

**MARTIN LUTHER: MARRIAGE AND
THE FAMILY AS A REMEDY
FOR SIN**

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"With my wedding, I have made the angels laugh and the devils weep."

Introduction

For most of the Christian era before the Reformation, the estates of marriage and the 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.¹ An important reason lay behind these perspectives: Christian teaching since the patristic period postulated a tension between salvation and pleasure. Most influential Christian thinkers of this period nurtured a gloomy suspicion that one cannot be attained without renouncing the other. Similarly, the medieval church long remained suspicious, even hostile, toward family ties. Church leaders suspected that conjugal affection and parental love often disguised sensual entanglements and worldly values. For this reason, theologians saw little value in family attachments. To protect against such entanglements among the clergy, the church proposed the keeping of vows of chastity, celibacy, virginity, and the vow not to engage in the rights of marriage.²

Not until the Reformation were marriage and the family restored to places of honor within the Christian community. One who contributed much to this restoration was Martin Luther, the great German Reformer. While Luther never completely rid himself of the tension between salvation and pleasure, he nevertheless began a movement within Christianity that made it possible to be a good Christian and at the same time be happily married and have an enjoyable sex life. One of the ways in which he helped to resolve this tension was in his revolutionary thinking about marriage and the family. It has

¹Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in *Luther's Work*, American ed., 55 vols., ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 1:135; hereafter LW. See also Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James K. Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 297-306.

²A. Vermeersch, "The Vow of Chastity," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, 23 vols., ed. Charles George Herbermann, Edward Aloysius Pace, Condé, Benoît Pallen, John Joseph Wynne, and Thomas Joseph Shahan (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1912), 15:514.

been noted that Luther “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.”³ Although Luther is known primarily for his teaching on justification by faith, it can be argued that his views on marriage and the family were just as significant for society at large. Most nonbelievers 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 this topic has had a significant impact on the definition of marriage and the family in the Western world.

The purpose of this article is to survey Luther’s views and experiences regarding marriage and the family. I will begin by examining the historical background from which his understanding of these estates emerged, followed by an examination of his theological responses to the church’s vows on chastity, celibacy, sex, women, marriage, and divorce.

Luther and Family Life

Childhood and Young Adulthood

Luther was born on 10 November 1483, in the small town of Eisleben, Germany.⁴ His family was clearly of peasant stock, but his father’s ambitious business dealings advanced the family’s economic fortunes and made it possible for Luther to receive the finest available education.⁵ His parents were devout, God-fearing Catholics, typical of their time and culture. Their religious beliefs were superstitious and dominated by fear of a vengeful God.⁶

Due to these economic and religious influences, Luther’s early childhood was not easy and he often received severe discipline from both mother and father. He once described an incident in which his mother whipped him until the blood flowed for stealing a nut.⁷ On another occasion, his father whipped him so severely that he ran away for a while.⁸ Luther’s discipline did not end at home; it was just as severe at school. Upon reflection of his early school experience, he noted: “I was caned in a single morning fifteen times for nothing at all. I was required to decline and conjugate and hadn’t learned my lesson.”⁹

³Steven Ozment, “Re-inventing Family Life,” *Christian History* 12/3 (1993): 22.

⁴De Lamar Jensen, *Reformation Europe* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992), 43.

⁵*Ibid.*, 106-107.

⁶*Ibid.*, 390; cf. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 7.

⁷Jensen, 109.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Bainton, 104.

Nevertheless, in spite of his strict and disciplined upbringing, Luther turned out to be a normal child. However, his views about God may have been influenced by his early experiences. God the Father was capricious, fluxuating “between wrath and mercy.”¹⁰

From Monk to Married Man

In 1505, Luther joined the Augustinian Hermits and took the threefold vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Marriage was thus out of the question. Nor did he later envision life as a married man after leaving the monastery and renouncing his monastic vows. Unlike many Catholic scholars of the time, he did not, however, denigrate marriage or see it as lesser form of spirituality. Contrary to many of his critics, who believed that he left the monastery in order to get married, Luther resisted the idea of marriage for himself, but encouraged it for other clerics.

Why was Luther initially so resistant to being married himself? In a 1521 letter to his friend Spalatin, he contended that he would never have a wife forced upon him.¹¹ Three years later he reiterated this position when seeking to squelch a rumor that he had married, noting, “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.”¹² Thus Luther’s primary objection to marriage seems to stem from his belief that his life could be taken from him at any moment. These fears appear justified. After the 1521 Diet of Worms, at which he made his emphatic stance against the church, he was placed under a ban and authority was given to any member of the church to arrest him. He therefore saw no value in getting married, only then to leave behind a widow and children.

But, of course, Luther did marry. His eventual decision to marry may have been influenced by a number of factors. Two important reasons involved his parents and his future wife and former nun, Katherina von Bora. On one hand, his parents encouraged him to get married. They wanted grandchildren.¹³ His father was displeased when Luther joined the monastery, but now that he was no longer a monk he desired for his son to enjoy a normal life. On the other, he was, at last, convinced of entering into marriage by von Bora. After renouncing his vows, Luther encouraged fathers to remove their daughters

¹⁰Ibid., 49.

¹¹Martin Luther, “Luther an Spalatin, Wartburg,” 6 August 1521, in *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 57 vols., ed. J.F.K. Knaake et. al (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883ff), WA, BR 2, nr. 426, 377. (Hereafter cited as WA).

¹²Paul Thigpen, “A Family Album,” *Christian History* 12/3 (1993): 14.

¹³William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 23.

from convents. In 1523, he praised Leonhard Koppe for engineering the escape of his daughter and eleven other nuns, among them von Bora. He compared Koppe's freeing of the sisters to Moses' deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage.¹⁴

All of the nuns returned to find husbands or employment, except for von Bora. Initially, she was in love with Luther's friend, Jerome Baumgartner, but their relationship was aborted by his parents, who disapproved of it. Von Bora thus found herself to be alone. Several other attempts were made to marry her off, but to no avail. Even Luther tried to find a suitable mate for her. Finally, it was brought to his attention by his close coworker, Nicolas von Amsdorf, that von Bora was interested in a match with him.

