

# Luther and the Reform of Marriage and Family Life

YOUNGCHUN CHO

## Abstract

Martin Luther was a reformer not only of Christian doctrines and church practices, but also of marriage and family life. This article investigates how Luther transformed the medieval concept of marriage and reconstructed family life as a sacred sphere in which the believer can exercise faith and Christian duties *coram Deo*, examining Luther's criticism of celibacy, his view of sexuality and women, and his pastoral insights on the responsibilities of husbands in relation to wives and parents in relation to children, thereby demonstrating that Luther's influence permeated the broader sphere of human life in the early sixteenth century.

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## Introduction

**T**he twenty-first century is often perceived as obsessed with sex, but sixteenth-century Europe was no less afflicted than our modern world. Marriage and sex were tainted by immorality and a number of other disorders, and the Reformers sought to provide helpful guidelines and thereby reform conjugal relations of their age. Martin Bucer discussed the subject of marriage and sex in detail and in depth,<sup>1</sup> and it is reported that Calvin spent more than sixty percent

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<sup>1</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *Marriage and Divorce in the Thought of Martin Bucer*, trans. John Vriend and Lyle D. Bierma (Kirkville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999).

of his time in pastoral care on issues of marriage, sex, and family.<sup>2</sup> The Reformation was not limited to the mere reform of doctrines or liturgical systems; it also had enormous impact on marriage and the home. Martin Luther was a central figure in the reform of marriage.

We will investigate how Luther as a pastor laid a foundation for Christian marriage and family, beginning with his criticism of celibacy in his early writings, continuing with his view of sexuality and women, and ending with his pastoral teachings on the responsibilities of husbands in relation to wives and parents in relation to children.

## **1. Martin Luther on Marriage**

### **1. Elevation of Marriage over Celibacy**

The medieval understanding of marriage was ambivalent. On the one hand, the medieval church seemed to have a high view of marriage as a natural institution created by God and as a sacrament of faith through which God's grace is communicated. Since marriage was understood as a sacrament, ecclesiastical authority controlled every aspect of married life. On the other hand, the prevailing view of sexuality in medieval Christendom was that celibacy is spiritually superior to marriage. This originated from the church fathers' negative attitude toward concupiscence. Viewing human sexual desires as the product of the fall and thus sinful, Origen is said to have castrated himself in order to literally follow Matthew 19:12, and Tertullian declared that sexual cravings or delights have no place in the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Jerome also made an interesting comparison between virginity and marriage, giving "virginity a numerical value of one hundred, widowhood, sixty, and marriage, thirty."<sup>4</sup> The Council of Elvira officially prohibited clerical marriage in the early fourth century, and the medieval church continued to affirm a strict code of sexual ethics as a distinguishing mark of the supremacy of Christian ethics over paganism.<sup>5</sup> Theologians and canonists "subordinated the duty of propagation to that of celibate contemplation, the natural drive for sexual union to the spiritual drive for communion with God."<sup>6</sup> Although

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<sup>2</sup> John Witte and Robert M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); André Biéler, *L'homme et la femme dans la morale calviniste* (Geneva: Labor & Fides, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Steven E. Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 153.

<sup>5</sup> Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 69–70.

<sup>6</sup> John Witte, "The Reformation of Marriage Law in Martin Luther's Germany: Its Significance Then and Now," *Journal of Law and Religion* 4.2 (1986): 300.

marriage remained a sacrament and a duty after the fall, the celibate clergyman turning away from any sexual desires was praised as the ideal man or first-rate Christian.

Such a two-tiered view of marriage not only “oppressed the laity,” but also “tormented the clergy.”<sup>7</sup> Many monks and nuns suffered from strong desires and the pangs of conscience because they violated the monastic codes. Far from being liberated from sexual desires through the celibate life, the clergy was enslaved to desire and committed to immorality. One anonymous clergyman, who lived with concubines and fathered seventeen children, bemoaned his dilemma:

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. ... 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?<sup>8</sup>

The bad effects of the celibate life, such as prevailing concubinage and illegitimate children, made the Reformers rise up against the medieval church law and practice. Luther criticized the papacy for insisting on clerical celibacy, claiming that it did so in order to keep an important source of its revenue, the so-called “whore tax.”<sup>9</sup> He also spoke of the disastrous phenomenon of thousands of aborted children being buried around convents.<sup>10</sup>

