MARTIN LUTHER ON MARRIAGE 
AND THE FAMILY

Carter Lindberg

Social historians of the Reformation have been reluctant to recognize theology as an agent of social change beyond endorsing an elite political agenda for social control and social disciplining.\(^1\) And popular portrayals of Luther\(^2\) tend to paint him as a conservative patriarch bent on limiting women to “church, kitchen, and kids” echo the conclusions of scholars who claim that the Reformation had a negative effect upon the position of women.


\(^2\) In this article, the following abbreviations are made in relation to Luther’s works: LW = Luther’s Works; WA = D. Martin Luthers Werke.
On the other hand, it may be argued that the marriage Luther himself entered into with Katharina von Bora, with its public protest against clerical celibacy, against the monastic vows of chastity, and against the Humanist movement’s contempt of women, raised a historically effective sign in favor of what Karl Holl described as the “reconstruction of ethics.” In contrast to the predominant attitudes of his day, Luther revalorized marriage and the family. Steven Ozment states: “No institutional change brought about by the Reformation was more visible, responsive to late medieval pleas for reform, and conducive to new social attitudes than the marriage of Protestant clergy. Nor was there another point in the Protestant program where theology and practice corresponded more successfully.” Luther’s application of evangelical theology to marriage and family desacramentalized marriage; desacralized the clergy and resacralized the life of the laity; opposed the maze of canonical impediments to marriage; strove to unravel the tangled skein of canon law, imperial law, and German customs; and joyfully affirmed God’s good creation, including sexual relations. In return, Luther was in such demand as a marriage counselor that he often complained of the burden it imposed on him.

Although his theological breakthrough preceded and influenced his theology of marriage and family, his own marriage and family also influenced his theological development. Luther dialectically related his experience of

---

3 Konrad Stock, Gottes wahre Liebe. Theologische Phänomenologie der Liebe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 47.
4 Gerta Scharffenorth, “Martin Luther zur Rolle von Mann und Frau,” in Hans Süssmuth (ed.), Das Luther-Erbe in Deutschland. Vermittlung zwischen Wissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1985), 111-129, here 112.
fathering to his theology of God as Father." Luther’s marriage and family also reinforced his experience that it is in the midst of life that one becomes a theologian: "It is through living, indeed through dying and being damned that one becomes a theologian, not through understanding, reading or speculation" (WA 5: 163, 28-29). Child care, for example, provided him with vivid illustrations of God’s love. "In Luther’s German, sins are said to be ‘stinking.’ Das stinkt zum Himmel (‘that stinks to high heaven’) is a way to express indignation over an offence. The association between the stench from soiled diapers and the sins of grown-ups was therefore not so far-fetched. Luther made it repeatedly. ‘God the Father has to bear much worse stench from human beings than a father and a mother from their children,’ and ‘How our Lord God has to put up with many a murmur and stink from us, worse than a mother must endure from her child.’"

For Luther the love of God could not be more emphatically expressed than by saying we are his children (WA 20: 694, 27-33). "But you say: The sins which we daily do offend God; thus we are not holy. I answer: Mother-love is much stronger than the excrement and scabs of the child. So is God’s love stronger than our filth" (WA TR 1: 189, Nr. 437).

We often forget how Luther’s marriage shocked his contemporaries, including his colleagues. The year he married (1525) witnessed the loss of significant humanist support through his break with Erasmus as well as the major upheaval of the Peasants’ War. In this context, convinced of his imminent demise, he married to witness his faith. His marriage he said "would please his father, rile the pope, make the angels laugh and the devils weep, and would seal his testimony."

Luther was, after all, one of the first priests in Western Christendom to marry. Even more startling was the fact that he married a nun. Indeed, according to Roman Catholic polemists of the time, all disorder in the world – including the Peasants’ War – is attributable to Luther’s marriage. The marriage of a monk with a nun is harlotry, and its consequence is disorder in the sense of

---

10 Stolt, "Martin Luther on God as a Father," 391.
offense against the divine foundation of this world. Furthermore, an old proverb claimed that the Antichrist would arise from such a union. In this regard, however, Erasmus wryly remarked that if that were the case the world would be full of Antichrists.

