

Luther's New View on Marriage, Sexuality and the Family

By Jane Strohl

»[...] for God has created man and woman so that they are to come together with pleasure, willingly and gladly with all their hearts. And bridal love or the will to marry is a natural thing, implanted and inspired by God. This is the reason bridal love is so highly praised in the Scriptures and is often cited as an example of Christ and his church.«¹ »To be sure, when I consider marriage, only the flesh seems to be there. Yet my father must have slept with my mother and made love to her, and they were nevertheless godly people. All the patriarchs and prophets did likewise. The longing of a man for a woman is God's creation – that is to say, when nature's sound, not when it's corrupted as it is among Italians and Turks.«²

Luther's early reflections on marriage concentrate on its importance as a defense against lust and as a safe channel for the expression of human sexuality.³ His anti-monastic polemic is constant.⁴ He distinguishes sharply between

1 LW 46, 304 ≙ WA 30 III, 236, 9-14.

2 LW 54, 161 ≙ WA TR 2, 167, 3-7 (1659).

3 »The concupiscence or fleshly self-centeredness of man forces him into all kinds of immorality and unchastity. Even though ›concupiscence‹ is described by Luther basically in terms of egoism rather than sexual lust, he is still impressed by the frightening ease with which man's sinful personality can unleash such uncontrollable passions«; William H. LAZARETH: Luther on the Christian home: an application of the social ethics of the Reformation. Phil 1960, 7. It is important to note that rapacious sexual desire is only one manifestation of the incurvatus in se nature of the fallen human being. One must not minimize the danger such desire presents, but one must see it as one among many ways in which concupiscence manifests itself at the expense of the neighbor. Luther himself puts lust into perspective: »Youth feels its own evils; then manhood does. For the flesh is plagued by lust, the heart by greed, wrath, hatred, and similar emotions, which trouble the mind in various ways. But these conflicts involve the Second Table *and gradually subside*. Therefore when the struggle seems to be over, this new and sharper battle involving the First Table confronts us, the fight against presumption, vainglory, and the confidence we have in ourselves because of our gifts«; LW 3, 6 (emphasis added) ≙ WA 42, 552, 23-29.

4 Roman Catholic teaching with regard to the social and spiritual good of marriage and

the true charism of chastity and what he denounces as the sham, brutally imposed celibacy of the monastic life. If God favors a person with the former, there is reason for rejoicing, not because it exempts one from the whole difficult business of sexual relationship but because, as Paul points out, it frees one from the entanglements of marriage for uninterrupted service and worship of God.⁵ Luther insists, however, that one cannot by one's own efforts generate such a calling; it comes only as a divine gift and quite rarely at that. Those who take upon themselves vows of celibacy that they prove unable to keep had far better marry, thereby honoring their created nature and corralling their sinful need. Christians remain male and female like other people and have the same innate desire to reproduce their kind. Despite the sin that infects the longing of male and female for one another, it remains in God's eyes a good part of the creation.

The view of marriage as the antidote to sin predominates in the early years.⁶ Over time, however, Luther also speaks of marriage as a divine calling. It is no longer chiefly about what marriage prevents; it is about what it allows to happen in terms of obedience to God and service to the neighbor. Despite Luther's praise of the celibate state – in contrast to the monastic – one ultimately comes away with the impression that the entanglements and challenges of married life generate the discipleship that is most pleasing to God. Luther emphasizes the holiness of the married estate,⁷ but he insists that it is a civil ordinance established as part of

the sanctity of procreation mirrored Protestant positions in many respects. What is offensive to Luther is the hypocrisy of honoring marriage while relegating it to a status far inferior to that of monastic celibacy.

⁵ LW 44, 264 ≙ WA 8, 585, 12-17.

⁶ »Although the remedial and defensive coloration of this initial view was to be complemented after 1523 by a more positive emphasis, it is important to note that it enjoyed virtually exclusive stress for some six years after the posting of the *Theses*, and even thereafter continued to remain prominent in Luther's view for the rest of his life«; Lazareth: Luther on the Christian home, 208f.

⁷ »[...] Luther allows all human occupations and institutions a *relative* autonomy in the realm of creation, and yet maintains that ›in, with, and under‹ them the living Word of God is at work transforming them into divine vocations for all who have the faith to ›see‹. In this manner, the realms of redemption and creation are neither separated nor equated, but permitted to remain in fruitful tension until the Day of Judgment«; Lazareth: Luther on the Christian home, 161.

God's rule of creation.⁸ Marriage and attendant concerns – betrothals, divorce – should be handled exclusively by the temporal authorities. Luther rejects the church's teaching that marriage is a sacrament and denounces as illegitimate and abusive its involvement in the regulation of marital matters. The only proper engagement on the church's part is with issues of conscience, and then pastors can only advise troubled souls embroiled in marital conflicts, not legislate.

For Luther the vocation of husband or wife is inseparable from that of parent, and ultimately he holds the latter to be the more important. He speaks often of the word of God that is joined to marriage and is the one thing that distinguishes it from fornication, for the two look the same in their externals.⁹ He appeals to several different biblical passages: »It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him«;¹⁰ »Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh«;¹¹ »What therefore God has joined together, let no one put asunder«;¹² but most often he makes reference to God's command to the man and woman at creation, »Be fruitful and multiply«.¹³ There is for Luther no greater blessing than the birth of children into a family and no weightier responsibility for husband and wife than becoming effective parents. He even links their eternal salvation to their diligence in this vocation.¹⁴ The parent-

8 In contrast to monasticism: »For though [marriage] is a worldly estate, yet does it have God's word in its favor and was not invented or instituted by men, as was the estate of the monks and nuns. Therefore, it should be accounted a hundred times more spiritual than the monastic estate, which in truth should be considered the most worldly and fleshly of all, because it was invented and instituted by flesh and blood, out of worldly reasons and considerations«; LW 53, 112 ≙ WA 30 III, 75, 15-21.

9 WA 34 I, 53, 19-30.

10 Gn 2, 18. All citations are from the »New Oxford annotated Bible. Rev. standard version«.

11 Gn 2, 24.

12 Mt 19, 6.

13 Gn 1, 28

14 »Think what deadly harm you do when you are negligent and fail to bring up your children to be useful and godly. You bring upon yourself sin and wrath, thus earning hell by the way you have reared your own children, no matter how holy and upright you may be otherwise. Because this commandment is neglected, God also terribly punishes the world; [...]«; THE BOOK OF CONCORD: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church/ ed. by Robert Kolb; Timothy J. Wengert. MP 2000, 410, 176f ≙ WA 30 I, 157, 2-7.

child relationship is also one of love. Yet this is a stern affection that must instill fear and exact obedience to be appropriately loving, for its purpose is to produce responsible citizens and faithful disciples.

This paper will discuss Luther's primary writings on marital matters in chronological order. It will then look at divorce and some aspects of the parent-child relationship and conclude with an exploration of Luther's portrayal of the patriarchs and matriarchs as married couples.

I The Early Writings

In his »A sermon on the estate of marriage, 1519« Luther begins by emphasizing the unique nature of marriage which God grants only to human beings and not to any of the other animals. The importance to God of this relationship is evident in the care God takes in creating Eve for Adam and giving her to him. Luther then distinguishes among three kinds of love: false love, natural love, and married love. False love is self-serving and uses the desired object to satisfy its own appetites, things such as money, sex or prestige. In reality false love is greed and covetousness posing as love. Natural love is that which binds us to parents, siblings, friends and family members. The third form, married love, is or should be the greatest and purest of all loves, writes Luther. It trumps the claims of natural love, since husband and wife leave father and mother to be joined to one another and create a new family.

»But over and above all these is married love, that is, a bride's love, which glows like a fire and desires nothing but the husband. She says, 'It is you I want, not what is yours; I want neither your silver nor your gold; I want neither. I want only you. I want you in your entirety, or not at all.' All other kinds of love seek something other than the loved one: this kind wants only to have the beloved's own self completely.«¹⁵

Luther then qualifies this paean to nuptial rapture with the observation that since the fall such love is no longer pure. It has been corrupted by the presence of false love, that is, the drive to use the other as the means to satisfying one's own desires. Such love is about the self, not the beloved. Luther then concludes that marriage now can be little more than a prophylactic measure against lust.¹⁶

¹⁵ LW 44, 9 ≙ WA 2, 167, 29-34.