Luther’s attack against compulsory celibacy was not explicit until 1520. In 1519 he preached “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage,” in which his view of marriage was still in line with the medieval understanding in two respects. First, Luther held to the medieval view of marriage as a “remedy against sin”: “[After the fall] the married state is now no longer pure and free from sin. The temptation of the flesh has become so strong and consuming that marriage may be likened to *a hospital for incurables which prevents inmates from falling into graver sin*.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, on the basis of Paul’s statement in Ephesians 5:32, he acknowledged that the estate of marriage is “a wonderful

<sup>7</sup> Carter Lindberg, “The Future of a Tradition: Luther and the Family,” *All Theology Is Christology*, ed. Dean Wenthe (St. Louis: Concordia Theological Seminary, 2000), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Ozment, *Protestants*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, “Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope and the Bishops Falsely So Called,” in *Luther’s Works* (hereafter *LW*), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86), 39:290–91.

<sup>10</sup> Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds. and trans., *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 169.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage,” *LW* 44:9. Italics added.

sacrament” that signifies a great reality of “the union of the divine and human natures in Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

The following year, however, Luther distanced himself from the Roman Catholic view of marriage. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he maintained that marriage is not a sacrament and translated the Greek word *mysterion* in Ephesians 5:32 as “mystery” rather than as “sacrament.”<sup>13</sup> He also objected to the Roman attempts to regulate married life by the enactment of “impediments,” and he denounced the *Summa Angelica*, the official document that lists eighteen impediments to marriage, as “worse than Diabolical.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, he reduced the number of those impediments to one: sexual impotence.<sup>15</sup> Thus Luther sought to stop the excessive control over marriage life exercised by the church. In this regard, it is noteworthy that he connected his view of marriage to his two-kingdoms theory. Rejecting the sacramental concept of marriage, Luther saw marriage as an institution of the earthly kingdom and urged the secular authority to take up marriage-related cases. According to John Witte, Luther’s shift of “jurisdiction over marriage from the church to the state” was an important change for later development of German secular marriage law.<sup>16</sup>

Luther’s more systematic and theological protests against the medieval argument for the superiority of celibacy are found in his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520). In this work, Luther sought to remove the false walls that the papacy had built in order to separate the spiritual area from the secular and to elevate the church over the state. Luther declared that there is no difference between “religious” work and “secular” work, for “all Christians whatsoever really and truly belong to the religious class, and there is no difference among them except in so far as they do different work.”<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Luther criticized people who pursued religious pilgrimages at the expense of the more important command from God that “a man should cherish his wife and children, and perform the duties proper to the married state.”

He applied his theology of vocation to sexuality in particular, denying that celibacy is more spiritual than and superior to marriage. While acknowledging that voluntary chastity is a respectable virtue and helps some to devote

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 326–27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 330–37.

<sup>16</sup> Witte, “The Reformation of Marriage Law in Martin Luther’s Germany,” 296.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, 407.

themselves more fully to study the Word of God and theology, Luther clearly asserts that celibacy *per se* is not spiritual.<sup>18</sup> For him, celibacy is such a special miracle of God that very few people are called to it, and the majority ought to be permitted to marry. Therefore, priests with troubled consciences due to their secret wives and children are free to enter into marriage and have conjugal union. Even if people blame them for such marriages, “they are certainly espoused in God’s sight.”<sup>19</sup> What is more, in order to better understand family-related problems and give practical counsel to their parishioners, pastors need to live among the people and keep house as other people do.<sup>20</sup> And no one who is married is less spiritual than monks and nuns, because faith equalizes “the value of all work before God.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, Luther tore down the strong wall not by eliminating the priesthood, but by eliminating the laity and granting spiritual estate to every work exercised out of faith. As Carter Lindberg puts it, “Luther’s application of evangelical theology to marriage and family desacramentalized marriage, desaceralized the clergy and resaceralized the life of the laity.”<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Centrality of Sex in Married Life

Along with elevating marriage to a spiritual estate, another of Luther’s contributions was to correct the longstanding medieval conception that human sex is impure. On the one hand, since marriage is one of God’s creation ordinances and it includes marital sex, the sexual union of a man and woman is holy and pleasing to God. It is neither different from nor inferior to any other ordinary work like eating, drinking, sleeping, or waking. Whoever tries to resist it necessarily falls into fornication and secret sins because “this is a matter of nature and not of choice.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, marriage and sex is holy on the ground that God redeems it by his grace. Though it was part of a creation ordinance, Adam’s fall distorted the original purity of sex as well as that of all other aspects of human life. Thus the estate of marriage became impure in that it was not free from the effects of original sin. Yet God delivers even this marital estate from its sinfulness, not “by taking away desire or love for one’s bride, or by forbidding marital