Thus Luther’s marriage was not just ordinary run of the mill pathology; it was spiritual, indeed cosmic, pathology! How could this be explained? Why, by looking at his parents of course. Johannes Cochlaeus, one of Luther’s more influential Catholic detractors, explained Luther’s perversity by claiming that Luther’s mother was a whore and his father a murderer. With a dysfunctional family like that what else could you expect than the Antichrist? In his Commentary... on the Acts and Writings of Martin Luther (1549), Cochlaeus affirmed the tale “that Luther was begotten of an unclean spirit under the appearance of an incubus.” Cochlaeus’s rather crude explanation remained influential into the early twentieth century and foreshadowed more sophisticated modern psychological efforts to explain Luther. Both the neo-freudian explanation of Norman O. Brown and the identity crisis theory of Erik Erikson continue pathological interpretations by convenient neglect of historical evidence.

Medieval doctrine viewed the celibate life as a meritorious work for salvation. Pope Gregory VII (r.1073-1085) who mandated priestly celibacy reanimated patristic suspicions of sexuality as the expression of original sin. Indeed, Augustine’s perspective on the matter suggests that original sin is the first sexually transmitted disease. Virginity was presented as the ideal state of the Christian life. As Jerome, that paragon of libido, put it: "Marriages fill the

———

13 Erasmus’s comment is cited by Martin Treu, Katherina von Bora (Wittenberg: Drei Kastanien, 1995), 35.
15 For the influence of Cochlaeus see Adolf Herte, Das katholische Lutherbild im Bann der Lutherkommentar des Cochlaeus, 3 vols. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1943).
These doctrinal developments, together with a catalogue of ecclesiastical marriage prohibitions for the laity, evoked a profound uncertainty – in spite of the sacramental character of marriage – concerning the meaning of marriage. The identification of sexual relations with sin and the high valuation of celibacy divided Christians into first and second-class citizens. If this oppressed the laity, it tormented the clergy.

Luther may have been one of the first priests to marry but he clearly was not the first Western priest to have sex. Medieval anti-clerical writings – as exaggerated and polemical as they may be – make it clear that celibacy was honored more in its breach than its observance. The practice of medieval priests having concubines and illegitimate children was neither unusual nor a particular obstacle to clerical advancement.

Indeed, clerical concubinage was a significant source of ecclesiastical revenue: the so-called “whore tax” (hurenzinss). In his “Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope and the Bishops Falsely So Called” (1522), Luther charged that the episcopal opposition to clerical marriage was primarily economic. “For bishops receive the greater part of all their annual interest rates in almost all religious foundations from nothing but the priests’ whores. Whoever wants to keep a little whore must give one guilder a year to the bishop.” And the fee increases with every child they bear (LW 39: 290-291). The bishopric of Constance “licensed” clerical concubinage for four guldens, and assessed each child of such unions an additional fee of four guldens. Since it is estimated that about 1,500 children were born annually in this situation, it is easy to appreciate the non-doctrinal reasons for Episcopal opposition to clerical marriage.

On the other hand, such casuistry did not alleviate the guilt many priests experienced in these relationships. A contemporary described his struggles as follows: “So I am caught. I cannot be without a wife. If I am not permitted to have a wife, then I am forced to lead publicly a disgraceful life, which damages my soul and honor and leads other people, who are offended by me, to damnation. How can I preach about chastity and unchastity, adultery and depravity, when my whore comes openly to church and my bastards sit right in...”

---

Luther’s theology liberated the clergy who suffered such anguish and self-hatred over failing to remain celibate. Already in his "Address to the Christian Nobility" (1520), Luther asserted that "before God and the Holy Scriptures marriage of the clergy is no offense." Clerical celibacy is not God’s law but the pope’s, and "Christ has set us free from all man-made laws, especially when they are opposed to God and the salvation of souls...” Thus the pope has no more power to command celibacy than "he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural movement of the bowels, or growing fat" (LW 44: 178; 39: 297-298).