¹⁶ »Therefore, the married state is now no longer pure and free from sin. The temptation

At this point he still considers marriage to be a sacrament. Because it signifies the sacred reality of Christ's union with the church, a married man should perform his conjugal duty, the act of making one, without fear of the wicked lust of the flesh that inevitably afflicts him in this most intimate of acts. The taint of lust is also counteracted by the covenant of fidelity that constitutes marriage.¹⁷ Because the couple stays within the limits of their committed relationship, God defends them from the sin of illicit desire. Moreover, within these confines husband and wife are allowed to give relatively free rein to their sexual lives.

»In this way God sees to it that the flesh is subdued so as not to rage wherever and however it pleases, and, within this plighted troth, permits even more occasion than is necessary for the begetting of children. But, of course, a man has to control himself and not make a filthy sow's sty of his marriage.«¹⁸

The third way in which marriage undermines the damning power of lust is by producing children. However, Luther insists, birth within the bonds of matrimony is only the beginning. Even heathens produce offspring, Christians must raise their children to a life of godliness. Maintaining the covenant of marriage becomes almost a secondary concern.

The following year, 1520, in »The Babylonian captivity of the church«, Luther rejects the sacramental status of marriage. He argues that marriage does not impart saving grace and has no divinely instituted sign, although it is a divine institution. Since marriage has existed from the beginning of the world and is found among all peoples, not just Christians, there is no reason to regard it as a sacrament of the Gospel under the governance of the church. Luther then catalogues at great length what he judges to be the church's abusive policies in the regulation of

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«; LW 44, 9 ≙ WA 2, 168, 1-4.

¹⁷ »Second, [the doctors say] that marriage is a covenant of fidelity. The whole basis and essence of marriage is that each gives himself or herself to the other, and they promise to remain faithful to each other and not give themselves to any other. By binding themselves to each other, and surrendering themselves to each other, the way is barred to the body of anyone else, and they content themselves in the marriage bed with their one companion«; LW 44, 10f ≙ WA 2, 168, 38 - 169, 3.

¹⁸ LW 44, 11 ≙ WA 2, 169, 3-7.

marriage.¹⁹ The treatise concludes with a discussion of specific marital situations – for example, what should an impotent man's wife do, if she wants children? – and of divorce.²⁰ In the years following Luther devoted increasing amounts of attention to such cases of marital difficulty.

II Rejection of Monasticism

Luther's »The judgment on monastic vows, 1521« is an unconditional denunciation of the monastic practice of his day and in particular of the required vow of celibacy. He argues that there is no biblical warrant for the imposition of this discipline. Jesus only discusses it with reference to eunuchs; he neither invites nor calls his hearers to take it up. The same, writes Luther, is true of Paul.²¹

He insists once again that true celibacy is a divine gift, not a human accomplishment. To demand it is a form of works righteousness and a violation of Christian freedom.²² Most monastics have tormented con-

19 »Among endless other monstrosities, which are supposed to instruct the confessors, whereas they most mischievously confuse them, there are enumerated in this book eighteen impediments to marriage. If you will examine these with the just and unprejudiced eye of faith, you will see that they belong to those things which the Apostle foretold: There shall be those that give heed to the spirits of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, forbidding to marry« (I Tim. 4:1-3). What is »forbidding to marry« if it is not this - to invent all those hindrances and set those snares, in order to prevent people from marrying, or, if they are married, to annul their marriage?«; LW 36, 96 f ≙ WA 6, 553, 29 - 554, 4.

20 »[...] the content of Luther's early marital counsel, whatever the motivation and the circumstances, is naïve at best and illegal at worst«; Lazareth: Luther on the Christian home, 189.

21 »But virginity and celibacy is a counsel, [they say]. Clearly Christ did not counsel it, but rather discouraged it. It was only when eunuchs had been mentioned that he referred to it and praised it by saying, »He who is able to receive this precept, let him receive it« [Mt 19, 12]. And again, »Not all can receive this precept« [Mt 19, 11]. Are these not the words of someone who prefers to advise against virginity and celibacy and discourage their application? He neither invites anyone to take up celibacy, nor calls men to it. He simply refers to it. Paul, however, says »I give this counsel [...]« [I K 7, 25], but he does not invite anyone to take up celibacy either; rather, he discourages them and deters them when he says, »But each has his own special gift from God« [I K 7, 7]. Paul neither persuades nor dissuades; he leaves the matter open«; LW 44, 261-62 ≙ WA 8, 583, 30-37.

22 »The virgin would then think like this, »Although I could marry, I am content to remain unmarried, not because it is commanded, not because it is advised, not because it is

sciences because they have vowed to do that which they cannot. They are denied the proper outlet for their sexual nature in marriage, and so, argues Luther, they inevitably fall into rampant lust and hypocrisy. Moreover, their celibacy serves no one but themselves; it has nothing to do with the worship of the Lord or the love of the neighbor. Indeed, it excuses them from the very works of mercy Christ has enjoined upon all believers.

Luther concludes »The Judgment ...« with some comments on marriage. He acknowledges that the married person, because of care for the family and involvement in worldly matters, has less time to tend to the Word of God than does the true celibate. Commenting on Isaiah 56, 4f.²³ Luther acknowledges that virginity and chastity are greater works and greater gifts than marriage. We know too, he writes, that in our Father's house are many mansions and that one star differs from another in brightness. »But in relation to the true God and the eunuchs there is no name other than the one we all enjoy, and that name is Christ.«²⁴ Marriage does not come across here as a way of life with the potential for joy. It is not for the faint of heart, but its hardships are far preferable to the tormented conscience of the person unable to keep a vow of chastity. Besides, connubial endurance has biblical precedent.

»We do not advocate marriage as an easy way out, nor do we hold out any promises that it will be such. We want it to be permitted, to be a matter of option, so that the man who is able may be continent for as long as he wants. We want the conscience to be free from offense, not from marriage. How much happier a state of affairs it is to tolerate a marriage irksome twice over than to be tortured by the constant pangs of conscience! This kind of trouble has been laid on us by God, and all the holy patriarchs have borne it.«²⁵

greater and more sacrificial than all other virtues, but because this seems to me to be the right way to live, just as marriage or farming may seem right to somebody else. I do not want the responsibilities of married life, I want to be free of responsibilities and have time for God.«; LW 44, 307 Æ WA 8, 611, 37 - 612, 2.

23 For thus says the Lord: »To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.« .

24 LW 44, 375 Æ WA 8, 653, 16f.

25 LW 44, 395 Æ WA 8, 665, 27-32.

In this treatise Luther does not celebrate married life. It is marked by the cross of Christ, but the light of its grace is less radiant than that of the truly celibate, the eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Over time, however, Luther comes more and more to see in the life of the family within the community of neighbors not an arena of potential distraction from the Word of God but the primary setting for experiencing and enacting the Gospel.

In »An exhortation to the knights of the Teutonic Order that they lay aside false chastity and assume the true chastity of wedlock, 1523« Luther appeals to the knights to abandon their vows without delay and get married. He makes his case using Gn 2, 18: »God says, ›It is my will that you have a helper and not be alone; this seems good to me.‹ Man replies, ›Not so; you are mistaken; I vow to you to do so without a helper; to be alone seems good to me.‹«²⁶ Vows of celibacy fly in the face of this divine word and so cannot be binding. Here the issue is not »marry rather than violate your conscience with a vow of chastity you can't keep«, but »you have no right to make such a vow in the first place when it is God's intent for you to marry«.²⁷ Luther emphasizes once again the hardship that married life entails: »For in the sight of God it is a precious and noble good work to bring up children and train them, to rule your wife and servants in a godly manner, to support yourself by the sweat of your face, and to endure much misfortune and unhappiness at the hands of your wife, children, servants, and others.«²⁸ Married life is the real spiritual discipline, whereas the monastic life, by avoiding such challenges, is pretending to greater suffering while in reality taking a far easier route.

²⁶ LW 45, 145 ≙ WA 12, 234, 22-25.