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<sup>18</sup> In his later treatise on “The Estate of Marriage” (1524), Luther says, “It is God’s word and the preaching which make celibacy ... better than the estate of marriage. In itself, however, the celibate life is far inferior.” *LW* 45:47.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” 450.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>21</sup> Karlfried Froehlich, “Luther on Vocation,” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 123.

<sup>22</sup> Lindberg, “Luther and the Family,” 133.

<sup>23</sup> Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 18.

intercourse,” but by redeeming or renewing its nature through his grace.<sup>24</sup> Thus, based upon God’s works of creation and redemption, Luther affirms that sexual activity within wedlock is holy and pure.

Luther also objected to the medieval notion that marital sex is allowed only for procreation and is, in this respect, a necessary evil. According to him, it is not only for having children, but also increasing intimacy and affection between spouses. The centrality of sex to marriage is already seen in his discussion on the impediments to marriage: sexual impotence is the only case inhibiting one from getting married. Luther also accused preachers who assigned particular times for sleeping with spouses and excluded many days of being “filth-preachers,” and he admonished people not to “pay any attention to holy days or work days, or other physical considerations [i.e., the wife’s pregnancy].”<sup>25</sup>

Luther’s stress on sexuality is demonstrated most clearly in his view of divorce. Luther allowed three grounds for divorce: sexual impotence, adultery, and refusal of conjugal duty. If a woman has unwittingly married an impotent man, she should ask him to tolerate her secret relations with another man. If he does not permit this, the woman can separate herself from him. Luther argues that such a woman is still in a state of salvation despite the divorce, “because in this case a mistake due to ignorance of the man’s impotence created a false situation which impedes the marriage proper.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, if a husband wants conjugal union but a wife refuses it, he can warn her by saying, “If you will not, another will; the maid will come if the wife will not.” If the wife continues to refuse, Luther advises the husband to “get rid of her” and “take an Esther and let Vashti go.”<sup>27</sup> His advocacy of the secret bigamy due to an impotent husband or his approval of abandoning a wife on account of refusing the conjugal duty might sound radical and embarrassing to the ears of modern readers, but it clearly illustrates how central the physical union of spouses was to Luther’s view of the marriage relationship.

Luther’s view of sexuality was so positive that it is no wonder that the Roman polemicists accused him of being the “most insane and libidinous of apostates.”<sup>28</sup> It was rumored that Luther helped nuns to run away from convents in order to satisfy his own carnal appetites, and that he had three

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<sup>24</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 152–53.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 35–36.

<sup>26</sup> Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” 337.

<sup>27</sup> Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 33–34.

<sup>28</sup> Jeanette C. Smith, “Katarina von Bora through Five Centuries: A Historiography,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999): 754.

wives at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Luther's marriage to Katharine was condemned not simply as adultery but even as incest by the Catholic Church on the ground that a monk and a nun are like spiritual brother and sister. Thomas More, a vigorous opponent of the Reformation, spoke ill of Luther's marriage: "Luther not only teaches monks, friars, and nuns to marry, but also being a friar has married a nun himself and with her lies under the name of wedlock in open incestuous lechery without care or shame."<sup>30</sup> Luther himself was concerned about a rumor that a monster baby would be born from the ex-monk and ex-nun couple, but was relieved when Katharine gave birth to a healthy and normal baby.<sup>31</sup>

In regard to the centrality of sexuality to conjugal relations, another significant fact that draws our attention is that Luther and other Reformers began endorsing divorce under some circumstances. Since marriage was considered as a sacrament in the medieval church, divorce was strictly prohibited on the basis of Matthew 19:6, "What God has joined together, let no one separate." Even when a spouse committed adultery, the church commanded "only the separation of a couple from a common bed and table, not the dissolution of the marriage bond and the right to marry again."<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the Protestants genuinely allowed divorce and remarriage. Of course, early Reformers were well aware of the possible abuse of this allowance and warned against a rash attempt to achieve divorce. Luther demanded careful investigation and decision of a public divorce by the state, the church, or the two in cooperation.<sup>33</sup> In Zurich, a petition of divorce involved an extended process in which a woman had to demonstrate her husband's impotence through medical investigation, and, even after his impotence was proved, the marriage court required a probationary period of one to five years.<sup>34</sup> Calvin's Geneva also allowed only about thirty divorces during a twenty-three-year period, which implies that divorce and remarriage were not easily attained.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it was a significant change that divorce became available, at least theoretically, for the first time in Western Christendom, thereby opening the way for later development.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas A. Fudge, "Incest and Lust in Luther's Marriage: Theology and Morality in Reformation Polemics," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34 (2003): 334.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>32</sup> Ozment, *Protestants*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 32.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 94.