At this point it may be helpful to take a moment to set the record straight on some items which perennially arise. Luther did not initiate the Reformation in order to legitimize his marriage. The driving force throughout Luther’s career was righteousness coram Deo not sex coram hominibus. He was not the first reformer to marry, nor was he eager to do so. Nor was his reforming movement a consequence of some pathology created in him by his father and mother. Indeed, his love for his parents was so strong that as a monk during his visit to Rome, Luther had wished them dead so he could have redeemed them from purgatory. "I ran through about a dozen Masses in Rome and was almost prostrated by the thought that my mother and father were still alive, because I should gladly have redeemed them from purgatory with my Masses and other excellent works and prayers. There is a saying in Rome: ‘Blessed is the mother whose son reads a Mass on Saturday in St. John’s!’ How I should have liked to make my mother blessed! But it was too crowded, and I could not get in; so I ate a smoked herring instead" (LW 14: 6).

Furthermore, Luther’s story is not mostly a male story. His mother, who came from the highly distinguished and educated Lindemann family, nourished his piety and learning. Luther’s love for his mother is evident not only in his

---

21 For other discussions of such self-hatred see Harrington, Reordering Marriage, 37 and Ozment, “Social History,” 193.
22 For a discussion of this claim carried into our time by the Dominican, Heinrich Denifle, see Heiko A. Oberman, Luther: Man between God and the Devil (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 275-276.
23 Siggins, "Luther’s Mother;" idem, Luther and his Mother, and Bainton, “Luther und seine Mutter.”
naming of his daughter after her, but also in the conclusion of the long letter of comfort he wrote her during her final illness. "The Father and God of all comfort grant you through his holy Word and Spirit a firm, joyous, and thankful faith that you may experience that it is the truth when he says, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' All my children and my Katy pray for you. Some cry, some eat and say, grandmother is very sick. God's grace be with us all, Amen. your dear son, Mart. Luther." 24 Luther’s love and respect for his father is evident especially in his overcoming their rift over his entrance into the monastery. In dedicating his "On Monastic Vows" (1521; LW 44: 243-400) to his father, Luther credits his father for being correct in criticizing his decision to enter the monastery and thereby resolves their conflicts. 25

Luther was not a misogynist nor did he hold to a double standard for men and women. In response to the vulgar proverb that all women are alike with the lights out, Luther not only responded that so are men, but also took to task those who would insult women. 26 Luther stated that "Marriage does not only consist of sleeping with a woman – anybody can do that – but of keeping house and bringing up children" (LW 54: 441). Those who followed Luther saw in marriage not only a new joyous appreciation for sexual relations, but also a new respect for women as companions. Luther could not imagine life without women: "The home, cities, economic life and government would virtually disappear. Men can’t do without women. Even if it were possible for men to beget and bear children, they still couldn’t do without women" (LW 54: 161). For Luther this included the intelligence, piety, and ethics of women.

Luther sought to redefine what his society thought appropriate for male

and female behavior. For example, medieval society and theology sanctioned prostitution and civic brothels. Prostitutes purified a town by draining off excess male sexual energy, like a sewer drained off waste.\footnote{Jacques Rossiaud, \textit{Medieval Prostitution} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 80-84, and passim.} The church tolerated prostitution because its gender values denigrated sex and also assumed that male lust was an anarchic, uncontrollable force which if not provided an outlet would pollute the town’s respectable women. Public brothels were thought to prevent the greater evils of adultery and rape. Luther’s criticism of this rationale attacked his culture’s gender presupposition concerning males. In asserting equal responsibility for males and females, Luther criticized the double standard of his day as well as the existence of brothels.\footnote{See LW 44: 214-215; LW 3: 259; Steven Ozment, \textit{When Fathers Ruled}, 56; and Susan Karant-Nunn, “Continuity and Change: Some Aspects of the Reformation on the Women of Zwickau,” \textit{Sixteenth Century Journal} 13 (1982), 17-42, here 24.} Luther attempted to redefine his culture’s understanding of male gender from uncontrollable impulse to social responsibility.

