Luther encouraged believers to pray and study God's word as a solution for the problem of immorality (Lazareth, 1960, pp. 215-216). Secondly, his personal conduct was above reproach for he lived a life of sexual fidelity to his wife of 21 years and faithfulness before God. So on both levels the criticisms leveled against Luther are without merit.

King Henry VIII of England whose personal life was a moral disgrace, had the nerve to criticize Luther on matters of sexual morality. He described Luther's movement as universally pernicious... "which profanes sacred things, preaches Christ so as to trample on his sacraments, boasts of the grace of God so as to destroy all free will, extols faith so as to give license to sin" (Henry VIII of England, January 20, 1523).

Luther would argue, and I think successfully, that it was not him that was encouraging immorality, but it was his opponents who were accusing him, they were the ones encouraging immorality. Because by their continual acceptance of the views of the church on celibacy, divorce, impediments and marriage they were in effect indirectly encouraging greater immorality. Most people agreed that the freedom that Luther taught concerning marriage resulted in a more upright moral climate. Priests no longer had to sneak around with prostitutes and concubines. People could enter marriage with the freedom that they could enjoy sex and still be serving God.

Luther's Call for Reformation in Marriage and Family

Luther's great contribution to marriage and family was to recognize that like so many of the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the institution of marriage 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. (Ozment, 1983, p. 1)

There were many threats to marriage and family in the laws of the medieval church: On the 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 16th century to end such secret unions and define impediments more realistically (Ozment, 1983, pp. 1-2). 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 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. (Ozment, 1983, p. 4)

It was as in much need of reformation as was the doctrine of grace. Luther in his irascible and earthy style went about to reform the institution of marriage. How successful was Luther when compared to his reform of the doctrine of grace? The fact that many of the ideas that Luther proposed about marriage and family are commonly accepted and practiced within the context in which Western Christianity testifies of his success.

Analysis of Luther’s View on Marriage and Sexuality

One of the great ironies about marriage in Luther’s day was that, although it was considered one of the seven sacraments of the church, it was the only sacrament not available to the priests who were dispensers of the sacraments. They who administered the sacraments could not partake of this one sacrament. Why was this? Supposedly it was because they had taken an oath of celibacy and that was considered sexual chastity elevating them into a higher arena of spirituality. But this stated reason was laid bare by what was happening in secret. It was a well-known fact that bishops kept concubines and they allowed priests to keep concubines if the priest paid them a fee as the following statement reveals:

Do not most bishops derive a large part of their annual income from the fees collected from the priests’ concubines? Whoever desires to have such a woman is obligated to pay the bishop at least a gulden a year. From this practice originates the common saying, “Chaste priests are the bishops’ worst enemies”, How can the procurers become any richer than our own bishops? Who would ever have thought that our spiritual fathers could permit such sexual promiscuity and deny their priests the right to marry just for the sake of money? Truly there are many forms of madness! (Lazareth, 1960, p. 206)

It seemed that the church’s reason for forcing celibacy on the clerics was not for the sake of chastity, for many of them were not practicing chastity; the church knew this and, in some cases, encouraged immorality. Marriage was denied them primarily out of economic reasons. The church wanted to make sure that priests would not be married and thus have legitimate heirs to inherit whatever they may possess, thus preventing priests from engaging in legitimate, marital relationships. Celibacy instead of creating chastity, indirectly fostered an atmosphere of gross immorality. This was one of the practices of the church that ignited Luther’s passion against the whole catholic system of celibacy and chastity. It seemed whenever he talked on the subject of marriage, sex or family he came back to the issue, blasting the church with strong language.

Some of Luther’s theology of marriage seemed to be highly polemic and reactive like when he spoke out against the corruption and denigration of marriage. There is an edge to his writing. His theology is not just “for something”, but against “something and someone”. It was a theology designed to restore in Luther’s mind the true biblical understanding of marriage. Rome had distorted, perverted and corrupted marriage as they had done with many of the truths of the Bible. Marriage was as much in need of restoration as was the Gospel, Justification and other truths. Time and time again he wrote of how the “papists”, “Rome” and the church had

made a mockery of marriage. His language in denouncing them was sometimes crude and vulgar. He called a spade a spade so he was not afraid to use words like “whore, antichrist, and fouled mouth”. In the words of one writer, “Luther was convinced that... the devil and his agents could not be handled with kid’s gloves” (Lazareth,1960, p. 207).

Because many of the things that Luther said on marriage was polemical and at times reactive, he was sometimes intemperate in his use of language. While it was biblical, it was not always balanced. An example of this is his description of marriage as a remedy against sin. The use of this metaphor to describe one purpose of marriage is a major characteristic of Luther’s view on marriage. One writer suggested that this was based on his conviction that “God had not left his children unprotected in the midst of this fallen and sinful world. He has graciously provided them with a mighty dike to hold back the destructive flood of human sensuality and immorality: the divine ordinance of marriage” (Lazareth,1960, p. 208). In the words of Luther, “Is it not a great thing that even in the state of innocence God ordained and instituted marriage? But now this institution and command are all the more necessary since sin has weakened and corrupted this flesh”. As one of God’s protective bulwarks in his struggle against Satan, marriage is interpreted by early Luther as a divine ordinance and institution, which provides fallen man and woman with a remedy, again sin (Lazareth, 1960, p. 208).