²⁷ »For this reason God has done marriage the honor of putting it into the Fourth Commandment, immediately after the honor due to himself, where he commands, ›Honor your father and your mother‹ [Ex 20, 12]. Just look! Show me an honor in heaven or on earth, apart from the honor of God, that can equal this honor! Neither the temporal nor the spiritual estate has been so highly honored. And if God had told us nothing more about married life than this Fourth Commandment, we should still have learned sufficiently from it alone that in the sight of God there is no higher office, estate, condition, or work (next to the gospel, which concerns God himself) than the estate of marriage«;

LW 45, 154 ≙ WA 12, 241, 10-17.

²⁸ LW 45, 153f ≙ WA 12, 241, 3-6.

III »The Estate of Marriage« 1522

The 1522 treatise »The estate of marriage« opens with a statement of reluctance on Luther's part to get further involved with the subject of marriage. He fears that there will be no end to the work of straightening out the confusion and damage caused by papal law and by the failure of the secular authority to fulfill its responsibilities. Luther objects that arbitrary restrictions imposed by the church that make it difficult for couples to marry are illegitimate and abusive.²⁹ Moreover, following the letter of even sound civil law in marital matters may be inadequate for the accomplishment of God's will and the spiritual health of the believer. In such cases of emergency Luther feels compelled to speak out on behalf of troubled consciences caught in conflict. It is here that the created order of marriage spills over into the realm of law and Gospel, where the peace of the conscience before God is of paramount concern.³⁰

29 Luther discusses at length eighteen impediments which were recognized as grounds for preventing or dissolving a marriage. These include issues of consanguinity, relationship through marriage, impotence, prior betrothal, coercion, etc. Of the eighteen Luther recognizes only the fourteenth, »unfitness for marriage« – impotence – as a valid ground for ending a marriage. Otherwise these restrictions represent for him an illegitimate interference with the freedom of a Christian. He concludes: »It is a dirty rotten business that a bishop should forbid me a wife or specify the times when I may marry, or that a blind and dumb person should not be allowed to enter into wedlock. So much then for this foolishness [...]«; LW 45, 30 ≅ WA 10 II, 287, 8-II.

30 Luther's advice concerning impotence given in »The Babylonian captivity ...« is reiterated here: »What I said was this: if a woman who is fit for marriage has a husband who is not, and she is unable openly to take unto herself another – and unwilling, too, to do anything dishonorable – since the pope in such a case demands without cause abundant testimony and evidence, she should say to her husband, 'Look, my dear husband, you are unable to fulfill your conjugal duty toward me; you have cheated me out of my maidenhood and even imperiled my honor and *my soul's salvation*; in the sight of God there is no real marriage between us. Grant me the privilege of contracting a secret marriage with your brother or closest relative, and you retain the title of husband so that your property will not fall to strangers. Consent to being betrayed voluntarily by me, as you have betrayed me without my consent.«

I stated further that the husband is obligated to consent to such an arrangement and thus to provide for her the conjugal duty and children, and that if he refuses to do so she should flee from him to some other country and there contract a marriage. I gave

While upholding the principle of Christian freedom, that a person may marry or not, depending on his or her abilities and inclinations, Luther does insist on a certain natural necessity that drives the human being to mate. »Be fruitful and multiply«, he writes, is more than a command; it is a divine ordinance which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. He compares it to such natural instinctual acts as sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and the emptying of bladder and bowels. God does not command people to be man or woman but creates them as one or the other. Neither does God command human beings to multiply but creates them so that they are driven to do so. Vows of celibacy are a vain attempt to reverse the tide and a dishonoring of God's created order. »And wherever men try to resist this, it remains irresistible nonetheless and goes its way through fornication, adultery, and secret sins, for this is a matter of nature and not of choice.«³¹ You either honor the nature God has given you or you degrade it by trying to become what you were not meant to be. There is for Luther nothing admirable or meritorious in such a vain struggle.

In the second part of »The estate of marriage« Luther discusses divorce, which will be taken up below. The final section of the treatise is devoted to the topic of how to live a Christian and godly life in marriage.

Luther is a realist. He points out that to recognize marriage as a holy estate is something quite different from merely being married. Family life is inevitably fraught with conflict and full of drudgery and hardship. Without the eyes of vocation that is all one will see. The person who knows herself called to this spouse and this home, however, will be strengthened by the assurance that all that she does and all that she suffers is pleasing to God. Moreover, she will find in her marriage delight, love and joy without end. The devil has a vested interest in defaming marriage, and so men and women must be on their guard lest they be lured into deni-

this advice at a time when I was still timid. However, I should like now to give sounder advice in the matter, and take a firmer grip on the wool of a man who thus makes a fool of his wife. The same principle would apply if the circumstances were reversed, although this happens less frequently in the case of wives than of husbands [...]. It will not do to lead one's fellow-man around by the nose so wantonly in matters of such great import involving his body, goods, honor, and salvation«; LW 45, 20f (emphasis added) ≙ WA 10 II, 278, 10 - 279, 5.

³¹ LW 45, 18 ≙ WA 10 II, 276, 29-31.

grating one another and rejecting the call to the marital estate.³² Luther gives particular emphasis to the generation of children which results from the relationship of husband and wife, comparing it to the sterility, both physical and spiritual, that he finds in monastic life. He also acknowledges the rich satisfactions that come out of the relation of husband and wife, in addition to the fulfillment of shared child-rearing.

»Observe that thus far I have told you nothing of the estate of marriage except that which the world and reason in their blindness shrink from and sneer at as a mean, unhappy, troublesome mode of life. We have seen how all these shortcomings in fact comprise noble virtues and true delight if one but looks at God's word and will, and thereby recognizes its true nature. I will not mention the other advantages and delights implicit in a marriage that goes well – that husband and wife cherish one another, become one, serve one another, and other attendant blessings [...].«³³

Luther makes clear that even within marriage copulation is not without sin. Yet, he writes, »God excuses it by his grace because the estate of marriage is his work, and he preserves in and through the sin all that good which he has implanted and blessed in marriage.«³⁴ The very same act outside of wedlock has no such coverage and, even when it leads to reproduction, is corrupting and wholly shameful. Fornication, he writes,

32 »What we would speak most of is the fact that the estate of marriage has universally fallen into such awful disrepute. There are many pagan books which treat of nothing but the depravity of womankind and the unhappiness of the estate of marriage, such that some have thought that even if Wisdom itself were a woman one should not marry [...]. I imagine that if women were to write books they would say exactly the same thing about men. What they have failed to set down in writing, however, they express with their grumbling and complaining whenever they get together«; LW 45, 36 ≙ WA 10 II, 292, 22-26; 293, 10-13.

»In order that we may not proceed as blindly, but rather conduct ourselves in a Christian manner, hold fast first of all to this, that man and woman are the work of God. Keep a tight rein on your heart and your lips; do not criticize his work, or call that evil which he himself has called good. He knows better than you yourself what is good and to your benefit, as he says in Genesis 1 [2;18], »It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.« There you see that he calls the woman good, a helper. If you deem it otherwise, it is certainly your own fault, you neither understand nor believe God's word and work. See, with this statement of God one stops the mouths of all those who criticize and censure marriage«; LW 45, 37 ≙ WA 10 II, 293, 26 - 294, 7.

33 LW 45, 42 f ≙ WA 10 II, 299, 1-8.

34 LW 45, 49 ≙ WA 10 II, 304, 9-12.

destroys not only the soul but also the body, property, honor and family.³⁵ The union of man and woman outside of marriage is no more a legitimate response to the divine imperative »Be fruitful and multiply« than the monastic withdrawal from the world of sexual relationship. Both represent a sinful self-assertion over against the will of God.

IV »I Corinthians 7« on Sexual Relations 1523

Sex outside of marriage is for Luther irredeemably sinful, but sex within marriage is obligatory. It is the obedient response to God's command and a good work on behalf of one's closest neighbor, one's spouse. As we shall see, the inability or unwillingness to fulfill one's conjugal duty is grounds for divorce. In his commentary on I Corinthians 7 (1523) Luther discusses the sexual commitment of married couples with reference to verses 1-7:

»Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control. I say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.«³⁶

Marriage is embraced by the law of love, which requires a person to put the neighbor's need before his/her own desire. Consequently, the partners surrender their bodies to each other. When lust assaults one partner, the other is to minister to him/her, and the commitment to

35 »For we see how a licentious and wicked life not only brings great disgrace but is also a spendthrift life, more costly than wedlock, and that illicit partners necessarily occasion greater suffering for one another than do married folk. Beyond that it consumes the body, corrupts flesh and blood, nature, and physical constitution. Through such a variety of evil consequences God takes a rigid position, as though he would actually drive people away from fornication and into marriage. However, few are thereby convinced or converted«; LW 45, 43f ≅ WA 10 II, 299, 21-27.