Luther’s own marriage ought not be romanticized yet it expressed his conviction that faith is to be active in love.\footnote{For discussions of Luther’s marriage, home, and family see Martin Brecht, \textit{Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 195-204; Treu, \textit{Katherina}; Heinrich Boehmer, ”Luthers Ehe,” \textit{Luther-Jahrbuch} (1925), 40-76; and Walther von Loewenich, ”Luthers Heirat: Geschehnis und Geschichte,” \textit{Luther} 47/2 (1976), 47-60.} The story of Luther’s marriage to the nun, Katherine von Bora, who with eight other nuns had fled the Cistercian monastery in Nimbschen, is well known. Katy made it known that Martin was her man in spite of Luther’s efforts to find her a husband. Luther, who had advocated clerical marriage, was under pressure from others to put his theology into practice. His supporters wanted a practical expression of his support for married priests, and his father wanted grandchildren. On 13 June 1525 Luther married Katy to please his father and to spite the pope (LW 29: 21). Now Luther affirmed marriage from experience as well as theory. It is, he claimed, a glimpse of what the lost Eden must have been like. Certainly he knew married life was not one long honeymoon, and commented that if we knew what lay in store for us, we probably would not get married. But celibacy, he believed, removed men and women from service to the neighbor, contravened the divine order, and denied the goodness of sexual relations. Marriage created a new awareness of
human community. The father washing smelly diapers may be ridiculed by fools, but “God with all his angels and creatures is smiling – not because the father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith” (LW 45: 40).

For Luther the companionship of husband and wife is a marvelous thing. But the Luthers also knew firsthand the pain of the loss of children. Elizabeth died in infancy, and Magdelene died in his arms when she was only thirteen. “It’s strange to know that she is surely at peace... and yet to grieve so much” (LW 54: 432). Altogether Martin and Katy had six children whom they loved dearly. His children were Luther’s great joy. He wrote the Christmas hymn “From Heaven Above I Come to You” (SBH 51; LW 53: 289-291) for his family Christmas just when his children were old enough to sing. “If we wish to train children,” Luther wrote, “we must become children with them. Would to God such child’s play were widely practiced” (“Preface to the German Mass,” 1526; LW 53: 67).

Katy nurtured and scolded her husband through more than 25 years of what certainly must have been one of the most eventful marriages in history. Luther was convinced that God had come to his aid by giving them to each other. His marriage influenced his theology of human relations, especially in terms of the mutuality and reciprocity of love, and contributed to new perspectives on the dignity and responsibility of women.

Luther viewed marriage and family as he did everything else – from the perspective of human righteousness before God as a gift rather than an achievement. That is, righteousness is received not achieved. Salvation is the source of life rather than the goal of life. Here is the freedom of the Christian. Once liberated from an otherworldly asceticism, from directing human energies and resources to acquisition of salvation, the Christian is free to direct energies and resources to social concerns in the world. Elsewhere I have belabored the

---

30 Johannes (1526), Elisabeth (1527), Magdalena (1529), Martin (1531), Paul (1533), Margarete (1534). Oberman, Luther, 278. For the history of Luther’s descendents see Johannes Luther, “Die Nachkommenschaft Martin Luthers des Reformators,” Luther-Jahrbuch (1925), 123-138.


Thus Luther wrote in relation to Gal. 3:26-28 that “Every one of us ought to serve God freely with the gift he has, but we must all glory in what is common to us all, a simple virgin faith in the one and only Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female, and consequently neither married nor unmarried, neither widow nor spinster, but all are one in Christ” (LW 44: 308-309; cf. also 373).

With regard to Gen. 1:28, Luther’s basic thesis is that man and woman are God’s work and creatures; God created humankind so that there should be men and women (LW 45:17). Bodiliness and sexuality are God’s gifts which deserve thanks and responsible use. God knows what humankind needs: “It is not good that a person be alone.” In his tract “The Estate of Marriage” (1522; LW 45:13-49), Luther ventured a new understanding of creation that discussed the relationship between man and woman and between children and parents as well as his model of marriage and family. He later developed this in the Large Catechism in relation to the praxis of life presented in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. His experiences as pastor, preacher, and university professor compelled him to think through the existential questions of persons in all classes. He discovered that scholastic theology was of little help in relating faith to life. He constantly sought ways to teach theology so that the proclamation of the gospel would be understandable to the laity.\footnote{Scharffenorth, “Martin Luther,” 115-119; cf. Gerhard Forde, Theology is for Proclamation (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).} Luther began his instruction on the estate of marriage with a critique of the
widespread judgments about it. "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 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 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’” (LW 45: 39). Such thoughts, Luther never tired of
asserting, are those of the “blind heathen” who do not know that man and
woman are God’s creation.

