



Luther on Marriage, Vocation, and the Cross

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In the middle 1530s, his health having become a trial and with rumors circulating that he had abandoned the faith that had driven the reform movement, Luther wrote several documents summing up his confession. The best known is the *Smalcald Articles*, and there are several lesser-known sets of disputations. His statements at this point are important because in them Luther indicates what he himself regarded as central.

As Luther marked out the essentials, he stressed a combination that had first appeared in the 1520 treatise, *On Christian Liberty*. There he wrote that being justified by faith, “the Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.” Just so, the Christian is also “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”¹ In the preface to the *Smalcald Articles*, he used somewhat different language to point to the same double focus, regarding it as the reform’s achievement: “By God’s grace our churches have now been...enlightened and supplied with the pure Word and the right use of the sacraments, with an understanding of the various callings and with true works....”² It is clear that in Luther’s mind, the doctrines of justification and

¹Martin Luther, “On Christian Liberty” (1520), *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) 31:344 (hereafter *LW*).

²Martin Luther, “Smalcald Articles,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 299 (hereafter *BOC*).

Martin Luther’s treatment of marriage is best considered in relation to his doctrine of vocation and to the theology of the cross. In the former, marriage is a matter of law and freedom; in the latter, a matter of death and resurrection.

vocation went hand in hand as the twin centers of both his personal faith and the-ology of reform.

It was this combination that made marriage a perennial topic for Luther. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he discussed marriage in the context of the Roman Catholic sacramental system. In 1522, he published a major treatise, *The Estate of Marriage*. His arguments there were a factor in convincing him that he should get married himself; he and Katherine von Bora were joined in wedlock in 1525. Thereafter, there are numerous references to marriage scattered through various writings, including a 1531 sermon on marriage and the Genesis commentary.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in Luther's view of marriage. William H. Lazareth's *Luther on the Christian Home*, written in 1960, provides a definitive, systematic overview.³ More recently, Scott Hendrix of Princeton University has written a more historical summary. His notes provide a virtually complete survey of the current state of the discussion.⁴

The purpose of this essay is to fill in further what Lazareth and Hendrix have done by locating Luther's treatment of marriage in a double context: one in relation to his doctrine of vocation, the other in relation to the theology of the cross. Justifying the godless, God restores sinners to the creatureliness for which we were intended, freeing the faithful to live in the down-to-earth relationships of the family. In this context, God brings about death and resurrection, repentance and faith.

THE SOURCES

In order to place Luther's treatment of marriage in context, it needs to be summarized. Luther's own writings on the topic are readily accessible, along with Lazareth's and Hendrix's works. But the arguments are straightforward enough to see the implications, even in condensed form.

A 1519 sermon on marriage reflects Luther's anchorage in the medieval Catholic tradition on marriage. Just a year later, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the*

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Church,⁵ he developed two objections. The first was to the definition of marriage as a sacrament. Reviewing the sacramental system of the medieval church, Luther pointed out that unlike baptism and the Lord's Supper, there is neither a specific promise nor a special physical sign involved with marriage. Marriage is not a matter of the gospel, but of the law. In this context, he also considered some of the church's treatment of marital issues, such as impediments to marriage and the legitimacy of divorce.

³William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home: An Application of the Social Ethics of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960).

⁴Scott Hendrix, “Luther on Marriage,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000) 335-350.

⁵Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520), *LW* 35:92-105.

The second challenge was directed at celibacy requirements for priests, nuns, and monks. Earlier in 1520, in *To the German Nobility*, Luther argued that that this was an illegitimate demand, expressing the hope that the church would “restore freedom to everybody and leave every man free to marry or not to marry.”⁶ In *The Babylonian Captivity*, he pushed the same point.

In 1523, Luther supported his objection to the celibacy requirement in a fuller way, offering an interpretation of 1 Cor 7 that Hendrix calls “revolutionary.” The church had taken over Paul’s apocalyptically driven considerations of marriage, interpreting them in terms of the old Roman understanding of spirit and flesh. The papacy insisted that genuine sanctification requires detachment from the flesh—so the celibacy requirement for priests and religious. Luther argued that marriage is also one of the gifts of God. In fact, as Hendrix points out, Luther held that “marriage is the most religious state of all,” the “real religious order,” because “nothing should be called religious except the inner life of faith in the heart, where the Spirit rules.”⁷

Luther divides *The Estate of Marriage*, his most complete statement on the topic, into three parts: requirements for marriage, bases for divorce, and godly marriage. The first part is fairly traditional, though Luther objects to the church’s enjoining of marriage to non-Christians on the ground “that marriage is an outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking.”⁸ In the second part, as Hendrix indicates, Luther’s “new theology of marriage becomes clearer.”⁹ On the one hand, denying the sacramental character of marriage legitimizes the possibility of divorce. But on the other, living by faith puts the legal possibilities in another perspective. While he acknowledges legitimate grounds, such as adultery, Luther was reluctant to support divorce, arguing that faith takes priority, moving a person beyond the law’s minimums.