Some have suggested that Luther was motivated by pity and responsibility for von Bora and that is why he married her.¹⁵ However, another reason why he might have chosen to marry was to live by example. He had written extensively on 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.¹⁶ Regardless of the reasons, Luther married the twenty-six-year-old von Bora on 13 June 1525 when he was forty-two.

At the time of Luther's nuptials, Germany was in the midst of the Peasant War, which only added to his already dangerous situation. Peasant leaders were using his materials and his name as the source of and support for their rebellion. Luther was well aware of these developments, yet he nonetheless entered into marriage. Just days before his wedding, he wrote to 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."¹⁷

But in spite of his change of heart toward marrying, not all of Luther's family and friends, including Melanchthon, his most trusted colleague, were in agreement with his decision to marry. Nor was the marriage preceded by a proper courtship or even, apparently, expressions of love for the woman he was to wed. Soon after his marriage, Luther noted, "God has willed and caused my act, for I neither love my wife nor burn for her but esteem her highly."¹⁸

¹⁴Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 17.

¹⁵Emmett W. Cocke Jr., "Luther's View of Marriage and Family," *Religion in Life* 42 (Spring 1973): 106.

¹⁶Lazareth, 23.

¹⁷Martin Luther "Letter to John Rühel at Mansfeld," 4 May 1525, in *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 2 vols., ed. P. Smith and C. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1913-1918), 2:310.

¹⁸Martin Luther, "Luther an Nikolaus von Amsdorf in Magdeburg, [Wittenberg],"

Nevertheless, while there were impediments and difficulties that made his road to marriage difficult and while he may not have been in love with his wife at their wedding, Luther grew to love her dearly and they enjoyed a happy married life together. In a letter written in 1526, he praised his wife, exclaiming: “My Katie is in all things so obliging and pleasing to me that I would not exchange my poverty for the riches of Croesus.”¹⁹ Later he paid her this tribute: “I give more credit to Katherina than to Christ, who has done so much more for me.”²⁰ Near the end of his life, after recovering from a severe illness, he ardently declared his love for his dear Katie and their children, stating: “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.”²¹ Judging from his words, it seems that Luther firmly believed that God’s hand was in his marriage and that he saw marriage as a way of getting back at the devil, who despised marriage.

Luther and von Bora were married for twenty-one years, and in spite of their sixteen-year age difference they enjoyed a fruitful and satisfying family life. Luther’s relationship with his wife was very good. He respected and admired her prudent management of their estate and financial affairs. She “earned such respect from her husband, whom she excelled in virtually all worldly matters.” She was a “model housewife and an accomplished businesswoman.” Examples of her diligent labor in behalf of her family, Luther’s resident students, and frequent guests include remodeling the Black Cloister in which the Luther family lived so that it would accommodate students and guests, enlarging the cloister gardens, and repairing and running the brewery. Luther dubbed her the “morning star of Wittenberg,” as her day began at 4:00 a.m.²² She freed Luther from many of the cares of domestic life so he could pursue his writing and reformation work without much worry. For these many wonderful attributes, Luther loved his wife and professed it openly throughout his life, leading him to state: “There is no bond on earth so sweet nor any separation so bitter as that which occurs in a good marriage.”²³ He once boasted to his table colleagues:

21 June 1525, in WA, BR 3, nr. 900, 23..

¹⁹Martin Luther, “Luther an Michael Stifel, in Wittenberg,” 11 August 1526, in WA, BR 4, nr. 1032, 108.

²⁰Bainton, 293.

²¹Ibid.

²²Katherine rose at 4 a.m. in the summer and at 5 a.m. in the winter to oversee her large household. See James G. Cobb, *Reformation’s Rib* (Lima, OH: CCS, 2001), 9. See also Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

²³Ozment, “Re-inventing Family Life,” 25.

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.²⁴

Luther was not alone in his marital joy. Von Bora's testimony at the death of her husband gives evidence of her equal love and devotion:

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.²⁵

Father

In their two decades of marriage, Luther and von Bora had six children, whom Luther adoringly called his six "little heathens" from God: Hans (1526), Elizabeth (1527), Magdalena (1529), Martin (1531), Paul (1533), and Margareta (1534). In spite of his prodigious scholarly work, Luther enjoyed spending time with his children. Emmett Cocke Jr. observes:

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.²⁶

Nevertheless, 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."²⁷ On another, 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, as with so many couples of that time, experienced the early death of two of their offspring. Elizabeth, their first daughter, died when she was only eight months old. Luther mourned, "I so

²⁴Luther, WA, TR 1, nr. 49, 17; trans. Lazareth, 32.

²⁵Katharina Luther, "Letter to Christina Von Bora," Wittenberg, 2 April 1546, in *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, ed. P. Smith (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 424.

²⁶Cocke, 107.

²⁷Luther, WA, TR 5, nr. 6102, 489. "Ich weil lieber einen todten son denn einen ungezogenen haben."

lamented her death that I was exquisitely sick, my heart rendered soft and weak; never had I thought that a father's heart could be so broken for his children's sake."²⁸ The death of their second daughter, Magdalene, at age thirteen almost devastated Luther and left him so grief-stricken that he sobbed openly at her funeral, exclaiming:

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.²⁹

Luther's immediate family was a source of joy and grief to him. The family's shared love made their home a source of inspiration and the Black Cloister was never empty of students and other guests.

Students and Guests

Luther's home was a place not just for his own flesh and blood. All who came to the Black Cloister were made to feel welcome. His home was more like a boarding house for relatives, tutors, students, and numerous nuns and monks. There was a constant flow of guests, all of whom were expected to conform to family customs, including studying the catechism, praying, and attending family devotions.³⁰ Luther had a gregarious nature and enjoyed good conversation, singing, and fellowship. It was from these gatherings that he, with von Bora's help in transcribing the lively conversations, created *Table Talk* and where he tested his theological ideas against the medieval concepts that he sought to reform. It is to Luther's theological repudiation and revision of the church's views on chastity, celibacy, sex, women, marriage, and divorce that I now turn.