The issue is not just that of the estate of marriage but that spouses find one
another in marriage, esteem each other in their own individuality, receive and
love each other. Among the “advantages and delights” in marriage are “that
husband and wife cherish one another, become one, [and] serve one another”
(LW 45: 43). Marriage includes effort, work, and suffering. But it provides the
opportunity to complement one another and to stand by one another in the
difficulties of life. The promise of marriage is fulfilled when husband and wife
trust God’s promises in the midst of their difficulties. To Luther marriage is not a
static existence but a mutual, reciprocal process of common learning in the
structures of life and the practising of faith. Being human is not mere biology
but living in a community nourished by early experiences of attention and love
in childhood. “No one can have real happiness in marriage who does not
recognize in firm faith that this estate together with all its works, however
insignificant, is pleasing to God and precious in his sight. These works are
indeed insignificant and mean; yet it is from them that we all trace our origin,
we have all had need of them. Without them no man would exist. For this
reason they are pleasing to God who has so ordained them, and thereby
graciously cares for us like a kind and loving mother” (LW 45: 42-43).

It is interesting that three years before he himself married, Luther the monk
contemplated the miracle of childbirth and what it means for the husband to
participate in God’s work of creation. The husband’s relationship to himself changes. What emerges is the readiness to serve a helpless life; a realization that emerges in relationship to his wife. He can no longer disparage the feminine. He no longer desires to be lord over his wife, but rather to be her companion in their common tasks of childrearing. This new understanding makes him capable of relationship and gives him the freedom for activities which beforehand he had seen as women’s work. “[W]hen a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool – though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith – my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling – not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith” (LW 45: 40). In care for children Luther clearly saw how husbands and wives were able to do together what God commanded of them because God had created them in his image. To be human is to be open for others, to live with one another and mutually to bear burdens. The quality of their relationship is therefore significant for the experiencing of humanity by their children and relatives in the relations between generations.35

The child is “God’s creature” not the parents’ possession. Therefore parents are responsible to enable the child to become an adult. In the strict patriarchal context of the sixteenth century, Luther mainly spoke of the responsibilities of the “house father”36 (e.g., in the prefaces to the catechisms). Nevertheless, for Luther the “house mother” has co-responsibility. In his commentary on the Fourth Commandment, Luther speaks of the “Patres et Matres familias.” To be parents is “the noblest and most precious work, because to God there can be nothing dearer than the salvation of souls. [Thus]... you can see how rich the estate of marriage is in good works. God has entrusted to its bosom souls begotten of its own body, on whom it can lavish all manner of Christian works.

35 Scharfenorth, “Martin Luther,” 121.
36 Luther and his contemporaries generally did not use the word “family.” The corresponding concepts were “house” (Haus) and “house-estate” (Haussstand). Hans Hattenhauer, “Luthers Bedeutung für Ehe und Familie” in Hartmut Löwe and Claus-Jürgen Roepke (eds.), Luther und die Folgen: Beiträge zur sozialgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der lutherischen Reformation (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1983), 86-109, here 92-93.
Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel... See therefore how good and great is God’s work and ordinance” (LW 45: 46).

Luther does not distinguish between father and mother in relation to the authority and power of parenthood. Both are worthy of love, respect, and obedience in the same measure. "That the wife as housemother bears full co-responsibility is a revolutionary concept in this period." Thus, the Protestant parsonage played a significant role in the development of modern German culture. In the words of Adolf von Harnack, "The evangelical parsonage, founded by Luther, became the model and blessing for the entire German nation, a nursery of piety and education, a place of social welfare and social equality. Without the German parsonage the history of Germany since the sixteenth century is inconceivable."38

The Large Catechism, which Luther set forth as the "Summa of Holy Scripture," characterizes the basic outline of responsibility common to husband and wife. The church orders as well as many biographical sources reflect Luther’s introduction of a change in thinking and relations. Steps toward the deconstruction of the contempt for women included establishment of schooling for girls, participation of women as teachers in catechetical instruction and worship, and the role of midwives as helpers in pastoral care. Yet the power of custom is a strong brake to the change of consciousness in fundamental existential questions. Therefore Luther constantly demanded the reading and learning of the catechism. The doctrines of justification and grace were to prepare the way to a changed consciousness in sexual relations. The proclamation that salvation is received not achieved undercut the perennial human temptation to control others. The good news is that we no longer have to be the captain of our ship and the master of our destiny. In certainty of the grace of God, Christians may breathe freely and in freedom fulfill their tasks in the community and church as "God’s co-workers."39