36 From Luther quoted LW 28, 9-15 ≅ WA 12, 95, 6-19, Das 7. Kapitel zu den Korinthern.

offer oneself to one's spouse is indissoluble. The boundaries are clearly drawn; you cannot give yourself to another, your body is no longer yours to give.³⁷ »For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.«³⁸

Luther is of the opinion that Christians should discipline themselves and conduct their sexual lives with moderation. However, he is adamant that no rules should be imposed on sexual activity, limiting the times and conditions in which intercourse is permissible. Citing the saying »Whoever is too passionate in love-making commits adultery against his own wife«,³⁹ Luther rejects the idea as impossible.⁴⁰ Sex within marriage, as St. Paul writes, is given as a defense against lust and unchastity. Under no circumstances should it be restricted, and the couple thereby left vulnerable to temptation. Moreover, such interference is a violation of God's will. How, asks Luther, can anyone forbid me access to the body which God has decreed should be given to me? St. Paul stipulates that only by common agreement may the partners in a marriage abstain from sexual relations in order to devote themselves to prayer. Luther notes that their sexual relationship takes priority. Both parties must agree, and prayer and fasting must yield to conjugal demand rather than either spouse withholding himself/herself from the other's need. Luther concludes, »Now prayer is a most precious good work, but it must give way to what seems a base thing. The law of love, by which they are bound, brings this about.«⁴¹

37 From this we see how adultery is the greatest robbery and theft on earth. For it gives away a living body, which belongs to another, and also takes a living body, that is not free for the taking«; WA 12, 101, 21-24 ≙ LW 28, 13.

38 LW 28, 13 ≙ WA 12, 95, 11-13.

39 »Wer zu hitzig ist ynn der liebe, der ist an seynem eygen weybe eyn ehebrecher. Aber eyn heyde hatts geredt, darumb acht ich seyn nicht, und sage, es sey nicht war«; WA 12, 101, 30 - 102, 1 ≙ LW 28, 13.

40 Luther adds an interesting exception to this: »Es kann freylich niemant an seynem weybe eyn ehebrecher werden, er wolt sie denn nicht fur seyn weyb hallten, oder nicht als seyn weyb berühren«; WA 12, 102, 1-3 ≙ LW 28, 13. It would appear that if the husband mistreats his wife sexually, then he has committed a sin on the order of adultery, using her body rather than receiving it within the covenant of their mutual self-giving.

41 LW 28, 14 ≙ WA 12, 103, 6-9.

V The Writings of 1529

»The order of marriage for common pastors«, dating from 1529, says nothing of the potential joys of the marital relationship but concentrates instead on its difficulties and dangers.

»For whoever desires prayer and blessing from the pastor or bishop indicates thereby – even if he does not express it in so many words – into what peril and need he enters and how greatly he stands in need of the blessing of God and common prayer for the estate which he enters. For every day we see marriages broken by the devil through adultery, unfaithfulness, discord, and all manner of ill.«⁴²

Luther gives Gn 2, 18. 21-24 as the first reading after the couple enters the church; this is the word that establishes marriage as a divine ordinance. Then follows a reading from Ephesians setting forth the duties of husband and wife.⁴³ The third reading speaks of the cross which God has laid upon marriage.⁴⁴ The last reading offers comfort to the couple, reiterating the first reading in the affirmation of God's blessing on their union.⁴⁵ The closing prayer, however, comes back to the issue of marriage's vulnerability to the machinations of the devil and the assaults of human sinfulness.

»O God, who hast created man and woman and hast ordained them for the married estate, has blessed them also with fruits of the womb, and hast typified therein the sacramental union of thy dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the church, his bride: We beseech thy groundless goodness and mercy that thou wouldst not permit this thy creation, ordinance, and blessing to be disturbed or destroyed, but graciously preserve the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.«⁴⁶

The service is marked by a somber tone which, rather than celebrating the present love of the couple, focuses on the daunting challenges of married life between sinful individuals in a fallen world. The couple's exchange of

⁴² LW 53, 113 ≙ WA 30 III, 76, 9-15.

⁴³ E 5, 22-29.

⁴⁴ Gn 3, 16-19.

⁴⁵ »So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' [...] And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good«; Gn 1, 27f. 31.

»He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord«; Prv 18, 22.

⁴⁶ LW 53, 115 ≙ WA 30 III, 80, 8-13.



Hans Sebald Beham (1500-1550): Das Liebespaar, Holzschnitt
(Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Lutherhaus)

vows constitutes the marriage. The liturgy makes it clear, however, that the couple is to look to the promise of God rather than their own affections and expectations to sustain their commitment.

In the Large Catechism, also dating from 1529, Luther has much to say about marriage in his explication of the sixth commandment, »You are not to commit adultery«. Indeed, Luther has more to say about marriage than about adultery *per se*. He emphasizes once again its status as divinely ordained and God-pleasing and insists on its pre-eminence among social institutions and vocations.

»[God] has established [marriage] before all others as the first of all institutions, and he created man and woman differently (as is evident) not for indecency but to be true to each other, to be fruitful, to beget children, and to nurture and bring them up to the glory of God. God has therefore blessed this walk of life most richly, above all others, and, in addition, has supplied and endowed it with everything in the world in order that this walk of life might be richly provided for.«⁴⁷

Once again Luther emphasizes the naturalness of the sexual urge as a physical drive implanted by God. Flesh and blood remain flesh and blood, writes Luther, and natural inclinations and stimulations function without fail. Marriage is the proper conduit into which these should flow; otherwise they will lead to licentiousness, for flow they must.

The issue of sexual fidelity is embedded for Luther in a deeper understanding of the relationship between marital partners. Chastity has its roots first and foremost in the affectional life of the spouses. Where husband and wife live together in love and harmony, chastity follows spontaneously, argues Luther. When one receives one's spouse as a gift from God, as the particular husband or wife given *for me*, then the boundaries are plainly drawn. It is clear now both where one is called to love and where one is forbidden to act on one's natural instincts.

VI »The Sermon on the Mount« 1532

Luther discusses the issue of licit and illicit desire at greater length in his study of Mt 5, 27-30. The temptation of lust is impossible to avoid. Men and women will be thrown together in society. Moreover, it is pleasing to

⁴⁷ The Book of Concord, 414, 207 f ≅ WA 30 I, 161, 28-34.

God that men look at women, talk, laugh and have a good time with them. People are supposed to fall in love. Indeed, they need to be swept off their feet in order to risk getting married. After that, safeguarding love and desire is crucial to sustaining a marriage.

»Without it there is trouble: from the flesh, because a person soon gets tired of marriage and refuses to bear the daily discomfort that comes with it; and from the devil, who cannot stand the sight of a married couple treating each other with genuine love and who will not rest until he has given them an occasion for impatience, conflict, hate, and bitterness. Therefore it is an art both necessary and difficult, and one peculiarly Christian, this art of loving one's husband or wife properly, of bearing the other's faults and all the accidents and troubles. At first everything goes all right, so that, as the saying goes, they are ready to eat each other up for love. But when their curiosity has been satisfied, then the devil comes along to create boredom in you, to rob you of your desire in this direction, and to excite it unduly in another direction.«⁴⁸

Luther takes the reality of lust and the temptation to adultery quite seriously, but he is no alarmist. A man may look at another woman, but he must not look at her the way he should look only at his wife. It does not take a rocket scientist to tell the difference. Such temptation will inevitably befall us. It comes with the territory of being social creatures, gifted with the capacity for passion and affection and blinded by the love of self. Luther is refreshingly matter of fact about it.

»Yet we should not make the bowstring too taut here, as if anyone who is tempted and whose lust and desire for another woman are aroused would be damned for it. I have often said that it is impossible to be alive and to have flesh and blood without any sinful and evil inclination, whether in this or in all the other commandments.«⁴⁹

It is impossible for us to keep sinful thoughts from occurring; just don't let them take root, cautions Luther. Of course, the lustful thought is sin, but no one lives in the flesh without a great many sins, and »everyone must have his devil«.⁵⁰ The best protection against adultery is, as Luther says in the Large Catechism, to remind oneself that one's wife is God's special gift, and that she alone has the surpassing beauty of God's Word to adorn her. With that the allure of any other woman cannot compare.