Luther's Views on Chastity, Celibacy, Sex, Women, Marriage, and Divorce

It appears that Luther's views on marriage and the family were forged, at least partially, in his experience of family life. But they were also influenced by his growing understanding of the theology of marriage and the family. His early theological perspectives began even while he was still a practicing monk contemplating the meaning of his monastic vows and the motivations that had brought such vows into existence. These vows included chastity,

²⁸Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 167.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Cocke, 107.

celibacy, virginity, and the vow not to engage in the rights of marriage and are differentiated from one another in the following way:

The vow of chastity forbids all voluntary sexual pleasure, whether interior or exterior: thus its object is identical with the obligations which the virtue of chastity imposes outside the marriage state. Strictly speaking, it differs (though in ordinary language the expressions may be synonymous) from the vow of celibacy (or abstinence from marriage), the vow of virginity (which becomes impossible of fulfillment after complete transgression), or the vow not to use the rights of marriage. . . . Unless the person concerned is able honestly to abstain from all use of the rights of marriage, every simple vow of chastity constitutes a prohibitive impediment to marriage.³¹

Chastity

Some of Luther's views on marriage and the family reflect the late medieval Catholic view. He was a child of his time and culture, so it should not be surprising that especially his early views on the subject would reflect the age in which he was born, but the greatness and originality of Luther was that he went beyond his age. One area in which he did so was in regard to the medieval concept of chastity. As Steven Ozment explains,

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.³²

Most of the church's teachers, including Jerome, Augustine, Tertullian, Ambrose, Aquinas, and Gregory the Great, believed that passionate sexual expression was a "sin," "evil," "befoulment," and not much different from adultery, while virginity and celibacy were to be highly honored.³³ These attitudes became entrenched within Catholic teachings, writings, and meditation. The Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic response to the Reformation, continued to uphold the vows of chastity and celibacy and restricted sexual relations to marriage for the purpose of conceiving children.³⁴

³¹Vermeersch, 15:514.

³²Ozment, "Re-inventing Family Life," 22.

³³Fiona Bowie, "Chastity," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108-109.

³⁴Michael Banner, "Ethics, Sexual," in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste, 3 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1:505-509.

Luther, however, brought a far different view of chastity and its accompanying vow of celibacy to bear, encouraging marriage for all but those who were especially gifted by God to lead a celibate life. In doing so, he also revised the understanding of other priestly vows, such as the freedom to marry or remain celibate.

In his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7* (1523), Luther states in his opening paragraph that he is interpreting this passage of Scripture to refute the interpretation given by some to support celibacy and condemn marriage. He undertakes 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.³⁵

Luther turns to Scripture to support his claims. He begins by questioning the wisdom of those who oppose marriage, calling them smart alecks, sophisticates, principal fools, and blind men, who “fill the world with their foolish and blasphemous scribblings and screeching against the married state.”³⁶ These opponents of marriage advise others against it, but are unable to do without women because human beings are created for marriage. He then cites Johann Schmidt of Constance as an example of one who writes books discouraging marriage, but who is himself a notorious whoremonger. For Luther, the only way to stop fornication is through marriage.³⁷

Luther understands Paul as saying that chastity is not some higher state of spirituality. Therefore, keeping men and women or boys and girls separate will not necessarily make them chaste. Chastity cannot be conjured up or willed by human effort; it is a gift from heaven and must come from within. Outward chastity should not be forced upon young people, leading them to 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 it is sin and wrong.”³⁸ There is no escape for this suffering except through marriage. For him, celibacy is a beautiful, delightful, and noble gift for the one to whom it is given, but without this gift it is better to marry. Therefore, if you cannot be happy living a celibate life, then it is far better to be happily married.³⁹

As Luther demonstrates, chastity is not simply about remaining celibate, that is, refraining from outward sexual activities, but is a state of being that is ultimately unattainable without God’s gift to a particular person. Where did

³⁵Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7* (1523), in LW, 28:3.

³⁶Ibid., 5.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 11.

³⁹Ibid., 12.

the church's understanding of pleasure in sex versus salvation originate, and why did Luther so vigorously seek to change it?

Celibacy

Luther's counsel on marriage addressed the issues of his time. One of the most important areas was celibacy, which was celebrated as the badge of spiritual superiority for Christians. Time and time again, Luther returned 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 to attain chastity, and he was also a witness to many of his companions' lives. Luther claimed that celibate men still lusted and many even had concubines.

Luther points to a core problem behind the twin problems of chastity and celibacy—the contempt with which marriage was viewed in his time:

When I was a boy, the wicked and impious practice of celibacy had made marriage so disreputable that I believed I could not even think about a life of married people without sinning. Everybody was fully persuaded that anyone who intended to lead a holy life acceptable to God could not get married but had to live as a celibate and take the vow of celibacy.⁴⁰

Marriage had fallen into awful disrepute. Books on the depravity of women and the unhappiness of the marriage estate proliferated. Man could not live without woman.

Luther contended, however, that men and women are the work of God (after the order of creation). Therefore, he stated:

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.⁴¹

Luther argued that the devil has contrived to have negative things written about marriage to frighten humans away from this godly life and entangle them in a web of fornication and secret sins. Proverbs 18:22 says that he that finds a wife finds a good thing, while the world says, "brief is the joy, lasting is the bitterness."⁴²

John Witte concludes that, according to many contemporary observers, Luther's alarm over the decrepit estate of marriage and marriage laws was

⁴⁰Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in LW, 1:135; cf. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe*, 297-306.

⁴¹Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, in LW, 45:37.

⁴²Ibid., 38.

certainly not unfounded. “Germany suffered through decades of indiscipline and immorality in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth 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.”⁴³

A far-reaching and influential idea that stood behind the church’s view of marriage was the doctrine of original sin. While the idea of original sin was not new in the fourth century, it was Augustine of Hippo who most fully connected the doctrine to the pleasure-versus-salvation understanding of Adam and Eve’s original sin. The early Greek theologians had understood original sin to mean that Adam and Eve had fallen from “an original innocence and purity through an abuse of free will,” but they had a difficult time explaining “how Adam, who enjoyed the direct vision of God in the divine goodness, fell into evil.”⁴⁴ Augustine solved this problem by interpreting Genesis 3 with both a literal and an allegorical hermeneutic, proposing that

Adam and Eve had natural bodies but were able to hold off lust (*concupiscentia*) by partaking of the sacrament of the Tree of Life. When they rebelled out of pride and became the playthings of their senses, their sin was transmitted hereditarily (as original sin) through sexual intercourse. In consequence, he believed, intercourse was always attached to lust, even in sacramental marriage (*Marriage and Lust* 2.8.20).⁴⁵

Augustine thus viewed sexual congress as necessary for child-bearing but intrinsically lustful.⁴⁶ Many priests struggled with their vows of celibacy, 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?⁴⁷

In spite of the potential for unchaste behavior, Augustine’s understanding of original sin was highly influential not only in Catholic dogma, but “if

⁴³John Witte, “The Reformation of Marriage Laws in Martin Luther’s Germany: Its Significance Then and Now,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 4/2 (1987): 293.