In the third part of *The Estate*, Luther further developed his positive treatment of marriage. Having argued at the beginning of the treatise that God established marriage by creating male and female and commanding them to be fruitful and multiply, Luther argues that the basic requirement is respect for both sexes, which involves ignoring those who disparage women and marriage. Christians are to “firmly believe that God instituted [marriage], brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them.”¹⁰ In the course of this discussion, Luther makes one of his best-known statements on married life:

Now observe that when that clever harlot, our natural reason...takes a look at married life, she turns up her nose and says, “Alas, must I rock the baby, wash its

⁶Martin Luther, “To the German Nobility” (1520), *LW* 44:176.

⁷Hendrix, “Luther on Marriage,” 338, citing “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7” (1523), *LW* 28:17.

⁸Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage” (1523), *LW* 45:25.

⁹Hendrix, “Luther on Marriage,” 340.

¹⁰Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” *LW* 45:38.

diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and sores, and on top of that care for my wife, provide for her, labor at my trade, take care of this and take care of that, do this and do that, endure this and endure that, and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves? What, should I make such a prisoner of myself? O you poor, wretched fellow, have you taken a wife? Fie, fie upon such wretchedness and bitterness! It is better to remain free and lead a peaceful, carefree life; I will become a priest or a nun and compel my children to do likewise.”

What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, “O God, because I am certain that thou has created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised.”¹¹

While the statement clearly reflects some traditional, patriarchal assumptions, it also indicates that Luther was in process with them, moving with his understanding of marriage to a more positive view of the relationship between men and women and of women in general.

In 1525, theological considerations took on a more personal form. The fact that Katherine von Bora is remembered by her family name, not simply as Mrs. Martin Luther, solidly indicates the standing that she achieved, not only with her husband but in the Lutheran Reformation. She was an extraordinarily gifted person.¹² If she took over a traditional role, bearing six children while managing a sprawling, multifarious household and looking after a husband prone to *Anfechtung* and increasingly to physical ills, she also established her individuality. Luther’s subsequent comments on marriage reflect the love they shared. He said in a 1531 wedding sermon, “The ancient doctors have rightly preached that marriage is praiseworthy because of children, loyalty and love. But the physical benefit is also a precious thing and justly extolled as the chief virtue of marriage, namely that spouses can rely upon each other and with confidence entrust everything they have on earth to each other, so that it is as safe with one’s spouse as with oneself.”¹³

VOCATION

Some years ago, Heiko Oberman demonstrated the force of apocalypticism in Luther’s thought. The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were alive with

¹¹Ibid., 45:39-40.

¹²Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) 23-44.

¹³*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-1980) 34:52.5-9 (hereafter WA).

such expectation. As he worked with the biblical texts—particularly Paul’s letters, but also the Psalms—Luther was caught up in this hope. “The waiting is for God to act,” Oberman wrote, “to take the initiative.”¹⁴

The impact clearly registers in the grammar of justification by faith, but spills over throughout. In justification, the crucified and risen Christ is the subject of every verb, the triune God at work ceaselessly in him to restore both creature and creation. But as the explanations of the Apostles’ Creed in the *Small Catechism* show, this grammar is not confined to the second article: God has created, given, and still preserves, provides, protects, and guards; in the face of unbelief, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps. In one of Luther’s favorite images, the triune God is a red-hot oven full of love, pouring himself out.

This apocalyptic emphasis on God’s continuing activity has a double effect on Luther’s discussions of marriage and related matters of creation. For one thing, in the end, marriage and the household are interpreted *coram deo*, in terms of God’s work as Creator in and through them. For another, Luther’s way of thinking is set in motion. There are some givens characteristic of creation itself—the existence of females and males, for instance, or the fact that life springs from the relationship between them. These givens have to be registered. But as the fourth verse of “A Mighty Fortress” in its current translation indicates, there is something beyond “goods, honor, child or spouse”—“God’s kingdom is forever.”¹⁵ In this light, even the defining relationships of life become provisional: they are not fixed, eternal, unchanging but, as Luther interprets, have to be worked out in light of the specifics.