37 Scharffenorth, "Martin Luther," 123.
38 Cited by von Loewenich, "Luthers Heirat," 55. Harrington, Reordering Marriage, 83, makes a similar point: "By the end of the sixteenth century, the Protestant Pfarrhaus had become a well-established and influential ideological institution in Germany. Catholic reformers could match Lutheran and Calvinist recruitment, training, and disciplining of their respective clerics, but not the living spiritual authority that married ministers lent to the institution of marriage itself.”
39 Scharffenorth, "Martin Luther," 124.
Luther developed the office of parenting not only in the catechisms, but also in his writings on education as an instrument for change. He demanded priority of the estate of "parenthood" over other estates in the interest of community. Fathers and mothers must be challenged in their educational duties by the establishment of schools for boys and girls, and through the reform of existing schools. The future quality of political institutions and the leadership in all worldly tasks depends in large measure upon the education of the next generation. Luther developed this concept in his "Sermon On Keeping Children in School" (1530; LW 46: 209-258).

In his explanation of the First Commandment, Luther stated that God "gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all temporal and eternal blessings... Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant, and he gives grain and all kinds of fruits from the earth for man's nourishment – things which no creature could produce for himself." People overlook this because they receive most gifts mediated through human work. But because God himself gives through these "creatures," "no one should presume to take or give anything except as God has commanded it. We must acknowledge everything as God's gifts and thank him for them, as this commandment requires." The explanation of the Fourth Commandment perceives parents as God's gift to us through whom God's command is laid on our hearts. "Hereby parents become a sacrament to us, the bodily signs of invisible grace."  

Luther developed his classification of husband and wife as equally valued members of the church from his theological position that baptism abrogates human distinctions in relation to God. All members participate in the same manner in the gifts of grace. He affirmed this from his early sermons on the sacraments to his late writing "On the Councils and the Churches." "[A]ll baptized women are the spiritual sisters of all baptized men by virtue of their common baptism, sacrament, faith, Spirit, Lord, God, and eternal heritage" (LW 45:24). Therefore their lives are given a common goal to be reconciled with one

---

another and to participate in the renewal of the world. “The knowledge of the necessary renewal of the relationship of man and woman grounded in the understanding of baptism corresponds to the fundamental Reformation insight that human relationships among Christians are not determined by power or control relations.”

I have sketched Luther’s theology and experience of marriage and family. Does this resource have a future? I think so. Obviously the sixteenth century is in many ways far removed from us, and we cannot just reprise Luther’s perspectives for our time. Yet Luther is a valuable resource for our own struggles with marriage and family.

First of all, the setting for Luther’s reflections is that of pastoral care. Luther opposed theological abstractions, and practiced theology in the midst of life. His treatises on marriage and family developed from his sermons. His “The Estate of Marriage” (1522, LW 45:11-49) exemplifies his pastoral intention. “How I dread preaching on the estate of marriage! I am reluctant to do it because I am afraid if I once get really involved in the subject it will make a lot of work for me and for others... But timidity is no help in an emergency; I must proceed. I must try to instruct poor bewildered consciences...” Luther’s discovery is what every pastor will discover once he or she gives permission for people to bring their concerns before the church. Once you preach about spouse abuse, for example, you will discover there is lots of abuse going on under your nose. Such abuse did not just happen after you preached about it! It has always been there, but now permission has been granted to bring it to light. Marriage, which Luther termed, an “external worldly thing,” is relevant for piety, for the praxis of Christian life.