⁴⁸ LW 21, 89 ≙ WA 32, 374, I-II.

⁴⁹ LW 21, 88 ≙ WA 32, 373, 6-10.

⁵⁰ LW 21, 89 ≙ WA 32, 373, 28 f.

The biblical passage with which Luther is working here deals specifically with the sin of adultery. He sees unfaithfulness at work among married couples in other ways as well. There will be dissension and distrust; angry words get spoken; feelings cut deep. The one you share bed and board with will sometimes seem like your worst enemy.

»Husband and wife can become alienated from no one else as readily as from each other. All it takes is one little word, spoken in passing or jokingly, which pierces the heart and cannot be forgotten. And thereafter they both brew pure poison and bitterness in their souls.«⁵¹

Your eyes may not be turning toward a new sexual partner, but when your heart is closed to the one you have married, then you are breaking the sixth commandment.⁵² You need once again to pay heed to the Word of grace shining through your marriage.⁵³

VII Divorce

Luther recognizes the need for divorce in a sinful society and regards its regulation as a matter for the civil authority. At the same time he wants Christians to do their best to exceed secular expectations and hold their marriages to a higher spiritual standard. In »The estate of marriage, 1522« Luther identifies three legitimate grounds for marital dissolution: inability to fulfill one's conjugal duty (impotence or frigidity) so that one's spouse is deprived of children, adultery, and refusal to fulfill one's conjugal duty or to live with one's spouse. The resistance of the partner in the last case may well become the cause of the other's fall. Luther suggests that he/she be called to public accountability,⁵⁴ and if that doesn't shame the errant spouse into cooperation, divorce is appropriate. The issue here is one of fraud.

⁵¹ WA 34 I, 61, 25-29.

⁵² »Let it be said in conclusion that this commandment requires all people not only to live chastely in deed, word, and thought in their particular situation (that is, especially in marriage as a walk of life), but also to love and cherish the spouse whom God has given them«; The Book of Concord, 415, 219 ≙ WA 30 I, 163, 14-17.

⁵³ WA 34 I, 56, 32-36.

⁵⁴ »Only first the husband should admonish and warn his wife two or three times, and let the situation be known to others so that her stubbornness becomes a matter of common knowledge and is rebuked before the congregation«; LW 45, 33f ≙ WA 10 II, 290, 10-12.

»When one resists the other and refuses the conjugal duty she is robbing the other of the body she had bestowed upon him. This is really contrary to marriage, and dissolves the marriage. For this reason the civil government must compel the wife, or put her to death.⁵⁵ If the government fails to act, the husband must reason that his wife has been stolen away and slain by robbers.«⁵⁶

Luther makes it clear, however, that this does not apply to a couple where one partner is unable to meet his or her conjugal responsibilities because of infirmity. Indeed, caring for an invalid spouse is an extraordinary spiritual discipline. He assures the reader that God is far too faithful to deprive a person of his spouse through illness without simultaneously subduing his carnal desire.

Luther discusses one additional situation that does not fit under the three major headings with which he began. This is the case of what today we would call »irreconcilable differences«: where husband and wife cannot get along together for some reason other than the matter of the conjugal duty. Luther points out that even the Scriptures make reference to such women »more bitter than death«,⁵⁷ and he acknowledges that there are also rude, brutal, and unbearable husbands. In such cases, which would include domestic abuse, Luther allows dissolution of the marriage as long as neither party remarries. He concludes this section with the observation that it would be a fine instance of Christian witness if one or the other of

⁵⁵In this early treatise Luther also suggests that the civil authorities impose the death penalty on adulterers: »You may ask: What is to become of the other [the guilty party] if he too is perhaps unable to lead a chaste life? Answer: It was for this reason that God commanded in the law [Deut. 22:22-24] that adulterers be stoned, that they might not have to face this question. The temporal sword and government should therefore still put adulterers to death, for whoever commits adultery has in fact himself already departed and is considered as one dead. Therefore, the other [the innocent party] may remarry just as though his spouse had died, if it is his intention to insist on his rights and not show mercy to the guilty party. Where the government is negligent and lax, however, and fails to inflict the death penalty, the adulterer may betake himself to a far country and there remarry if he is unable to remain continent. But it would be better to put him to death, lest a bad example be set«; LW 45, 32 ≙ WA 10 II, 289, 8-17.

⁵⁶LW 45, 34 ≙ WA 10 II, 290, 20 - 291, 1.

⁵⁷»And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her«; Eccl 7, 26.

the spouses in such a dysfunctional relationship could endure the misery. This is not terrified submission but a conscious sacrifice by the wronged party for whom the marriage is the devil's battleground.

»Now if one of the parties were endowed with Christian fortitude and could endure the other's ill behavior, that would doubtless be a wonderfully blessed cross and a right way to heaven. For an evil spouse, in a manner of speaking, fulfils the devil's function and sweeps clean him who is able to recognize and bear it. If he cannot, however, let him divorce her before he does anything worse, and remain unmarried for the rest of his days.«⁵⁸

It is the Christian's obligation to bear the cross, and in Luther's view the path of suffering in a miserable relationship can have unique spiritual benefits. If you refuse that opportunity, you don't get the chance to work out your salvation with fear and trembling in a second marriage.⁵⁹

In his commentary on Mt 5, 31f in »The sermon on the mount« Luther again stipulates that divorce is a secular, external matter that is rightly regulated by the law in its first use. When Christ speaks to the issue, it is not as a lawyer or ruler but as a preacher. He is not prescribing policy but instructing Christian consciences in the godly use of divorce law. Luther sees himself functioning in a similar vein. His conclusion from Jesus' teaching in »The sermon on the mount« is that those who want to be Christians should not be divorced, »but every man should keep his own spouse, sustaining and bearing good and ill with her, even though she may have her oddities, peculiarities, and faults. If he does get a divorce, he should remain unmarried.«⁶⁰

Luther offers a good dose of commonsense realism in his reflections on the matter. Writing on Mt 19, 8, Luther states that it was better to allow the sin of divorce to the people of Israel than to court greater evil. He goes on to

⁵⁸ LW 45, 34f ≙ WA 10 II, 291, 15-20.

⁵⁹ In »On marriage matters, 1530« Luther, again referring to 1 Corinthians 7, 10f, comments: »But if sometimes one party runs away from the other out of anger or rage, it is quite a different matter [...]. Here we can see what to do from St. Paul, 1 Cor. 7 [11], namely, they are to be reconciled or, if the reconciliation does not succeed, remain single. There may well be a case where they are better off separated than together, otherwise St. Paul would not have permitted them to remain single if they did not wish to be reconciled. And who can enumerate all the cases like these or make laws to deal with them? Sensible people must be the judges here«; LW 46, 314 ≙ WA 30 III, 243, 31 - 244, 2.

⁶⁰ LW 21, 94 ≙ WA 32, 378, 5-7.

say that a similar accommodation to contemporary social reality might be advisable, if lamentable: »[...] certain queer, stubborn, and obstinate people, who have no capacity for toleration and are not suited for married life at all, should be permitted to get a divorce. [...]. Frequently something must be tolerated, even though it is not a good thing to do, to prevent something worse from happening.«⁶¹

Luther knows that people can be dangerously deluded. There is no getting around the tedium of daily life, the predictable burdens of family and the aggravations imposed by the outside world. One just has to deal with them. Still many think they can escape the disappointments, most readily by transferring their affections to a new spouse. But if you can't see the hand of God at work in your life in the first place, then it will just go on as the »same old, same old« no matter how you try to spice up the domestic scene.⁶² Luther's response to such people is unsparing: get real, grow up, work at your marriage – vocations require effort after all – remember what the forgiveness of sins is all about, and pray.