<sup>35</sup> Scott Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 176.

### 3. *Dignity of Women*

With respect to marriage, another distinction between the medieval church and Luther concerns the view of women. On the grounds that Eve was tempted first by the serpent, women had been regarded as a source of evil and inferior to men from the early church through the medieval period. An example of this mindset was Tertullian, who defined woman as “a temple built over a sewer”; Augustine warned men against touching women, and Aquinas viewed women as “defective and misbegotten.”<sup>36</sup> Luther grew up in the male-dominated structure of village, school, and cloister. Some of his statements, such as “women have narrow shoulders and wide hips ... therefore they ought to be domestic,” sound like male chauvinism.<sup>37</sup> However, this is not the whole picture of Luther’s view of women, as he also strongly defended the dignity of women through his writings and his ministry.

To begin with, Luther’s advocacy of women’s rights is found in one of his proposals to the Christian nobility in 1520: “Would to God also that each town had a girls’ school where, day by day, the girls might have a lesson on the gospel.”<sup>38</sup> He continued to speak of the necessity of such an institution for women’s education, and, as a result, a girl’s school was founded in the city of Zwickau in 1526, and the Wittenberg *Mädchenschule* was founded in 1533. Luther’s primary aim was to teach them the Bible and thereby train them to be godly wives and mothers in the household, and so provide them with intellectual content. For this reason, Susan Karant-Nunn argues that the educational quality or curriculum of the girls’ school was substantially different from and inferior to that of the boys’ grammar school, and that the only teachings inculcated were merely moral matters of modesty, decency, and chastity.<sup>39</sup> Acknowledging such limitations, Jonathan Zophy argues that the institution of the Lutheran girls’ schools was nevertheless “an advance over the almost total absence of similar schools for girls in Catholic Germany.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Citation comes from Jonathan W. Zophy, “‘We Must Have the Dear Ladies’: Martin Luther and Women,” in *Pietas et Societas: New Trends in Reformation Social History*, ed. Kyle C. Sessions and Phillip N. Bebb (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1985), 144.

<sup>37</sup> Ozment, *Protestants*, 152.

<sup>38</sup> Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” 475.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Karant-Nunn, “Continuity and Change: Some Effects of the Reformation on the Women of Zwickau,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13.2 (1982): 19. Referred to in Zophy, “‘We Must Have the Dear Ladies,’” 148. In another article, Karant-Nunn also maintains that the establishment of the girls’ school in Zwickau “was designed to reinforce women’s roles within the home.” “Transmission of Luther’s Teaching on Women and Matrimony: The Case of Zwickau,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 77 (1986): 40.

<sup>40</sup> Zophy, “‘We Must Have the Dear Ladies,’” 148.



Furthermore, Luther's high view of woman is demonstrated well in his discussion on marriage. Based on Genesis 1:27 and 1:31, which state that both man and woman are created by God, Luther writes, "the man is not to despise or scoff at the woman or her body, nor the woman the man. But each should honor the other's image and body as a divine and good creation."<sup>41</sup> He goes on to stress that God created woman as a good helper (Gen 2:18). Luther repeats this several times because he is deeply concerned about the poisonous teachings of many pagan books "which treat of nothing but the depravity of womankind and the unhappiness of the estate of marriage."<sup>42</sup> He warns the young to be on their guard and keep themselves from inhaling poison when they read such books. Since marriage is God's good will and work, the devil seeks to spread prejudices against woman in order to "frighten men away from this godly life."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, every young man should beware of such an evil deception and keep in mind the partnership of woman and man in the marriage relationship.