⁴⁴Frank K. Flinn, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 274, s.v. “Fall, the.”

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Martin Marty, *Martin Luther: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 107.

⁴⁷Steven E. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 6.

anything, it became more influential during the Protestant Reformation, whose leaders cited Augustine in their insistence on the total depravity of fallen humanity.”⁴⁸

While he did not break with the Augustinian concept of original sin, nevertheless Luther sought to remove the stigma from marriage and the family that had come to be associated with Augustine’s version of original sin. In fact, he argued, marriage was the best state if one wanted 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 that it was a part of the devil’s strategy to cause men to sin more than if they had not taken the vows. He noted that

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.⁴⁹

Although Luther, at times, had a negative reason for marriage, nevertheless, both personally and socially, he emphasized a positive dimension. It was an opportunity for man to participate in a noble and precious work—the rearing of children in the knowledge and love of God.

Sexual Relations

The church’s view on sex was based largely upon the doctrine of original sin. Out of this understanding, three models of sexuality arose. The first model presented reproduction or procreation as the primary goal of sex, a view championed by the Roman Catholic Church. The second model of sexuality focused on the impurity and pollution caused by sex. Unlike procreationists, advocates of the “pollution model” strongly favored limiting marital relations to particular times, seasons, places, and circumstances. Hence pollutionists attached secondary importance to procreation, tending instead to emphasize “nature” as a criterion of sexual morality and not being overly concerned about contraception.⁵⁰ The third model of sexuality viewed marital sex as a source of intimacy and affection and as a symbol and source of conjugal

⁴⁸Flinn, 274.

⁴⁹Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” in LW, 45:38.

⁵⁰James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6.

love. Subscribers to this school of thought regarded sexual pleasure more positively than the proponents of the other two models.⁵¹

These ideas on sexuality were far-reaching and extended back, at least, to the early Christian era. When Jerome, writing in the fourth century, compared virginity, widowhood, and marriage on a scale of 1 to 100, he gave the highest possible score of 100 to virginity and scores of 60 and 30, respectively, to widowhood and marriage.⁵²

Luther, on the other hand, had much to say about sex, some of it crude and earthy. It appears that he embraced all three views of sexuality at various times in his life. He says much about sex as a procreative function and as an outlet for man's passions and desires, although at times he speaks of sex in more affectionate tones. As a student of the Catholic and Augustinian theology, he was affected by the view of the sinfulness of sexuality (even in marriage), once noting that

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.⁵³

Luther had difficulty ridding himself of the evil connotations associated with sexuality. Much of his writings reflected a one-sided view of sex. Sexuality seemed to be associated with man's sinful, carnal nature. Time and time again, Luther speaks of marriage as a kind of remedy for the sinful, lustful desire of man: "a remedy against sin."⁵⁴ Luther interprets Psalm 51 as an indication that our natures are corrupt from birth. He states:

As it says in the fiftieth Psalm [LXX], 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

⁵¹Ibid., 5.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Martin Luther, "Sermon, September 6, 1545," WA 51:51, cited in *Luther on the Christian Home: An Application of the Social Ethics of the Reformation*, William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 213.

⁵⁴Lazareth, 233-234.

handiwork, and he preserves all the good which he has planted within it even in the midst of all the surrounding sin.⁵⁵

There is not much of the celebratory dimension of sex in Luther's writings, and there is little emphasis on the unifying and intimate function sex may play in marriage. Luther generally downplayed the role of pleasure in sexual intercourse in the marriage, except on a few occasions. For example, in 1522, he preached a sermon, *The Estate of Marriage*,⁵⁶ in which he affirmed sexuality as something good, created by God. He notes that human anatomy speaks to an individual's sexual identity; therefore, marriage is between a male and a female, thus ruling out same-sex marriage.

Unlike many of his time, Luther also affirmed the essential goodness of the body as something created by God for a divine purpose. Such a view represented a marked departure from the prevailing Christian view of humanity in which the body is denigrated. He called God's divine mandate to be fruitful and multiply a natural and necessary thing, and gave no indication in this sermon that sex is unnatural, dirty, perverse or immoral when conducted within the proper context. The sexual drive is powerful and it abides and rules within humanity, which can ignore it or be "bound to" commit heinous sins without end.⁵⁷

Luther was thus still deeply influenced by the doctrine of original sin, even while he attempted to move beyond the more typical contempt of marriage. How did his understanding of original sin affect his understanding of women?

Women

Frank K. Flinn points to three issues that helped to shape the church's understanding of women.

Beginning as early as the second century, [1] the condemnation of remarriage and [2] the teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary of Nazareth helped create a culture in which the celibate, monastic, and religious life was considered superior to that of laypeople. [3] Augustine located original sin in the disorder of the will, which was manifest in the concupiscence of the flesh.⁵⁸

Flinn notes that not everyone shared these views. "Some, such as Jovinian (d. 405) and Julian of Celanum, argued for the goodness of creation and for

⁵⁵Martin Luther, "Vom ehelichen Leben," in WA 10.II, 304, trans. Lazareth, 212..