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This noted, Luther numbers the household with church and government as God’s three orders, ordinances or, in an older translation, estates. The original German, *Stand*, like the English terms, easily loses the dynamism Luther has invested in it. The church is not simply an institution or a structure but an activity: it happens as a gathering in which the word is preached and the sacraments administered. Similarly, but more provisionally in that it was instituted after the fall, government’s defining characteristic is not a particular form but a function: it exists to restrain the effects of sin in public life, to work out the provisions necessary to approximate peace and justice in a fallen world.

The household, which as Oswald Bayer has pointed out includes marriage and the family as well as the work necessary to provide for them, is even more basic than government.¹⁶ It is also defined by what God does through it: in this order, the

¹⁴Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) 14.

¹⁵*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) hymn 229.

¹⁶Oswald Bayer, “Nature and Institution: Luther’s Doctrine of the Three Orders,” trans. Luis Dreher, *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998) 125-129.

Creator continues to give life to creature and creation, using wives and husbands as his “hands,” “channels,” or “masks” for this purpose.

As an order of creation, the household is regulated by law. The law gains its authority in this connection by formulating or codifying what is required in the workings of creaturely life in relationship. So as Luther interprets the Fourth Commandment, honor is required by the workings of the family. Because life is fragile, because beginnings are so crucial to later life, mutual cherishing and deference are necessary to a family’s well-being. Likewise on the Sixth Commandment, married life by the very givens of the relationship requires sexual fidelity, so that infidelity signals its breakdown.

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As codified requirement, however, the law is doubly vulnerable. For one thing, life inevitably gets more complicated than the code. Putting sinners together belly to belly for a lifetime is a risky proposition. The law runs along behind on short legs, trying to keep up with all the permutations and variations. Child protection policies, property laws, and divorce regulations further specify what is required in particular circumstances, but there is always something more, not yet part of the code. For this reason, as Luther once commented, “every house needs its own Moses”—a law speaker who can recognize the adjustments that need to be made. But this necessity also exposes the law to a second vulnerability: sinners always think they are the exceptions to the rule, as though the law’s code were merely a paper summons to be accepted or dismissed at will. Adjustments are necessary, but beyond the code, the demands and requirements of life are still working themselves out. At that level, the law continues to work itself out in experience even if it can’t get a hearing: the diapers need to be changed, no matter what the father or the mother thinks of the process.

Thus, in the Table of Duties at the end of the *Small Catechism*, Luther gathers up scriptural passages that describe the requirements that pertain to the three estates, including familial relationships and work. The Ten Commandments stand in the background, stating the essential, creaturely minimums—what life demands of all, Christian or otherwise. The biblical word interprets these minimums in the perspective of faith, further specifying what is expected in the defining relationships. At the same time, with the word, God sanctifies the earthly connections, just as, with the word, God sanctifies the sacramental elements.¹⁷ Finally, quoting the command to love at the end of the Table of Duties, Luther emplaces the all-

¹⁷Ibid., 141-143.

encompassing, all-embracing condition that not only sums up the law but makes the relationships workable.

“In the Spirit,” the phrase Luther uses to note the turning point in the long citation above from *The Estate of Marriage*, all of this takes on a different appearance. What has been demanded by the law, whether codified or required in the actual workings of daily life, becomes a vocation—the Christian’s calling. It becomes the specific opportunity for, and occasion of, service.

In point of fact, marriage and the family include many different callings: as son or daughter, as spouse, as mother or father, brother- or sister-in-law, uncle or aunt, cousin, and so forth. Each calling has its own particular characteristics as well as its timing. The relationship between parent and child changes, for example, as the child becomes an adult and the parent ages. Uncles and aunts have a particularly significant calling in helping nieces and nephews to leave home. But no matter what the calling, they are all life-conditioning, life-shaping—points at which knowingly or without knowledge aforethought a person actually functions as God’s mask, hand, or channel.

The familial callings are so important, in fact, that in this connection Luther can use language that he otherwise assiduously attacks and resists: called by God, the believer becomes God’s partner and friend, working with God to look after the aging parent, to love a spouse, to give life to a child, and so to contribute to the future of the community. The partnership is not exclusive to the family—labor with head or hands, callings in church and state are all blessed by God as points of specific service. But the life-giving, life-shaping characteristics of the household give it a prior significance.

In this partnership, the believer is literally law-free. The relationship, whether as spouse or in some other familial connection, takes over. Caught up in it, the believer does without the law what the law requires. So older couples, commended for the years of love and service to one another, will generally reply that they didn’t realize that there was an alternative—it just happened. This kind of lawlessness is a hallmark of grace, breaking loose in the down-to-earth connections of everyday life. In vocation, the sinner grasped by faith is becoming what Adam and Eve were intended to be, a free and joyous creature of the earth.