Luther's stress on the equality between man and woman is also found in his Large Catechism (1529). In his exposition of the fourth commandment, he does not distinguish the role of the father from that of the mother, but places the same authority and power upon both. Parental responsibilities are equally incumbent upon both mother and father. Luther's explanation of the sixth commandment also shows his advocacy of equality. While using several texts that are usually used to emphasize the wife's duty to submit to her husband, Luther does not mention any inequality, but urges mutual duty and responsibility to keep the marriage secure. "This outspoken equality was no small feat for a thinker whose entire social life was marked by inequalities."<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, Luther even describes the woman as a heroic figure. According to Mickey L. Mattox's interesting article, Luther's portrayal of Eve changed after his marriage in 1525. In 1523 and 1524 Luther interpreted Eve's confrontation with the devil as a "talkative and superstitious" act, and argued that she should have avoided the talk with the devil and instead referred the devil's question to Adam, her superior. However, in his lectures on Genesis between 1535 and 1545, he pictures Eve's conversation with the serpent as a heroic act that resulted from the recognition of her responsibility to rule over the creatures, of which the serpent was one. In other words,

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<sup>41</sup> Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 17–18.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, "Martin Luther and the Ten Commandments in the Large Catechism," in *The Pastoral Luther*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 143.

Eve proved herself to be a coworker with Adam as ruler and keeper by confronting the serpent.<sup>45</sup> He also portrayed Sarah's request that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael from his household as an active and heroic confession of faith.<sup>46</sup> Thus Luther praised female figures in the Genesis narrative as great saints living by faith.

In addition to elevating woman's status to partner or coworker, Luther sought to protect women's rights in several ways. First of all, his approval of divorce on the basis of adultery and impotence would help women to assert their freedom from an unjust marriage. When a woman wants a divorce but obtains neither her husband's consent nor the investigation of the secular authority, Luther writes, "I would counsel her to contract matrimony with someone else, and flee to some distant and unknown region."<sup>47</sup> An interesting anecdote about a case that took place around 1524 also illustrates his advocacy of women's rights. Luther heard that a violent husband had been beating his wife for many years. After careful investigation, he concluded that the husband was insane and the wife ought to separate from him, and so he requested the Wittenberg city council to permit the divorce. The magistrates did not agree with Luther and rejected his petition—which implies that Luther was no dictator of Wittenberg—but Luther did not surrender to the decision of the city council; instead, he continued to appeal to the elector for the woman's security until he finally received the elector's approval for her separation.<sup>48</sup> This is evidence that Luther not only insisted on women's rights in speech or writing, but he also fought for them in his ministry.

A letter written in 1524 shows another category of women whom Luther attempted to protect. In the letter entitled "Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children," he does not follow uncritically the stipulation of Exodus 22:16–17 ("If a man lies with a maiden, he shall endow her and make her his wife; but if her father refuses this, he shall provide for her the dowry"). Luther's interpretation is that the father should not refuse to give her to the man at all in this case, but ought to allow the marriage; otherwise, the woman could be in jeopardy:

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<sup>45</sup> Mickey L. Mattox, "Luther on Eve, Women, and the Church," in *The Pastoral Luther*, 256–59.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>47</sup> Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," 337.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, "Martin Luther on Spousal Abuse," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 337–39.

At that time [i.e., in Moses's time], however, there was not so much stress laid on virginity. In our day there is a strong aversion to marrying a despoiled woman; such a marriage is regarded as disgraceful. As a result the second part of this law of Moses, with respect to parental authority over the despoiled virgin, is harmful and a source of peril to the child.<sup>49</sup>

Luther's exposition of Exodus 22:16–17 demonstrates 1) his humanist concern to take into consideration the difference between Moses's day and his own day—which is also seen in his application of the ninth and tenth commandments<sup>50</sup>—and 2) his pastoral concern for the possible peril of a despoiled virgin. Although he held a high view of parental authority and demanded children's faithful obedience, Luther saw protection of the despoiled woman as more important than the authority of the parents.

How much influence did Luther's view of women have on male-dominated European culture? Was Luther, or the Reformation in general, good for women in the sixteenth century? Several scholars have argued that Luther's positive evaluation of marriage did women more harm than good. According to them, women had enjoyed more independence and freedom in the convent or even in the public brothel than in the home. Merry Wiesner, drawing on recent research, notes that “women fought harder than men to retain their religious houses” and to prevent the closing of convents and monasteries,<sup>51</sup> and Karant-Nunn claims that monasticism provided women with a refuge through which they could escape from male dominance in the household and the high risks accompanying pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>52</sup> Though women's opportunity for education was expanded, that education was merely used to reinforce the male-dominated family and society. A daughter's prayer was, “Let me become a good housekeeper,” and a housewife's prayer was, “[May] I humble myself before my husband and raise my child to fear you and to live in decency.”<sup>53</sup> Family became another kind of

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther, “Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children,” *LW* 45:391.