Having dealt with the whiners, Luther then turns to more serious problems. Adultery is legitimate grounds for divorce, for the adulterer has in truth already dissolved the marriage by his actions. Luther hopes that the other partner, although set completely free, will nonetheless choose to reconcile.⁶³ He recognizes, however, that there may be no hope for

61 LW 21, 94 ≙ WA 32, 377, 37 - 378, 3.

62 »The only source of trouble here is the fact that marriage is not thought of on the basis of the Word of God, as His work and ordinance, and that His will is ignored. He has given every man his spouse, to keep her and for His sake to put up with the difficulties involved in married life. To them it seems to be nothing more than a purely human and secular state, with which God has nothing to do. Therefore they tire of it so quickly; and if it does not go the way they would like, they immediately want a divorce and a change. Then God so arranges things that they are not better off as a consequence. A person who wants to change and improve everything and who refuses to put up with any inadequacies, but insists on having everything clean and comfortable, will usually get in exchange something twice as uncomfortable or ten times as uncomfortable. [...]. A change is a fast and easy thing, but an improvement is a rare and doubtful thing«, LW 21, 94f ≙ WA 32, 378, 10-22. 32f.

63 »To those who really want to be Christians, we should give this advice. The two partners should be admonished and urged to stay together. If the guilty party is humbled and reformed, the innocent party should let himself be reconciled to him and forgive him in Christian love«, LW 21, 96 ≙ WA 32, 379, 27-31.

improvement and a renewal of spousal fidelity, and then the partners must go their separate ways, with only the innocent party free to marry again. The other issue Luther raises here is that of abandonment. He is outraged by the »dead beat dad«, the man who takes off from his family, leaving them to fend for themselves and expecting them to take him back whenever he chooses to return. Luther judges such a person to be worse than an unbeliever and less tolerable than an adulterer. He recommends that the authorities issue a summons, and if the offender does not respond within the stated time, that the wife be set completely free. Luther's indignation is evident; the person who would default not just on his commitment to his spouse but on his obligations to his children is beneath contempt.

VIII Parents and Children

As has already been noted Luther extols the vocation of marriage chiefly because it produces family life.

»But the greatest good in married life, that which makes all suffering and labor worth while, is that God grants offspring and commands that they be brought up to worship and serve him. In all the world this is the noblest and most precious work, because to God there can be nothing dearer than the salvation of souls. Now since we are all duty bound to suffer death, if need be, that we might bring a single soul to God, 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. Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.«⁶⁴

Parental responsibility to serve one's children as »their apostle and bishop« consists of four crucial duties: to provide the sacrament of baptism for infants, to form children in the true faith as they mature, to attend to their education for vocation, and to provide them with a suitable spouse in a timely fashion, that is, before the force of their natural sexual instincts puts them at risk of sin. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the last of the four.

⁶⁴ LW 45, 46 ≙ WA 10 II, 301, 16-27.

In 1524 Luther wrote a brief piece entitled »That parents should neither compel nor hinder the marriage of their children, and that children should not become engaged without their parents' consent«. Luther reminds the reader that God has established parental authority to build up, not destroy. Indeed there are strict limits set on it; it cannot go so far as to inflict damage on the child, especially not on his or her conscience. Thus a father violates his sacred trust and acts against God when he forces his child into a marriage without love.⁶⁵ He does the same when he prevents his child from marrying. Luther allows that interference with a relationship to a particular person can be justified, but it is a gross sin to prevent the child from marrying altogether and force him or her into a life of celibacy. No parent can demand of their children that they go against their created nature.⁶⁶ God has made human beings to eat, drink, procreate, sleep and

65 Luther addresses the same issue with great passion in »On marriage matters, 1530«: »Yes, my dear fellow, if you want to accept the gospel when it gives you power over your child and demands filial obedience to you, then you should also accept it when it commands you to treat your child in a paternal way and forbids you to use your power shamefully and criminally in this matter, since the salvation of your child is in danger, for you cannot give your child the desire and love for his spouse that he should have according to the commandment of God, who desires that husband and wife shall love one another. If you now can make a big thing out of the sin of filial disobedience on the basis of the gospel, then one can also make a big thing out of your unnatural crime on the same basis, and if filial disobedience is a sin, then your unnatural criminal power is two sins«; LW 46, 306 ≡ WA 30 III, 237, 27-36.

66 Luther speaks sharply about the same subject in »On marriage matters, 1530«, chiding fathers who refuse to let their daughters marry because the women are more useful to them at home: »Before I would tolerate such peasant caprice with paternal power on the part of these rude louts, I would rather advise their children and tell them to get engaged without the consent of such fathers. For paternal power is not given to the fathers by God for their caprice or to do harm to their children, but to further and help them. And anyone who uses paternal power in any other way or to the disadvantage of his children forfeits it thereby and is not to be considered a father, but an enemy and destroyer of his own children«; LW 46, 308 ≡ WA 30 III, 239, 15-22.

Luther advises that in such cases the authorities act *in loco parentis* and take custody of the child, as they do with abandoned children and orphans, and insure that the father cannot hinder an honorable and advantageous marriage. In addition, the authorities should punish the father as a public enemy of his child, God, and the entire community. If the authorities default, then the pastor should help as he can and »give to the child, as one deserted by her father and prevented by him, the free right before God

respond to other physical needs, writes Luther. Not even the father in his vast God-given authority can alter that. Finally, if he fails to help his child make a suitable match, he again defaults on his parental responsibility. In such a case, if the child has sought the father's assistance in vain, the child may proceed as if the father or guardian were dead and make his or her own marital arrangements.

Luther considers one hypothetical case that calls for some artful pastoral counsel on his part. What should a young person do when his father intends to force him into an unwanted marriage? Strictly speaking, responds Luther, he should do as his father demands and take up his cross in obedience to Christ.

»For Christ has the ready answer: Let that be my concern; why do you have no faith in me? Obey my command, and I can so govern events that none of the misfortunes you foresee will occur, and all will be good fortune and happiness. Would you transgress my certain and blessed commandment on account of an uncertain future misfortune? Or would you do evil, that good might result? Paul condemns this in Romans 3[:8]. And even though misfortune were certain for the future, indeed already at hand, should you on that account disregard my commandment, when you are in duty bound to hazard body and soul temporally and eternally for my sake? «⁶⁷

It is not clear how enduring a loveless and potentially destructive marriage qualifies as faithful Christian discipleship. What appears to be at stake for Luther is obedience to the fourth commandment, even when

to become engaged in good conscience, and confirm this marriage for the reason that paternal power is not created by God to be free wantonness but is an obligation first of all to serve the children with advice and help for their benefit and honor and with all diligence to further and seek the improvement and increase of the community. And the pastors are publicly to point out most emphatically the malice of these crude people as most shameful, so that they will have some conscience about it. And even if they do not fear God., they must still be ashamed before men and obey the authorities«; LW 46, 309 Æ WA 30 III, 239, 35 - 240, 5.

Luther is very clear that marriage is a community affair; the community depends upon it for the increase of its citizenry. Thus it has a vested interest in acting against parents who would prevent their children from taking up their marital and childbearing responsibilities. It is also worth noting how the fourth commandment comes into play here: authority of the spiritual father, the pastor, trumps that of the biological father of the girl in this case.

⁶⁷ LW 45, 389 Æ WA 15, 166, 13-20.

paternal authority is exercised tyrannically and cruelly. But Luther offers escape routes for »weak Christians« – and are there any other kind in his theology? If you can't bear the yoke of Christ in a forced marriage, then turn to the civil authorities for aid, »[...] that they may put a stop to such outrageous injustice, deprive the father of his devilish power, rescue the child from him, and restrict him to the proper use of his parental authority.«⁶⁸ Now the burden of honoring the fourth commandment falls on the father. The Christian is called to endure injustice, but the temporal authority is responsible for preventing it and punishing perpetrators. Luther concludes that if the government fails to do its duty, the child might flee and settle somewhere else, out of the reach of both parent and ruler.⁶⁹ There is precedent for this, he writes, citing certain »weak Christians« in the Old Testament who fled tyrants.