THE CROSS

In the fourth question on baptism in the *Small Catechism*, Luther asks what the sacrament signifies for daily living: “It signifies that the Old Adam in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”¹⁸

¹⁸BOC, 360. Translating “*der alte Adam*,” “the old Adam,” is a difficult problem. Rendering it “the old creature” may be more inclusive, but it is also more neutral and therefore doesn’t appear to pick up the adversarial character of Luther’s usage.

Given the old Adam's eagerness for job jars, especially when the tasks appear manageable, the imperative in Luther's explanation is often misinterpreted. Then the drowning and the rising become obligations put upon the baptized, as though the old sinner in each of us should take charge of its demise and create the new being. If that were the case, baptism would signify either hypocrisy or despair.

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Rather, as Luther points out again and again, the cross is not something to be sought. When the word is near, the cross is always close at hand; you don't find it, the cross finds you. So the cross characterizes all vocations, but becomes particularly evident in families. To be someone's son or daughter is to be on the receiving end of their gifts and limits, their strivings and fears, faith and unbelief. Even—perhaps it would be better to say, especially—in the healthiest families, self-loss is an inevitable aspect of the relationships. Putting sinners together multiplies the risk exponentially.

The call to bear the cross is a summons to enter these controverted family relationships by sharing them. There are, to be sure, situations where conditions can be changed. When that is the case, the possible improvements become an obligation to those in a position to be helpful. Bearing a cross needlessly is itself a form of self-justification. But as Sheldon Tostengard, professor emeritus at Luther Seminary, often says, “Angels and demons have the same backbone.” What makes a family member gifted and delightful also makes them troublesome, so that to slay the demon is also to kill the angel. At such points, attempting to lift one cross simply creates another.

Thus, with the cross, repentance is built right into marriage and the family. Exclamations like, “I can't take this anymore!” or, “It can't go on like this!” are the old Adam's death cries. When the Holy Spirit takes over such desperation and turns it toward a new resolve in the troubled relationship, repentance has happened—even unawares. It is another indication, hidden in the contraries, that as the old Lutheran marriage service put it, “nevertheless our gracious Father in heaven doth not forsake his children in an estate so holy and acceptable to him.”¹⁹

Marriage and the family being a point of crucifixion, they are also and at the same time a point of resurrection. Conditioning, limiting, bringing one another to the brink and sometimes seemingly beyond it, spouses still share in intimacies that approach the gospel of Christ Jesus and faith itself in their profound joys. Watching a child whose diapers are unforgettable emerge out of childhood and the hor-

¹⁹“Order for Marriage,” in *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg et al., 1958) 271.

monal baths of adolescence into young adulthood becomes a foretaste of the resurrection. Even the ancillary delights of being an uncle or aunt, a relationship that features generous forms of authority without concomitant responsibilities, can be a foretaste of the new creation. At such points, the forgiveness of sins realizes itself, not as an occasional moral necessity, but as the reality of Christ's promise opening up the deepest levels of freedom possible in creaturely life.

Martin Luther and Katherine von Bora both knew the cross of marriage. Katherine von Bora was dumped in a convent as a surplus daughter. She and Luther lost two children, one in infancy, another as a teenager, along with her beloved aunt, "Mume Lena," who had moved in with them to help out. Undoubtedly, when Luther talked about the cross in the family, Katherine von Bora thought of him lying there beside her, sometimes beset by dread, other times trying to give away their substance.

With this, however, as husband and wife Martin Luther and Katherine von Bora also shared in the daily resurrections characteristic of marriage. So in his later years, as he talks about the household estate or order, Luther focused on the love that grows out of shared life. Thus, Scott Hendrix concludes his fine article with a translation of a passage from Luther's 1531 wedding sermon:

God's word is actually inscribed on one's spouse. When a man looks at his wife as if she were the only woman on earth, and when a woman looks at her husband as if he were the only man on earth; yes, if no king or queen, not even the sun itself sparkles any more brightly and lights up your eyes more than your own husband or wife, then right there you are face to face with God speaking. God promises to you your wife or husband, actually gives your spouse to you, saying: "The man shall be yours; the woman shall be yours. I am pleased beyond measure! Creatures earthly and heavenly are jumping for joy." For there is no jewelry more precious than God's Word; through it you come to regard your spouse as a gift of God and, as long you do that, you have no regrets.²⁰ ☩

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²⁰WA 34:52.12-21, translated by Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage," 347.