<sup>50</sup> Pointing out that Luther did not apply the tenth commandment directly to his own day, Wengert states, “What a remarkable turn of a text! Here Luther, who more than anyone focuses theology on the Word alone, dismisses a clear Word of God as inapplicable for social reasons! We have no slaves, and women are not property!” Wengert, “Martin Luther and the Ten Commandments in the Large Catechism,” 135.

<sup>51</sup> Merry E. Wiesner, “Studies of Women, the Family, and Gender,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1992), 164.

<sup>52</sup> Karant-Nunn, “Transmission of Luther's Teaching on Women and Matrimony,” 31.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Susan Karant-Nunn, “Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Social Ideology in the Sermons of Johannes Mathesius,” in *Germania Illustrata*, ed. Andrew C. Fix and Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 130–31.

nunnery that inhibited women's self-realization and subjected wives to their husbands' authority.

Nevertheless, it would be anachronistic to strictly apply the standard of modern feminism to the sixteenth century and thereby depreciate the Reformers' endeavor to reform marriage and family life. Despite many limitations, it is certain that they rebelled, or at least started rebelling, against the long-held social structure of inequality between man and woman. This is especially true of Luther, who said, "I wouldn't give up my Katie for France or for Venice," and designated his wife "heir to everything" in his last will and testament against the traditional German practice;<sup>54</sup> he should thus be appreciated as a forerunner of the modern advancement of women's rights.

## **II. Martin Luther on Family Life**

Marriage is not merely for satisfying suppressed sexual appetites and elevating women's dignity. It exists primarily for glorifying and pleasing God. In this respect, marriage and family can serve as a great school for sanctification and Christian character. Home is the place where what Luther declared as the essence of Christian ethics can be exercised: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone." Though some accuse Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers of promoting individualism, he actually had great concern for the communal aspect of faith: "To be human is to be open for others, to live with one another and mutually to bear burdens."<sup>55</sup> Whereas monks and nuns sought to pursue holiness in isolation from earthly cares and struggles, Luther urged the Christian to practice sanctification in the midst of difficulties and relational conflicts. This shows Luther's pastoral genius quite clearly.

In order to enjoy a delightful marriage, first of all, one ought to recognize about the estate of marriage that "God himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them."<sup>56</sup> To put it simply, to know the lordship of God over married life is the beginning of godly marriage. While the pagans scoff at laborious housework and say that "it is better to remain free and lead a peaceful, carefree life," the Christian man looks at all the annoying and despised duties differently in light of the Spirit and praises God with a humble heart:

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<sup>54</sup> Ozment, *Protestants*, 160.

<sup>55</sup> Lindberg, "Luther and the Family," 140.

<sup>56</sup> Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 38.

O God, ... 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?<sup>57</sup>

Likewise, all that a wife does at home are “truly golden and noble works,” and even childbirth is a glorious suffering in subservience to God. Luther summarizes his whole point in a witty remark: “When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child ... God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling.”<sup>58</sup>

### **1. Responsibilities of Husband and Wife**

In the Large Catechism, Luther teaches that God values the conjugal relationship and wants to protect its purity by giving the sixth commandment: “You should carefully note, first, how highly God honors and praises this walk of life, endorsing and protecting it by his commandment.”<sup>59</sup> The duty of husband and wife is not merely to keep marriage from adultery, but “to love and cherish the spouse whom God has given them.”<sup>60</sup> Married love is over and above all other kinds of love in that it desires nothing but the loved one. Husband and wife should say, “It is you I want, not what is yours: I want neither your silver nor your gold; I want neither. I want only you. I want you in your entirety, or not at all.”<sup>61</sup>

Everything runs smoothly in the early stage of marriage, says Luther. A husband and wife who have just married love each other with all their hearts. Once their initial curiosity is satisfied, however, the devil begins to arouse boredom with their married life, thereby making them look for another man or woman. Those who do not walk by the Word of God become easily tired of their spouses and soon want change or divorce.<sup>62</sup> But Christian couples should be different and be consistent in their married love. The Word of God, not human desire or appetite, should lead and guard the Christian marriage. A man armed with God’s Word will not be attracted by another woman, but will say,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>59</sup> Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 414.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>61</sup> Luther, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage,” 9.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount,” *LW* 21:89, 95.