Luther is equally concerned about the conduct of children in the process of betrothal and marriage. He is adamant that no union should be based on a secret engagement. Clearly the easiest way around parental objections or interference was to join oneself to another without their knowledge. Protestant and Roman teaching held the free mutual consent of the parties in an exchange of vows to constitute a marriage. However, Luther did

68 LW 45, 389 ≙ WA 15, 166, 21-25.

69 Luther addresses a similar case in »On Marriage Matters, 1530«. Here he is more sanguine about the efficacy of intervention on the part of the authorities, including the pastor, and does not suggest flight as a potential last resort. On the other hand, he is callous about the lack of power that would contribute to a young person's being railroaded into a disagreeable marriage by coercive parents. »What if a child has already been forced into marriage? Shall this be and remain a marriage? Answer: Yes, it is a marriage and shall remain one, for although she was forced into it, she still consented to this coercion by her action, accepted it, and followed it, so that her husband has publicly acquired conjugal rights over her, which no one can now take from him. When she feels that she is being coerced, she should do something about it in time, resist, and not accept it, call upon some good friends, and if that were of no avail she should appeal to the authorities or complain to the pastor or give public, verbal testimony that she did not want to do it, and thus cry out openly against the compulsion. For these four means, namely, calling upon good friends, appealing to the authorities, complaining to the pastor, and protesting openly, should be powerful enough to prevent a forced marriage. Indeed, the authorities with the law or the pastor with good counsel can probably do it alone.«; LW 46, 307 ≙ WA 30 III, 238, 4-16.

not acknowledge the validity of freely exchanged promises between two parties of legally marriageable age if they were made without public witnesses or parental consent, whereas Roman canon law did recognize such unions. Luther objected on four grounds: 1) that such commitments led too easily to conflicts of conscience;⁷⁰ 2) that marriage is critical to the life and health of the community and therefore should be contracted publicly before one's neighbors and with the recognition of the secular authorities; 3) that a betrothal contracted without the approval of one's parents violates the fourth commandment; and 4) that no word of God is proclaimed over the couple's action and consequently God has not joined them together. The bride, says Luther, has only the fine words and promise of her seducer to go by and on these she dare not rely.

Luther also condemns children who, presuming on the fact that they should not be forced into a marriage, resist a union that is honorable and desirable. It is their duty to abandon what Luther calls their »foolish young love« and honor their family's judgment. Parents, however, can only go so far in leading a child to wisdom. Once they offer their counsel, their consciences are clear. If children reject their considered opinion and persist in

70 »Here I want to show what impelled me, even before I had considered these causes, to advise and act against secret engagements. It often happened that a married couple came to me (not counting those who came to others all over the world), one or both of whom had previously become secretly engaged to others, and now there was misery and distress. Then we confessors or theologians were supposed to counsel these captive consciences. But how could we do this? There was the law and custom of the officials which decreed that the first secret betrothal was a true marriage in God's sight, and that the second one was an open act of adultery. So they went ahead and tore up the second marriage and ordered them to keep the first secret betrothal, even if they had ten children together in the second marriage and had joined their inheritance and property into one [...]. Further, if this engagement was so secret that it could not be attested by a single witness, and the second one was openly confirmed in the church, then they were forced to comply with both: first, they must consider the secret betrothal as the true marriage in their consciences before God, and on the other hand the woman was forced on pain of excommunication and by obedience to share the table and bed of the second man as her true husband, because this marriage was publicly attested, while the former secret engagement no one dared to acknowledge except she herself, and that in her conscience before God. What should a poor conscience do in a case like this?«; LW 46, 270 f. ≙ WA 30 III, 209, 10-21. 24-32.

their intention to make a match to which their parents object, the parents are free to leave them to their own devices, commit the matter to God, and consider their parental obligation met.

IX The Patriarchs and Matriarchs as Married Couples

Luther makes creative use of biblical narratives to support his arguments concerning the holy status of marriage and family life. Husbands and wives do not figure significantly as actors in the New Testament, but the stories of the Old Testament patriarchs and matriarchs provide him with rich material. Indeed, Luther expands with relish on what he finds there, decking these figures out with a full range of emotions and domestic virtues. Given the promise made to Abraham that God would make of him a great nation, these couples are deeply concerned with child-bearing. Luther comments that it is hard for us to imagine the anguish and shame caused by barrenness in the days of the matriarchs and patriarchs. Indeed, the worst stresses fall on these marriages when infertility becomes an issue.⁷¹ Consequently,

⁷¹Infertility afflicts Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, although they all ultimately become mothers. Eve is the exception; she has a lot of stressors on her marriage, but an inability to conceive is not one of them. Tamar is not barren, but she is deprived of her rights to bear children due to the death of her first husband (slain by God for his wickedness) and the sexual malpractice of her second.

Of the latter Luther writes: »Onan must have been a malicious and incorrigible scoundrel. This is a most disgraceful sin. It is far more atrocious than incest and adultery. We call it unchastity, yes, a Sodomitic sin. For Onan goes in to her; that is, he lies with her and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination, spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed. Accordingly, it was a most disgraceful crime to produce semen and excite the woman, and to frustrate her at that very moment. He was inflamed with the basest spite and hatred«; LW 7, 20f ≅ WA 44, 316, 39 - 317, 6.

Luther's concern for Tamar's experience in this sexual encounter is noteworthy. Judah, the father of these two men, promises Tamar the third son in marriage but fails to follow through. Tamar then disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces Judah, is impregnated by him and thus secures her right to childbearing of which his family had defrauded her. Although Luther charges Tamar with incest, he sees her case as complicated. She transgresses boundaries in a rightful cause: »To be sure, she sins gravely, but it is the unwillingness to bear reproach which provides the occasion for this sin. She grieves because the highest honor of women is being taken from her, namely, to be a wife, especially of

the greatest manifestation of God's goodness is the opening of the womb, so that the childless woman is able to take her place in the line of those carrying God's promises to future generations.

When commenting on the creation story in his »Lectures on Genesis«, Luther notes that with the work of the fifth day God not only »saw that it was good«, God also »blessed them«. Only with the fifth day does God bring living things into being,⁷² and the blessing given to them and not to the inanimate part of the creation has to do with their distinctive method of reproduction: »But here there is procreation from a living body into a living body. This, therefore, is a new work, that a living body grows and multiplies out of its own body.«⁷³ This capacity to bear live young is the effect of the Word making fruitful the common act of reproduction.⁷⁴

When discussing Adam and Eve, Luther understands Gn 2, 18 – »Then the Lord God said, ›It is not good that the man should be alone [...].‹« – to be concerned with what he calls the common good of the species rather

this son of Judah, and because she is being deprived of all the adornments of a lady of the house. Her wrath was justified and almost excusable«; LW 7, 34f ≙ WA 44, 326, 36-40.

Moreover, her conduct plays a key role in the plan of salvation, since Christ is descended from her and Judah's son Perez. Thus Jesus can trace his ancestry back to some very bold sinners. However, later in his commentary on Genesis ³⁸ Luther counts Tamar among the excellent saintly matrons who administer the household and care for the stock. Once the time of crisis is over, she settles back into modesty and domesticity.

⁷² Gn 1, 20-22: »And God said, ›Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens.‹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, ›Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.‹«

⁷³ LW 1, 53 ≙ WA 42, 39, 37-39.

⁷⁴ »What, then, is the reason for this remarkable procreation? The hen lays an egg; this she keeps warm while a living body comes into being in the egg, which the mother later on hatches. The philosophers advance the reason that these events take place through the working of the sun and her belly. I grant this. But the theologians say, far more reliably, that these events take place through the working of the Word, because it is said here: He blessed them and said: ›Increase and multiply.‹ This Word is present in the very body of the hen and in all living creatures; the heat with which the hen keeps her eggs warm is the result of the divine Word, because if it were without the Word, the heat would be useless and without effect«; LW 1, 53 ≙ WA 42, 40, 5-12.

than the personal good of Adam. The other created living beings had companions with whom they could mate, but »so far Adam was alone; he still had no partner for that magnificent work of begetting and preserving his kind.«⁷⁵ He required Eve so that he could fulfill his duty to be fruitful and multiply. It is only after the fall that he has need of her to ward off the sin of illicit desire.⁷⁶ The animals, Luther notes, do not have to contend with lust, but neither do they have the kind of spiritual, affective relationship that comes with human marriage. Luther laments the damage done to the intimacy between husband and wife by the loss of innocence. Delight gives way to shame and resentment.