Second, again in contrast to his time as well as a salutary reminder to us,

---

41 Scharffenorth, “Martin Luther,” 129.
Luther understood sex to be part of God’s good creation. “Christians who have been transformed by the gospel are not to avoid sex, but to dedicate their sexual gifts – like all others – both joyfully and shamelessly to the glory and service of God.” To be sure, Luther continued to affirm that ancient view that marriage is a “remedy against sin,” but this view did not dominate him. For Luther sex is not a necessary evil, but marriage is necessary in order that sex not become evil. The passion of the bride and bridegroom for each other is the greatest love people can have (WA 17/I: 350, 35-351,11). Sexual feeling and the admiration of the other sex is implanted in persons by God, and is expressed by sleeping together, kissing, and embracing. Luther does not hesitate to speak of this I-thou relationship in the medieval mystical term for the relationship of God and the person, Brautliebe. “For there are many loves, but none is so passionate and fiery as the Brautliebe which a new bride has for her bridegroom and the bridegroom has for his bride. This love does not look for use [of the other], nor present, nor rule, nor golden rings and the like; but it looks only to the bridegroom. And if all these were given, still it would not look to them, but says, I will love you alone. And if in return it had nothing at all, still it regards him the same and will have him. That means right Brautliebe. But where one looks to use, that is whore’s love [Hurenliebe] which does not see the person but the benefits; therefore, this love does not last long. The right Brautliebe God has delivered to us in Christ... Now as the bridegroom loves the bride, thus has Christ loved us, and we in return as we believe and are the right bride” (WA 13: 11, 4-7).

Luther’s positive view of the erotic and its place in life stands against misogyny and the pornography that flows from it. It also stands against the equally destructive romanticism flowing from Hollywood that relativizes relationships on the subjective bases of feelings and desires for self-fulfillment. To the romantic Luther said: “You would gladly have a beautiful, good, and rich wife if you could. Indeed, we really ought to paint you one with red cheeks and white legs! These are the best, but they usually cook poorly and pray badly.” Marriage is an order of God’s creation that in itself pleases God. The decisive

44 Lazareth, Luther on the Christian Home, 226.
45 Eberhard Winkler, “‘Weltlich Ding’ oder ‘Göttlicher Stand’?” 130.
46 Olavi Lähteenmäki, Sexus und Ehe bei Luther (Turku, 1955), 55-56, 136-137.
insight of Luther’s marriage ethics is that marriage is not merely the affirmation of the partners but the affirmation of a form of life. The foundation for marriage and family is thus faith from which flows the fruits of love.

Luther’s point is that sexual compatibility, happiness, and self-fulfillment are consequences of faith and trust not their prerequisites. Self-fulfillment is an extremely fragile foundation for any human relationship let alone marriage and family.

Third, Luther’s pastoral approach addressed an issue of his day that has some analogy to the present: the medieval practice of clandestine marriage. Luther’s objection to clandestine marriage continues to have relevance for it stands against the contemporary privatization that assumes living together is a private affair without social and personal significance. To be sure, Luther agreed with canon law’s point that “consent makes the marriage” (consensus facit nuptias), but he opposed the Roman church’s sacramental view that personal covenant was all that was necessary. He spoke to this issue in his tract “That Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder Their Children and That Children Should Not Become Engaged Without Their Parents’ Consent” (1524; LW 45: 379-393). Luther’s effort to increase the parents’ role in the marriage of their children intended to foster responsible decisions, not to constrict the children. “Together, members of the family worked to form marriages that preserved the material and moral interests of kin and community. In the matter of consent, then, the dialectic resolved itself in a higher truth, common interest, and cooperation.” Luther opposed secret betrothals without the consent of parents and the public support of the community because he saw that it is usually the woman and her children who are at risk of being discarded with no rights. In these arrangements to live together, the woman could not file suit for her rights if the man left her. Luther stated clearly: “Secret engagements should not be the basis of any marriage whatsoever. A secret engagement should yield to a public one” (LW 46: 267). “Marriages” without marriage certificates, according to

48 Winkler, “’Weltlich Ding’ oder Göttlicher Stand?’ 130-131.
Luther’s experience led to legal, economic, and pastoral problems. Such arrangements undercut the communal stake in family life. Furthermore, the theological perspective that marriage is based in faith and trust makes a “trial marriage” an oxymoron. Public marriage is difficult enough, secret marriages which lack legal and communal support are even more so. Every marriage is a risk, but a clandestine marriage based only on mutual good will exacerbates rather than minimizes the risk.