⁵⁶Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," in LW 45:17-49.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Flinn, 570.

marriage and the equality of a lay life lived in holiness, but their voices were effectively shut out.⁵⁹

While Luther honored and elevated marriage, he veered little from contemporary views about the subordination of women, which was linked directly to Genesis 3 and the fall of humanity through the doctrine of original sin. He seemed to focus more on the male sexual drive and his need to satisfy himself. He supported the conjugal rights of both men and women, even encouraging them in some instances to find pleasure. In a hypothetical situation, he counseled a man who had been denied sex by his wife to turn to his handmaid or some other woman for sexual relations.⁶⁰ Because he respected the rights of the woman in this regard, he balanced that advice with its counterpart. A woman who was married to an impotent man, but who desired to have children could, with her husband's consent, have intercourse with another man such as her husband's brother. They were advised to keep this 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."⁶¹

Generally, however, Luther advised couples of the necessity of remaining pure within the marriage relationship. Any survey of Luther's writing leaves no impression whatsoever that he encouraged sexual immorality; instead, he spoke against it time and time again. He encouraged believers to pray and study God's word as a solution for the problem of immorality.⁶² His great burden was for Christians to live in purity before God not as celibates, but as happily married couples. His personal conduct was above reproach and he lived a life of sexual fidelity to his wife of twenty-one years and of faithfulness before God. Importantly, however, he respected and cherished his wife in the day-to-day activities of life. In doing so, he serves as a model for the treatment of women, especially within marriage.

Marriage

Luther pointed to a number of reasons why people get married: (1) to attain money and property, (2) from sheer immaturity, (3) to seek sensual pleasure and satisfy it, (4) to beget heirs, (5) for Paul's reason: NEED, which commands it—nature will express itself in God's command to be fruitful and multiply, but this applies only within the marriage, "and so everyone because of this

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Marty, 108.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Lazareth, 200-201, 215-216.

need must enter marriage if he wants to live with good conscience and in favor with God.⁶³ Therefore, he concludes:

When there is not a special gift of God [that is, of chastity] 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. A Christian is free to remarry if the spouse separates or prevents a Christian spouse from leading a Christian life.⁶⁴

It is interesting to note that while still a celibate priest, Luther wrote extensively and positively on marriage. He viewed married life, as with other issues in the church, in need of reform. His writings on the subject played a significant role in restoring marriage to its rightful place. In contrast, the church made marriage and the 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. One did not need to be married, however, to know that marriage was under assault. Luther recognized this when he described marriage as “universally fallen 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.⁶⁵ With such low esteem of marriage, it is little wonder that people saw singleness as a better alternative to marriage.

Luther covered a wide variety of subjects on the topic of marriage. Some of these views, such as marriage as a sacrament, changed over time. Others developed as he experienced married life and fatherhood. Also important to his concept of marriage was the growing sense of movement away from the Catholic Church, which, with its intimate relationship with the civil state, brought its own set of marriage laws. Luther sought to redefine the relationship between the church and state in regard to marriage and was instrumental in defining a particularly Protestant approach to the concept of a civil marriage, the freedom to marry, the role of parental authority in the marriage contract, adultery and divorce. I now turn to Luther’s complex understanding of marriage.

Marriage as a Sacrament

One of Luther’s earliest works on marriage was a sermon he gave on the second Sunday after Epiphany in 1519, based on the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). In this sermon, Luther described marriage as God’s special gift to

⁶³Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, in LW, 28:27.

⁶⁴Ibid., 28.

⁶⁵Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, in LW, 45:36.

humanity. Since marriage comes from God, he counseled those who wanted to enter the estate of marriage to “earnestly pray to God for a spouse.”⁶⁶ Marriage was no accident, but was created for man. The woman was given to the man as a companion in all things, but particularly to bear children. Sin has corrupted marriage so that people enter into it not for companionship or procreation, but to fulfill their lust.⁶⁷

Luther describes three types of love: 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.” Married love is “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 only you.’”⁶⁸ But Luther acknowledges that even this pure love has become corrupted by sin. He describes the temptation of the flesh to be so strong and consuming that “marriage may be likened to a hospital for incurables which prevents inmates from falling into graver sin.”⁶⁹ Luther seems to have a clear grasp of how difficult it was to live a chaste life outside of marriage and he continually speaks of the difficulty of keeping the vow of chastity.

In this sermon, Luther seems to agree with the theologians of the church in calling marriage a sacrament. He would later reverse himself on the notion of marriage as a sacrament, while retaining its high and holy calling. Here, however, he describes 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.”⁷⁰ He considers 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 is mutual self-giving and a promise of faithfulness to the other. He believed that this promise should be more than just words spoken to each other, and he encouraged children to seek their parents’ counsel in choosing a life partner.⁷¹

Luther also proposed that while the chief purpose of marriage is to produce children, it is more than just this—it is for rearing godly children. Therefore, marriage partners “can do no better work and do nothing more valuable either for God, for Christendom, for all the world, for themselves,

⁶⁶Martin Luther, *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, in LW, 44:8.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., 10.

⁷¹Ibid., 11.

and for their children than to bring up their children well.⁷² He called marriage a kind of spiritual vocation, greater than all the good works of the church. In classic Luther, he says, “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.”⁷³ Addressing the issue on the other side, he says, “By the same token, hell is no more easily earned than with respect to one’s own children. You would do no more disastrous work 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.”⁷⁴ In Luther’s world, there was no place for negligent, indulgent parents. He seems to infer that the salvation of parents depends on how they rear their children.

This sermon provides valuable insight into Luther’s earliest views on marriage. He is still Catholic in seeing marriage as a sacrament. Although unmarried and a celibate priest, he was, nevertheless, a keen observer of marriage, and sought to provide valuable counsel on love in marriage, selecting a mate, the meaning of marriage, and parenting advice on child rearing.

A year later, however, Luther’s understanding of the sacrament of marriage changed. In one of his most important works, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), he repudiated marriage as a sacrament, which, of course, put him in direct conflict with traditional Catholic teachings. He appealed to the Scriptures by showing that the chief text, Eph 5:31, upon which the sacramental nature of marriage was established, was based on a faulty translation of the Greek word *mysterion* as “sacrament.” The original Greek word had nothing to do with sacrament and simply means mystery. He also showed that the definition of the word “sacrament,” which means “a sign of grace,” could not apply to marriage because even nonbelievers, Jews, Turks, and others practiced marriage and thus it was not the exclusive possession of the church.⁷⁵ Having removed the sacramental badge from marriage, Luther concluded that it is the civil, and not the ecclesiastical, authorities that have authority over marriage. Nevertheless, couples should seek out the church to receive blessing and guidance for their marriage.