Is she beautiful? As far as I am concerned, she is not very beautiful. And even if she were the most beautiful woman on earth, in my wife at home I have a lovelier adornment, one that God has given me and has adorned with His Word beyond the others, even though she may not have a beautiful body or may have other failings. ... I know that He and all the angels are heartily pleased if I cling to her lovingly and faithfully. Then why should I despise this precious gift of God and take up with someone else, where I can find no such treasure or adornment?<sup>63</sup>

Luther was also well aware that married life is not free from troubles and hardships. Some occasions in which husbands and wives have difficulty keeping a good relationship can take place. But it is in this situation that marriage especially serves as a school for faith. For example, a woman could live with a rude and unbearable husband. Should she depart from such an evil husband? Luther's counsel to her is to be equipped with Christian fortitude and endure his ill behavior because "that would doubtless be a wonderfully blessed cross and a right way to heaven."<sup>64</sup> Similarly, when a wife becomes ill and accordingly unable to fulfill the conjugal duty, her husband should remain in the relationship rather than take another wife. According to Luther, this is a great opportunity to put one's trust in God's providence and await his good pleasure:

Consider that in this invalid God has provided your household with a healing balm by which you are to gain heaven. Blessed and twice blessed are you when you recognize such a gift of grace and therefore serve your invalid wife for God's sake. ... If you will earnestly serve your invalid wife, recognize that God has placed this burden upon you, and give thanks to him, then you may leave matters in his care. He will surely grant you grace, that you will not have to bear more than you are able.<sup>65</sup>

## ***2. Responsibilities of Parents***

Luther also stresses the responsibilities of parents. The greatest good in marriage is that "God grants offspring and commands that they be brought up to worship and serve him." Also, "there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal."<sup>66</sup> First, as the temporal authority, parents should provide material support for their children. They should not spare money or effort for their education. If one is concerned about the lack of financial resources to support children, "he should take satisfaction in this; first, that his status and occupation are pleasing to God; second, that God will most

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>64</sup> Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 34.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 46.

certainly provide for him if only he does his job to the best of his ability.”<sup>67</sup> What is more, parents ought to help their children find suitable spouses, thereby establishing new households. Luther warned parents neither to prevent their children from getting married nor to put their marriage off for any reason. If parents fail to perform this duty, he advises children to marry without the consent of their parents.<sup>68</sup>

Though it is important for parents to perform their responsibilities as temporal authorities, providing material support is only a small part of parental duty. Much more important is their spiritual role. In this regard, Luther calls parents “apostles, bishops, and priests to their children,”<sup>69</sup> and he also calls children “the churches, the altar, the testament, the vigils and masses.”<sup>70</sup> To bring up children with Christian minds to worship and serve the Lord is the “shortest road to heaven.”<sup>71</sup> Luther warns his reader that many parents pay more attention to the care of their children’s bodies than to that of their souls, and merely want their children to get ahead or become rich in this world. But this should be always remembered:

We must not think only of amassing money and property for them. God can provide for them and make them rich without our help, as indeed he does daily. But he has given us children and entrusted them to us precisely so that we may raise and govern them according to his will; otherwise, God would have no need of fathers and mothers. Therefore let all people know that it is their chief duty—at the risk of losing divine grace—first to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God. ...<sup>72</sup>

When parents stand before God at their death and on the day of judgment, they will not be asked about how much money or property they piled up for their children, but about how sincerely they taught the Word of God and the Christian faith to the children whom God entrusted to them.<sup>73</sup>

### ***3. Responsibilities of Children***

Luther’s teachings on the duty of children are well summarized in his exposition of the fourth commandment, “You are to honor your father and mother.” According to Wengert’s analysis of Luther’s Large Catechism, the

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 47–48.

<sup>68</sup> Luther, “Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children,” 387–90.

<sup>69</sup> Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 46.

<sup>70</sup> Luther, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage,” 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>72</sup> Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 410.

<sup>73</sup> Luther, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage,” 13.