Fourth and finally, marriage and family is a Christian calling. Luther’s sermons and catechisms made it clear in contrast to the theology and laws of the medieval church that home and discipleship are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, it is precisely in marriage that chastity is possible, and religious vocation finds its realization. We have forgotten the explosive power of Luther’s doctrine of vocation. To the medieval vocation was limited to priests, nuns, and monks. The thought that persons could serve God in marriage was revolutionary. Justification by grace alone apart from works liberated Christians from achieving salvation for service to the neighbour. And the neighbour is always the person encountered in the concrete situation, that is, parents, spouse, and children. It is often thought that Luther’s exhortation to remain in one’s calling merely reflects the patriarchal conservatism of his day. Precisely the opposite is the case. Luther was rejecting flight into self-chosen religious callings of clericalism, and calling people to serve others in the web of relationships where they live. We are to do what God commands, not what we fancy God would like. The perennial temptation is to desire to do “important” things rather than sweep the floor, change diapers, and do the dishes. But we are not called to self-chosen extraordinary tasks but to service in the world. Luther’s point here is always timely, especially for religious folk like pastors. It is so easy to rationalize long days as the Lord’s work; to rationalize absence from home in terms of discipleship. But then who will be spouse and parent? Not God; that is not his vocation, its yours! Of course this applies to all areas of the church’s work. It is often easier for church activity to interfere with marriage and family than one’s job.

It is precisely in our vocations that the cross and resurrection are active, but we often try to choose our crosses elsewhere so they will be easier to bear.

---

"Luther moved the theology of the cross from self-chosen piety to God-commanded works of love... The old person dies in self-offering for the neighbor; in this sacrifice he is united with the death of Christ and possesses the new life hidden under the death of self in service to others in the midst of earthly life... 'Vocation is the work of faith; vocation is worship in the realm of the world.'"\(^{51}\) Hans Hillerbrand has identified this understanding of vocation as the expression of Lutheran spirituality that "begins and ends with the celebration of the mundane, the ordinary life as the vehicle for glorifying God... the doxology of the ordinary."\(^{52}\)

To say with Luther that spouses and their children are sinners instructed by forgiveness is no mere theological turn of phrase but a hard reality. But as long as families live from forgiveness, as "sinners and righteous at the same time," they may give to one another the forgiveness they receive from God. This is easier said than done, especially in a culture that constantly promotes idealistic and romantic images of self-fulfilment contingent on pleasure. What we hear from Luther is that marital bliss is not maintained without preparedness for suffering. The joy of marriage like everything else in life is a gift that we can only thankfully receive. But this joy may be quickly lost if it is not at the same time received as a task. What is at play here in Luther’s terms is the dialectic of law and gospel. The gospel frees us from narcissistic preoccupation to give and receive love. But the law also calls forth this love, jolting us out of complacency and driving us ever anew to seek and to give forgiveness.\(^{53}\) Marriage is both grace and work under cover of which God gives his gifts. Marriage and family is one of God’s masks. "He could give children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this. Instead He joins man and woman so that it appears the work of man and woman, and yet He does it under the cover of such masks. We have the saying: ‘God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand.’ God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the


\(^{53}\) Winkler, "'Weltlich Ding' oder Göttlicher Stand?'" 134-135.
bull by the horns; that is you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask” (LW 14: 114-115).

Here, too, the theology of the cross affirms that God deals with sinners on the basis of their sin, not on the basis of their achievements. The good news is that the gospel is for failures. The theology of glory (cheap grace) fails to comprehend that God is hidden under the cross and that faith is not based on empirical verification or signs and wonders. “God’s gifts and benefits are so hidden under the cross that the godless can neither see nor recognize them but rather consider them to be only trouble and disaster...” (WA 31/1: 51, 21-24). In contrast to the theology of glory, with its self-chosen works, the theology of the cross propels personal engagement where God wills to be found - in the neighbor who is our parent, spouse, and child.55

54 See the classic exposition of Luther’s theology of the cross by Walther von Loewenich, Luther’s Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976).
55 This article is a revised version of “The Future of a Tradition: Luther and the Family” that appeared in Dean Wenthe, et al. (eds.), All Theology is Christology. Essays in Honor of David P. Scaer (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2000), 133-51.