Protestant Marriage as a Civil Matter

In his *Small Catechism* (1529), Luther calls marriage a worldly business and proposes that the church should not attempt to order or govern anything connected to it. In other words, marriage is a civil matter; but the church

⁷²Ibid., 12.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., 12-13.

⁷⁵Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in LW 36:93-96.

should be willing to bless and pray for the couple before the church or in the church. Although marriage is a divine creation, it also was a civil matter.⁷⁶ Included within the civil structure of marriage, Luther discussed marriage as a type of social order, and considered the freedom to marry, parental authority, secret engagement, adultery, and divorce. His proposals became the basis of the Protestant conception of marriage.

Marriage as a Type of Social Order

Luther also described the role of marriage similarly to the role of political order. Marriage was to be a kind of restraint against the problems of sensuality and immorality. Marriage was necessary because of the weakness of the flesh after the fall. “For is it not a great thing,” he asks, “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.”⁷⁷

Luther’s understanding of marriage as a type of social order is problematic because it suggests his view of marriage was a kind of force to ward off evil. 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 times when the couple cannot engage in sexual intercourse? Hence Luther provides a negative reason for getting married. Nevertheless, in the process of understanding marriage as a type of social order, he raises another important issue—the freedom to marry.

Freedom to Marry

Luther understands Paul’s counsel on marriage to mean that marriage should be a free choice. When Paul says, “I wish that all were as I myself am,” Luther asks, “Is this not spoken against matrimony, as though he wanted no one to marry?” His response is that Paul wished everyone had the 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 and that not everyone has been granted it. For Luther, as he understands Paul’s counsel, chastity and marriage are gifts of God, but while chastity is the nobler gift it is not for everyone.⁷⁸

Luther contrasts the married and celibate states, noting that, on one hand, marriage “is by nature of a kind to teach and compel us to trust in God’s hand and grace, and in the same way it forces us to believe,” while, on the other, the religious orders tempt men to settle into secular and material concerns and

⁷⁶Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (1529), in *Martin Luther’s Large and Small Catechism* (Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision Publications, 2007), 21.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, in LW, 28:16-17.

to not have faith and trust in God.⁷⁹ Further, he claims that marriage should not exclude anyone from being a priest or a bishop. Christ called married men to his service; the apostles of the early church were married.⁸⁰ Luther sarcastically remarks 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.”⁸¹

But what determined whether a person was free to marry? Luther asked: Were priests free to marry after renouncing their vows? Were young adults still under the authority of their parents free to marry whom they pleased? Who decided if a person was to be married or to remain celibate? Were widows and widowers free to remarry after the death of a spouse?

In one of Luther’s famous Reformation pamphlets, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), he explicitly encouraged priests to marry and thereby repudiate their vows of celibacy. He wrote: “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.”⁸² 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 vow of celibacy.

In 1524, Luther wrote a small tract, “Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children and that Children Should not Become Engaged without Their Parents’ Consent,” in which he 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: whether a parent had the authority to (1) prevent a child from marrying a particular person, (2) forbid his marrying at all, or (3) force him into a marriage distasteful to him. Luther gave an affirmation to the first question, an emphatic no to the second question, and considered the third question to be the most difficult to answer.

While a child was duty-bound to obey parents, nevertheless a child could in good conscience disobey tyrannical parents because mutual consent is important.⁸³ On one hand, parents have neither the right nor authority to compel children to marry, although they may have the right and authority to prevent a particular marriage. Thus, for Luther, parental authority is limited.

⁷⁹Ibid., 18, 20.

⁸⁰Ibid., 22, 24.

⁸¹Ibid., 25.

⁸²Martin Luther, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (18 August 1520), in LW 44:176.

⁸³Martin Luther, “Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of their Children and the Children Should not Become Engaged without their Parents’ Consent” (1524), in LW 45:385-393.

A father oversteps and exceeds his authority and becomes a tyrant when he forces either marriage or celibacy or lets the child go ahead on his own without any intention of helping him in the matter. Parents are duty-bound to get good spouses for their children so that the marriage is not simply for convenience or financial benefit or for fulfilling lustful desires. On the other hand, children should not marry or become engaged without the knowledge and consent of their parents according to the fourth commandment (Catholic numeration). There are no examples in Scripture of couples entering in an engagement of their own accord. Secret engagements are condemned.⁸⁴

Luther ridicules the church's definition of bigamy (that is, marrying consecutively). Paul gives himself the right to remarry, which would make him a bigamist in the sight of the church. Therefore, widowers and widows may remarry.⁸⁵ Because the flesh is full of 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."⁸⁶

Civil problems such as marriage, engagement, adultery, and divorce needed a solid foundation upon which to rest. It was to this task that Luther turned, basing his understanding of civil governance upon his Protestant theology of marriage and the family.

Civil Mandates concerning Protestant Concepts of Engagement, Conjugal Rights, Adultery, and Divorce

In an important tract, *On Marriage Matters*, written in 1530, Luther outlines important principles on marriage within the new Protestant lands. In the aftermath of the separation between Catholics and Protestants, Luther believed there was a need to clarify marriage among the clergy and civil authorities. In this tract, he addresses several questions: How binding is an engagement? Does the validity of a marriage require witnesses? Is divorce permissible, and on what grounds?⁸⁷

On the basis of his understanding of Scripture, law, and common sense, Luther addresses these questions in five points: (1) secret engagements 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; (5) forced engagement, that is, engagement imposed upon young people against their will and without

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 7, in LW, 28:25.

⁸⁶Ibid., 26.

⁸⁷Martin Luther, *On Marriage Matters*, in LW 46: 265ff.

their consent is not valid.⁸⁸ He also lays down principles concerning conjugal rights, divorce, and impediments to marriage, which he addresses not only from theory, but from his own experiences and marital troubles.

1. *Engagement.* In line with his discouragement of secret engagements, Luther views marriage as a public estate that must be entered into and recognized publicly, meaning that it must be established by at least two witnesses (Matt 18:16). By secret engagement, he meant 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. On the basis of Matt 19:6, he denounced the church's claim that secret engagements are binding.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ However, he contended that those who were already married based on a secret engagement have a valid marriage and that they must remain together and not divorce.

