

Luther and Women

Seminar leader: Jane D. Douglass

Reporter: Jane D. Douglass

I Luther and woman

Luther's theological understanding of the nature of woman and the image of God in her. Discussion was focused on the Genesis commentary (WA 42, especially 51f. 87-176). Problems particularly addressed were the view of woman before and after the fall, whether Eve was created with equality to Adam or whether Eve was from the beginning subordinate to Adam, Luther's description of Eve's nature and gifts, the nature of the image of God. Luther's relation to his mother, one of the foundations of his attitude towards women. Ulrich Becke gave a brief survey of the psychohistorical literature on the theme, "Luther and his mother". He gave special attention to the Luther biography by Paul Johann Reiter, contrasting it with the studies by Erik H. Erikson and Ian Siggins. Discussion centered on the methodology of psychohistory and its usefulness to the historian, and especially to the historian of theology; the differing perceptions by scholars of the importance of Luther's mother in his life; and the significance of Siggins' recent reconstruction of the biographical data concerning his mother for our understanding of Luther's personal development and his theology. Examples of relevant texts from Luther were examined by the seminar.

II Luther and marriage

Luther's theological understanding of marriage. Discussion leader: Maurice Schild. Special attention was given to "Vom ehelichen Leben", 1522 (WA 10 II, 267-304). Tension was perceived between Luther's very high praise for marriage as one of the greatest gifts of creation,

worthy of symbolizing the relation of Christ and his church, and his view of marriage as a "worldly thing". There was discussion of the effect of sin upon marriage and of Luther's view of divorce. Luther's own marriage. Heiko Jürgens led discussion of texts he had selected for insight into Luther's experience of marriage: letters from Luther to Georg Spalatin in 1523 and 1525; letters exchanged between Martin and Katie; and WA TR (Nr. 4786. 508. 1975. 1461. 3298). Noted were the genuine love and partnership between Luther and his wife, despite the lack of equality in relationship, and Luther's growth through the years in understanding reciprocity in sexuality. Attempts were made to correlate changes in Luther's view of women and marriage with Luther's experience of marriage.

III Transmission of Luther's teaching

Susan Karant-Nunn made a presentation, "The transmission of Luther's teachings on women and matrimony: the case of Zwickau". She provided examples of the use of the printing press, the sermon, ecclesiastical authority, correspondence, and drama in the dissemination of Luther's thought. The work of Stephan Roth and Johannes Bugenhagen was described. Discussion centered on the usefulness of social history and its evaluation of social change in judging the impact of theological ideas.

IV Luther and the public rules for women

Study of Luther's commentaries on 1 T 2, 11-15, on Joel 2, 28f, and on Eccl 7, 27. Douglass made a presentation comparing Luther to John Calvin on this topic. Luther appears simply to accept

Paul's teaching on the subordination of women to men both in the church and in society as normative. Calvin approaches Paul's writings on the topic from a somewhat more critical stance, raising different questions. In the »Institutes« Calvin places the silence of women in church in the context of human governance, of church order which is open to modification as circumstances change in order to serve the edification of the church. Calvin is also more positive toward women rulers than Luther; he clearly approves queens ruling in their own right where law and custom approve. Neither Luther nor Calvin thought it proper to have women in public leadership of the church in their own day.

V Summary

Members of the seminar were very much aware that this topic is a relatively new one for Luther studies. One important function of the seminar was to become familiar with the now growing body of literature which is often published outside the usual Luther publications. Participants felt perhaps their most helpful accomplishment during the seminar might be identification of questions and themes for future research; some members indicated an intention to begin work on the topics identified. Therefore we include a listing of research needs drawn together from the week's discussion by James Schaaf.

VI Questions and themes for further research

1. What is »new« and what is »old« in Luther's view of woman, i.e., how much is a product of the general culture and how much is a product of his own theological understanding or its practical application?
2. How much did Luther shape the understanding of woman in later Protestantism and how, if at all, does this differ from that understanding in subsequent Catholicism?

3. To what extent do Luther's life experiences (especially his marriage) affect the structure of his thought and his interpretation of the Scriptures, particularly their references to women?

4. Is there a shift in Luther's understanding of woman, particularly her subordination to man, from early sermons to later commentaries?

5. Is there a tension between Luther's understanding of marriage as a secular matter (»weltlich Ding«) and also as a sacrament (or one of the orders of creation) and, if so, can it be resolved?

6. What was for Luther the relationship between sexuality and sin (e.g., his interpretation of the Sixth Commandment)?

7. Did Luther promote and/or hinder the development of a new view of women and their equality with men?

1. A chronological study of the development of Luther's ideas on sexuality

2. A study of marriage in the sixteenth century and how Luther's own marriage compares with other marriages

3. A study of the status of women before and after the Reformation

4. A study of the development of the concept of marriage as a remedy for sin before, in, and after Luther

5. A comparison of Luther's and Calvin's view of women

6. Luther's views on the Virgin Mary

7. Luther's attitude toward witches and their relationship to the devil

8. Luther's attitude toward divorce

9. Luther's attitude toward the education of girls

10. Luther's attitude toward the celibacy of women

11. Polemics against Luther's own marriage

12. Marriage laws and legislation relating to wills and inheritances in the Reformation era

13. Particular women Luther knew who could have influenced his thinking