Even as we critique Luther’s view on marriage and family we must keep in mind that Luther was still many years ahead of his contemporaries, his church, society and the culture on this subject, especially his ideas on sex, divorce, roles of husbands and wives. Unlike the Catholic Church which had strict and rigid rules about divorce, Luther showed a flexibility that was admirable. Luther understood the complexity of the issues that he addressed and recognized the difficulty of providing traditional simplistic answers to many of the sexual and marital problems of his times. In the following words from Luther we get a small glimpse of his frustration in trying to deal with these problems.

The matter troubles and distresses me; I meet cases of it every day whether it happens by the special malice of Satan or because of our neglect of the Word of God... In these matters I decide nothing, as I have said, although there is nothing I would see decided, since nothing at present more perplexes me and many more with me. (Luther, October 6, 1520)

Instead of relying only on canon law, tradition, or local legal codes, Luther depended on a mixture of biblical principles, common sense reason, and relevant elements from the existing legal code to deal with the issues. Most of his counsels were written from the heart of a caring pastor ministering to his flock and one who was deeply concerned about their spiritual well-being.

One of the most admirable qualities about Luther’s theology on marriage and family is the incarnational quality of his theology. Luther is no ivory tower theologian spinning out esoteric and theoretical views disconnected from real life. Luther lived and worked in the trenches of life, his hands were dirty and stained with life’s problems. His theology emerged from and was shaped by this immersion in life. He was married for 21 years and by all reports had a fulfilling and successful marriage. But it was not a marriage without challenges. Therefore, much of his counsel on marriage came from his own experience as a married man (he did not simply write about marriage, but spoke from his own marriage). He lived what he preached.

Luther’s view on the importance of teaching and training children led to the establishment of the public school system in Germany. Luther moved the sacred from the church and brought it into family context, so that the mundane activity of family life, rearing children, cooking and cleaning took on a sacred and valued character that was never part of medieval society (Lazareth, 1960, p. 134). Luther believed that God’s service

should not be limited to the pulpit or the altar, whatever our calling or profession whether in the home or outside of the home, we are as much engaged in the work of God as any priest or monk. “When a Christian dedicates his labors to serving his family and glorifying God’s name, faith can transform dreary occupation into a meaningful vocation” (Lazareth, 1960, p. 150). Here we see how Luther elevated marriage and family to a place it never was before. Luther sanctified the secular, he made sacred the common.

Luther affirmed the authority of parents in their homes and admonished children to respect and honor them. But even as he said this, he cautioned parents to exercise their authority with discretion and wisdom and not use it to abuse their children nor coerce them into decisions (especially regarding marriage) that they did not agree to.

Luther’s counsels generally were wise and supported by biblical principles but on a couple of occasions he made some serious mistakes. Two of the most well-known, one was the case of Phillip of Hesse concerning his bigamous relationship. The counsel he gave to this important leader of the reformation concerning his wife left much to be desired. Luther in counseling with Phillip of Hesse, one of the evangelical German princes who was having marital problems, suggested that he married another woman instead of a public marriage annulment. This played into the hands of Luther’s critics and gave credence to those criticizing Luther as providing license to sexual immorality.

On another occasion, he counseled an impotent husband to allow his wife to sleep with his brother.

Suppose I should counsel her, with the consent of the man (who is not really her husband, but merely a dweller under the same roof with her), to give herself to another, say her husband’s brother, but to keep this marriage secret and to ascribe the children to the so-called putative father. The question is: Is such a woman in a saved state? I answer, certainly. Because in this case the error and ignorance of the man’s impotence are a hindrance to marriage; the tyranny of the laws permit no divorce; the woman is free through the divine law, and cannot be compelled to remain continent. Therefore the man ought to yield her this right, and let another man have her as wife whom he has only in outward appearance.

Moreover, if the man will not give his consent, or agree to this division, rather than allow the woman to burn or to commit adultery, I should counsel her to contract a marriage with another and flee to distant parts unknown. What other counsel could be given to one constantly in danger of lust?... Is not the sin of the man who wastes his wife’s body and life a greater sin than that of the woman who merely alienates the temporal goods of her husband? Let him, therefore, agree to a divorce or else be satisfied with strange heirs; borne by his own fault he deceived the innocence of a maiden and defrauded her of the proper use of her body, besides giving her a well-nigh irresistible opportunity to commit adultery. (Luther, October 6, 1520)⁴

Lessons from Luther on Marriage and family

Luther’s revolutionary teaching on marriage and 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 a 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.

⁴Lazareth comments on this: “Having no remedial recourse in either civil or canon in such a case, Luther turns desperately to the Bible for guidance. The best he could come up with is questionable modification of the old Hebrew ‘levirate marriage’. Deuteronomy 25:10 decrees that when a male dies without a male descendant, the widow must not marry a stranger, but rather the surviving brother of the deceased (even if he is already married). He must take her as his own wife and her first born son together succeeds to the name and property of the deceased. In Luther’s eyes the impotent male was actually ‘dead’ to his wife as far as any possible procreation in their marriage was concerned” (Lazareth, 1960, p. 191, n. 85).

Luther's unequivocal affirmation is needed today more than ever. Luther called marriage an order of creation, God-appointed, legitimate union of man and woman, necessary for the human race. He affirmed 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 described 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 (LW, 3 : 221).

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.

Luther's concept of marriage as a vocation is a wonderful idea that needs to be recaptured by post modern 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 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 attempted 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 attempted to forge a path that will not be too burdensome for the parties involved without compromising the word of God.

Luther counseled 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.

Conclusions

Martin Luther's views on marriage and family have 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 a 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 devoted 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 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.

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