Marriage is not a shady business that is to be carried on in dark corners. For Luther, public engagement is equivalent to marriage in the sight of God and the world. Therefore, he suggests that punishment should be meted out to fornicators by the state. Public engagement was vital to a healthy marriage. Therefore, marrying strangers was not encouraged since there should be public testimonies to the bride's and groom's characters.⁹¹

2. *Marriage and Adultery.* In his *Large Catechism* (1529), Luther cites the sixth commandment (Catholic numeration), calling the commandment against adultery a hedge and protection for marriage. He calls 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."⁹² Marriage, however, was the first institution of God. Therefore, marriage is an excellent thing, designed for all men and women except those specially called by God to a celibate life, and, therefore, a matter of divine seriousness.⁹³ For these reasons, marriage should not be despised or held in disrepute, but should be sanctified and not only placed in equality with other estates, but precede and surpass them all.

Luther proposed that even though priests and nuns took vows of chastity and celibacy, they were still capable of committing adultery, noting:

⁸⁸Ibid., 267-268.

⁸⁹Ibid., 275..

⁹⁰Ibid. 265-288.

⁹¹Ibid., 289-297.

⁹²Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, in LW, 28:13.

⁹³Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* (1529), in LW, 54:222-223.

From this you see how this popish rabble, priests, monks, and nuns, resist God's order and commandment, inasmuch as they despise and forbid matrimony, and presume and vow to maintain perpetual chastity, and besides, deceive the simple-minded with lying words and appearances [impostures] . . . And, in short, even though they abstain from the act, their hearts are so full of unchaste thoughts and evil lusts that there is a continual burning and secret suffering, which can be avoided in the married life.⁹⁴

Luther especially encouraged young people to change their views on marriage because, he proposed, by coming to like it, the honor of marriage would be increased and immoral practices would decrease all over the world. He described love as having harmony with one another, having moral respect for each other, and cherishing one another with faithfulness.⁹⁵

3. *Marriage and Conjugal Rights.* Luther next turns to Paul's counsel regarding conjugal rights: "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."⁹⁶ In addressing Paul's counsel on how and when couples should refrain from sex, Luther declares that no one has the right to tell the couple what to do. They should refrain by mutual consent and be ever mindful that prolonged withdrawal can lead to sin. He couches his argument to show Paul's lack of confidence in chastity because of his knowledge of human nature and the devil's tricks.⁹⁷

4. *Divorce.* In his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (1532), Luther addresses issues pertaining to divorce in Matt 5:31-33. He asks, "What is the proper procedure for us nowadays in the matter of marriage and divorce?" As with marriage, divorce, he proposes, is best left to lawyers and made subject to secular government. Marriage and divorce are secular and outward. However, Christians should not stop merely with the secular dictates of the law; it is different for the Christian who is governed by the word of God. Therefore, he proposes, "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."⁹⁸ Christians should not be divorced, but patiently bear the good and the bad in the relationship. However, Luther agrees that this advice only applies to the believer.⁹⁹

⁹⁴Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Large Catechism*, trans. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau (U.S.: CreateSpace), 50.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, in LW, 28:13.

⁹⁷Ibid., 14.

⁹⁸Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (January 1532), in LW 21:94.

⁹⁹Ibid., 94.

For Luther, the legitimate cause given by Jesus for divorce is adultery. According to Matt 19:9 and Lev 20:10, adultery was punishable by death. He understands “adultery” to occur when a man separates himself not only from his wife, but also from his life, and, having done so, he has no right to either. Luther concludes, in accordance with his view of marriage and divorce as matters of civil governance, that “we neither commend nor forbid such divorce, but leave it to the government.”¹⁰⁰ An 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 he shows up, the innocent party is not obligated to take him back.¹⁰¹

He goes on to advise, however, that believers should stay together if the guilty party humbles himself and repents. The innocent party should be reconciled and extend forgiveness. However, sometimes the case is hopeless, especially when the guilty party flagrantly continues to commit sin. In this case, the innocent party has all rights to divorce.¹⁰²

Luther not only explains the grounds for divorce, but set forth principles on “Divorce Prevention”: (1) learn patience by putting up with the faults and troubles of life, knowing that no situation is ever ideal; (2) care for your spouse in the same way you would give greater care to your body when it is ill; (3) following Paul’s counsels in Rom 12:4-5 and 1 Cor 12:12-26, accept the faults of others, sympathize with them, forbearing and doing everything possible to help them; and, most importantly, (5) forgive one another’s sins.¹⁰³

In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), Luther provides counsel on whether a couple should remain together or divorce:

a. If the husband or the wife is not equipped for marriage due to bodily and/or natural deficiencies, they should remain together, especially the husband should stay with the invalid wife and care for her needs. Luther, however, gives some rather strange advice for how to care for the sexual needs within the constraints of illness or impotence. For example, in counseling with Phillip of Hesse, an evangelical German prince, Luther suggested that he marry another woman without first receiving a public marriage annulment.¹⁰⁴

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

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 96.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 97.

¹⁰²Ibid., 96.

¹⁰³Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁴See esp. Erasmus’s critique of Luther’s teaching on marriage (“Letter to George Duke of Saxony,” Basel, 12 December 1524, cited in P. Smith and C. Jacobs, eds., *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1913-1918), 2:269.

Then I would further counsel her, with the consent of the man (who is not really her husband, but only a dweller under the same roof with her), to have intercourse with 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 saved and in a saved state? I answer: Certainly, because in this case an error, and ignorance of the man's impotence, impedes the marriage and the tyranny of the laws permits no divorce. But the woman is free through the divine law, and cannot be compelled to remain continent. Therefore the man ought to concede her right, and give up to somebody else the wife who is his only in outward appearance.