Ten Commandments “are given in descending order of importance.”<sup>74</sup> The earlier commandments have authority over the later ones. The first three commandments in relation to God dominate applications of the following commandments in relation to man. Accordingly, if a child’s parents would force him to abandon faith in God, prayer, or worship, he should not obey his parents. Yet, in all other cases that do not contradict Christian faith, one ought to follow the words of parents above those of any other human. Obedience to the authority of parents is the best virtue of children.

This is because parents are the reminder of God’s benevolence and providence. As God’s representatives on earth, parents are worthy of reverence in all circumstances. Just as people easily forget “how God feeds, guards, and protects us and how many blessings of body and soul he gives us,” so children forget the benevolent works of their parents.<sup>75</sup> Luther criticizes the papacy for fostering such disregard for parents. By encouraging monastic life and elevating obedience to the church over obedience to parents, the Catholic Church neither taught nor heeded the fourth commandment. Luther once accepted this Catholic teaching, but he expressed his regret about entrance to the monastery when he wrote *On Monastic Vows* (1521). He dedicated this treatise to his father, Hans Luther, and asked his father’s forgiveness for the decision to be a monk and the willful violation of the fourth commandment.<sup>76</sup>

What if parents are poor or not worthy of respect, humanly speaking? Should children still obey them? Luther’s answer is yes. Obedience to parents does not depend upon whether they are good or bad, but upon God’s will.

However lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are still their mother and father, *given by God*. They are not to be deprived of their honor because of their ways or failings. Therefore, we are not to think of their persons, whatever they may be, *but of the will of God*. ...<sup>77</sup>

Luther continues to affirm that it is “for God’s sake” that “the young people should banish all other things from their sight and give first place to this commandment.”<sup>78</sup> Even when parents force unwilling marriage—though Luther strongly warns parents against this—Christian children have to remain with their spouses, remembering the example of Jacob, who endured Laban’s injustice “although in the eyes of mankind he was under no

<sup>74</sup> Wengert, “Martin Luther and the Ten Commandments in the Large Catechism,” 139.

<sup>75</sup> Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 404.

<sup>76</sup> Froehlich, “Luther on Vocation,” 126.

<sup>77</sup> Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 401. Italics added.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 402.



obligation.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, poor or evil parents can be the instruments by which the children practice their trust in God’s sovereignty.

All in all, marriage and family make for a wonderful school where Christians can test and practice their faith in God and pursue sanctification. Luther emphasized the function of the Christian family as a great sanctifier by using such strong language as “a blessed cross and a right way to heaven,” and “the shortest road to heaven.” Luther even encouraged the potential husband who is worried about material well-being by saying, “God will most certainly provide for him if only he does his job to the best of his ability,” which is an echo of the medieval scholastic idea of “*facere quod in se est*” (do what is in you).<sup>80</sup>

However, it should be observed that Luther did not introduce any notion of meritorious works for salvation. His basic presupposition is that marriage and family are a gift from God rather than a human achievement. As Luther stressed his view of a passive righteousness before God rather than an active righteousness in his soteriology and claimed that “salvation is the source of life rather than the goal of life,”<sup>81</sup> he said the same here: what makes marriage and family holy is faith in and gratitude for God’s benevolent gift, not human work.

## Conclusion

In his biography of Luther, Roland Bainton concludes that “the influence of the man on his people was deepest in the home. In fact, the home was the only sphere of life which the Reformation profoundly affected.”<sup>82</sup> Some would see Bainton’s comment as an exaggeration and point out the practical limitations of Luther’s reform of marriage. Nevertheless, his contributions to the establishment of modern Christian marriage and family life should be acknowledged. Marriage and family had been in his mind all the time. Luther’s early sermons and treatises were full of attacks against the superiority of celibacy held by the papacy. Throughout his writings and ministry, he elevated and protected the rights of women and highlighted the importance of the Christian home. He put his teachings into practice by marrying Katharine and seeking to bring up six children in a Christian manner. He

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<sup>79</sup> Luther, “Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children,” 388.

<sup>80</sup> Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 47.

<sup>81</sup> Lindberg, “Luther and the Family,” 138.

<sup>82</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 384.

wrote a preface for the publication of Johann Freder's *A Dialogue in Honor of Marriage* in 1545, just a year before his death,<sup>83</sup> thereby demonstrating that marriage and family was his lifetime concern. All these show us that Luther was not merely a critical theologian or uncompromising church reformer, but a faithful pastor who was sensitive to people's daily concerns and problems.

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<sup>83</sup> Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage," 171.