Moreover, if the man will not give his consent, or agree to this separation,—rather than allow the woman to burn [1 Cor 7:9] or to commit adultery—I would counsel her to contract a marriage with another and flee to a distant place. What other counsel could be given to one constantly struggling with the dangers of natural emotions? . . . 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 heirs not his own, for by his own fault he deceived an innocent girl and defrauded her both of life and of the full use of her body, besides giving her a an almost irresistible cause for committing adultery.¹⁰⁵

Needless to say, Luther's critics found much ammunition with which to pursue Luther on this point.

b. If adultery is private, there are two options: a spouse may rebuke his wife privately or keep her if she changes, or he may 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 the Scriptures, for the purpose of preventing temptation, or the adulterer may be exiled and there remarry if he is unable to remain chaste. But it would be better to put him to death lest a bad example be set.¹⁰⁶ Luther addresses those who find fault with his solution of exile and blames the government for failing to punish adulterers.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in LW, 36:103-104; Lazareth comments: "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 firstborn 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, 191, n. 85).

¹⁰⁶Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, in LW, 45:32.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 32-33.

c. If in the event of failure to fulfill conjugal duties for reasons other than illness or impotence, divorce is permissible. Luther proposes: "If you [the wife] will not [perform her sexual duties], another will; the maid will come if the wife will not." The husband should warn his wife twice, then take her to appear before the church. If she still refuses to perform her duties, she may be divorced (Esther 1:12-17; 1 Cor 7:4-5).¹⁰⁸

d. If a couple cannot get along together, divorce is permissible, but remarriage is not. Either the couple must remain unmarried or become reconciled.¹⁰⁹

Luther attempted to modify the strict Catholic nondivorce policy by allowing divorce that was based on biblical criteria, that is, adultery and desertion. Some have accused Luther of opening the door to easy divorce. However, Luther attempted to reform a broken system in which the church controlled marriage and refused to grant divorce even under justifiable circumstances. Because the church considered marriage to be a sacred sacrament, it could not be dissolved without the death of one of the spouses. In rare situations in which the church was forced to dissolve a marriage based on its stated impediments (consanguinity, affinity, and spiritual relationship), such dissolution was not called divorce but rather annulment. This was an absurd and nonsensical practice which, Luther believed, encouraged fornication, adultery, and other immoral practices. For him, divorce and remarriage, practiced according to biblical principles, would reduce the level of sexual immorality in society.

Conclusion

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. Because the priest had taken vows of celibacy and chastity, he was, therefore, elevated into a higher arena of spirituality. However, as Luther so vibrantly pointed out, the public vows of celibacy and chastity did not always reflect the inner, hidden life. It was a well-known fact that bishops kept concubines and that 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

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 33-34

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 45:34-35.

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!¹¹⁰

It seems that the church's reason for forcing celibacy on the clerics was not for the sake of chastity, but for the procurement of its clergy's inheritance. Marriage was denied primarily for economic reasons. The church wanted to make sure that priests would not be married and thus have legitimate heirs to inherit the clerics' properties. For the cleric, however, the outcome also prevented them from engaging in legitimate marital and family relationships. Celibacy instead of encouraging 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 system of celibacy and chastity.

Luther's theology of marriage and the family seems to be highly polemical and reactive. There is an edge to his writing. His theology is not just "for something," but is against "something and someone." It was designed to restore, Luther believed, the true biblical understanding of marriage. Marriage was thus as much in need of restoration as was the gospel, justification, and other truths.¹¹¹

Because so much of what Luther said on marriage was polemical and reactive, he was sometimes intemperate in his use of language. While he endeavored to present a biblical view of marriage and the family, his ideas were not always balanced. His description of marriage as a remedy against sin presented a negative view for entering into marriage. On occasion he made serious mistakes in the name of biblical counsel, as in his advice to an impotent husband to allow his wife to sleep with his brother. These types of suggestions played into the hands of Luther's critics and gave credence to their criticism that Luther was giving license to sexual immorality.

Nevertheless, Luther's understanding of marriage and the family was revolutionary. Importantly, it gives evidence that God continues to be concerned about human sexuality and the problem of immorality. Luther would concur with this assumption, as he once surmised: "For 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."¹¹² As one of God's protective bulwarks in the struggle against Satan, marriage is interpreted by the early Luther as a divine ordinance and institution, which provides fallen man and woman with a remedy against sin.¹¹³

¹¹⁰Luther, "Vom ehelichen Leben," WA 10.II:148, trans., Lazareth, 206.

¹¹¹Ibid., 207.

¹¹²Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in LW 1:134.

¹¹³Lazareth, 208.

Even as I critique Luther's view on marriage and family, it must be kept in mind that Luther was many years ahead of his contemporaries on this subject, especially his ideas on sex, divorce, and the roles of husbands and wives in marriage. In a time in which the church proposed a strict and rigid doctrine regarding marriage and the family, Luther showed a flexibility that is admirable. He understood the complexity of the issues that he addressed and recognized the impossibility of solving many of the sexual and marital problems of his times. That this was a frustrating task is reflected in his comment:

This matter troubles and distresses me, for there are daily cases, whether by the special malice of Satan or because of our neglect of the Word of God.

Nevertheless, in these matters I decide nothing (as I have said), although there is nothing that I would rather see decided, since nothing at present more grievously perplexes me and others with me.¹¹⁴

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. Most of his counsels were written from the heart of a caring pastor ministering to his flock and concerned about their spiritual well-being. One of the most admirable qualities about Luther's theology on marriage and the family, however, is the incarnational quality of his theology. Luther is no ivory-tower theologian spinning out esoteric and theoretical views disconnected from real life. Rather he lived and worked in the trenches of life; his hands were dirty and stained with life's problems. His theology emerges from and is shaped by this immersion. He was married for twenty-one 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 comes from his own experience as a married man. Luther lived what he preached.

Luther thus moved the sacred from the church and brought it into the 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.¹¹⁵ He firmly believed that God's service should not be limited to the pulpit or the altar; whatever the calling or profession, whether in the home or in the service of church and society, all believers are as much engaged in the work of God as any priest or monk.

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

¹¹⁴Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (October 6, 1520) in LW, 36:106.

¹¹⁵Lazareth, 134.

it to abuse their children or coerce them into decisions, especially regarding marriage. The new Protestant and secular marriage ordinances in the sixteenth century ended secret engagements and defined impediments within marriage more realistically.

Luther demonstrated that marriage was in as much need of reformation as was the doctrine of grace. In his irascible and earthy style, he lobbied for the reformation of the institution of marriage. The fact that many of the ideas that he proposed about marriage and the family are commonly accepted and practiced within the context of Western Christianity testifies to his success.