God tells the woman, »I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.«⁷⁷ In this Luther hears as much good news as bad. Yes, the flesh will suffer, but God does not repudiate Eve. Nor is she deprived of the blessing of procreation or separated from her husband to live in solitude. Most of all, in keeping what Luther calls the glory of motherhood, she also has the assurance that the Seed who will crush the head of her betrayer will come from her. The discomfort of pregnancy and the danger of childbirth pale in comparison, concludes Luther. Then he writes:

»Without a doubt, therefore, Eve had a heart full of joy even in an apparently sad situation. Perhaps she gave comfort to Adam by saying: ›I have sinned. But see what a merciful God we have. How many privileges, both temporal and spiritual, He is leaving for us sinners! Therefore we women should bear the hardship and wretchedness of conceiving, of giving birth, and of obeying you husbands. His is a fatherly anger, because this stands: that the head of our enemy will be crushed, and that after the death of our flesh we shall be raised to a new and eternal life through our Redeemer. These abundant good things and endless kindnesses far surpass

⁷⁵ LW I, 116 ≙ WA 42, 87, 36-38.

⁷⁶ Luther speaks from the male perspective: woman is man's defense against lust. The following is typical: »In Paradise woman would have been a help for a duty only. But now she is also, and for the greater part at that, an antidote and a medicine; we can hardly speak of her without a feeling of shame, and surely we cannot make use of her without shame«; LW I, 118 ≙ WA 42, 89, 34-37. Considering the universal nature of the fall, it is a given that women too are plagued with selfish, raging desire that threatens to use rather than honor the partner in every aspect of a relationship. Eve also needs Adam to be able to subject lust to love.

⁷⁷ Gn 3, 16.

whatever curse and punishments our Father has inflicted on us.« These and similar conversations Adam and Eve undoubtedly carried on often in order to mitigate their temporal adversities.«⁷⁸

Adam and Eve, caught in sin and facing the trauma of life in the post-fall world, represent marriage at its best. The couple accepts the arduous work that lies before them as God's charge, and they stand together as companions, sharing words of comfort and faith. Clearly there is more going on in the relationship of husband wife than the containment of lust and the raising of children.⁷⁹

Abraham and Sarah serve Luther as a model for the discipleship of Christian couples first and foremost because of their faith. Both of the elderly people give up the home they know to answer God's call to go forth to a strange land. When promised the birth of a child at their advanced ages, they are shocked but confident of God's truthfulness. Luther also praises their daily discipleship because of the commonplace duties and normal domestic tedium it entails. He contrasts this in most pejorative terms to the idle, inflated »spiritual« life of the monastics and assures his readers that the menial tasks that occupy Sarah and Abraham, done as they are in faith, are more precious than any trumped up work of holiness and celibacy.

»Therefore shut out from your heart and eyes the outward appearance, and see what God has commanded; do this, and you will not go wrong, even if in outward appearance it is small, ordinary, and insignificant. Antony withdraws into the desert, and Jerome makes a pilgrimage to sacred places and advocates devotion to chastity. These works the world regards as great. But the fact that Sarah stands at the hearth and busily prepares food for the guests – this not only has no outward appearance of a good work but seems to stand in the way of good works. Yet to one who has regard for the Word it will be evident that Sarah did a holier work than all the hermits did.«⁸⁰

78 LW 1, 199 ≙ WA 42, 148, 35 - 149, 5.

79 In relation to Gn 2, 22 Luther writes: »Let us, therefore, obey the Word of God and recognize our wives as a building of God. Not only is the house built through them by procreation and other services that are necessary in a household; but the husbands themselves are built through them, because wives are, as it were, a nest and a dwelling place where husbands can go to spend their time and dwell with joy«; LW 1, 134 ≙ WA 42, 100, 17-21.

80 LW 3, 216-17 ≙ WA 43, 30, 5-12.

When, Luther says, you are confident of doing full justice to your calling and of having no need to pray »forgive us our trespasses« because of negligence, dissatisfaction, or impatience, then feel free to go into the desert and busy yourself with showy works of holiness.

Luther finds in Sarah a treasury of housewifely virtues. He makes much of the fact that when the three guests inquire as to Sarah's whereabouts, Abraham answers, »She is in the tent.«⁸¹ Women, writes Luther, are given to a certain levity and indecent curiosity. They either run around or hang out conspicuously at their doors to pick up the latest gossip. Such women on the loose are susceptible to moral laxity. Sarah, however, is right where she belongs, within their home, leaving her husband and his guests in peace while she prepares the meal and manages the household responsibly.

Yet one should note that Sarah is not always so amiable and modest. Luther maintains that in the matter of Hagar and Ishmael Abraham is lax in protecting the promise made to him and Sarah concerning their descendants. He loves the slave woman and their son with a natural affection and does not see their impudence. Sarah is the one who obliges him to expel them, lest Ishmael presume on his primogeniture at Isaac's expense. Although Luther is at some pains to protect Sarah's wifely modesty, stating that she humbly implores but does not command Abraham, he recognizes the reality of dissension and anger in their marriage and by extension in every marriage. The endurance of such arguments by husband and wife is a spiritual discipline, a formation in holiness, far excelling anything concocted by the monks.

»Therefore they call the life of married people a »secular« life, but it surely has a place among the highest levels of spiritual life. For the loftiest sentiments of married people toward God and man are being cultivated.

In this passage Abraham is an instance. He is compelled by a two-fold right, the natural and the divine, to defend his lawful wife and son. Because of this feeling he is unable to see the promise clearly. On this account a violent outburst of anger occurs, and there is a very sharp quarrel – to give us an example and to comfort us, in order that when slight offenses arise, we may be mindful of the life and the lot that are common to all men.«⁸²

⁸¹ The story is told in Gn 18, 1-16.

⁸² LW 4, 22 ≙ WA 43, 151, 28-36.

In this instance Sarah, in fulfilling her »secular« responsibilities as wife and mother, acts as the unlikely but indispensable champion of the Word. Through bearing Isaac and protecting his position as heir to the promise, she becomes the mother of the faithful.⁸³

Luther's commentary on the courtship of Jacob and Rachel offers some interesting observations on the realities of physical attraction. Reflecting on Jacob's infatuation with Rachel and indifference to Leah, Luther offers the opinion that ugly women are usually the most fertile. By rights men should love women simply for the sake of procreation; strictly speaking they should not be swayed by appearance. However, God indulges the male's preference for beautiful women to help sweeten the conjugal pot.

»Because of so many great troubles and difficulties of marriage it is not wicked if one chooses a beautiful woman with her bodily strength unimpaired in order that he may be able to endure this bond of marriage with all its troubles longer and more easily.«⁸⁴

Because of original sin man's sexual urges are unpredictable and urgent. He needs to marry, and if it takes feminine beauty to get the deed done, so be it.

Luther speaks of Jacob the suitor with fond amusement. According to his calculations the patriarch is 84 years old when he first meets Rachel. He is already an old man, but in the presence of this beautiful girl he is rejuvenated.⁸⁵ He single-handedly rolls away the stone from the mouth of

83 One finds a similar dilemma in the narrative of Isaac and Rebekah, when the wife transgresses the bounds of propriety and obedience to her husband in order to preserve the divine promise. In this case Rebekah disguises Jacob as Esau so that he might secure the paternal blessing due the first born, despite the aged Isaac's stated intent of bestowing it on Esau.

84 LW 5, 290 ≙ WA 43, 628, 33-36.

85 »Then, when in his exile he found Rachel, his blood relation, he took courage and gained great hope that at last he would obtain what he had in mind and what his father had commanded him with respect to taking a wife. Therefore he is immediately inflamed with love at first sight, and natural desire toward his kinswoman comes to the fore, so that the two-fold impulse of faith and love made his body and heart more animated. For he wanted to show himself as a man of strength and agility – in order that he might capture the maiden's heart and entice her to fall in love with him«; LW 5, 281 ≙ WA 43, 622, 33 - 623, 2.

the well so that she might water her sheep. Luther praises Jacob's extraordinary chastity; he has remained continent from his youth, some 68 years, until now, which is at it should be. But continence is destined to end in marriage. As Luther describes it, this is not a surrender to carnal necessity but a venture into love from the very start, when the patriarch kisses Rachel at the well before they have even been introduced. Old Jacob makes a bit of a fool of himself. And it is surpassingly pleasing to God.

»Other histories about very great events – about the burning of Sodom, about the sacrifice of Isaac – [the Holy Spirit] has described with very few words and has summed up in barely five or six verses. But when He comes to these sordid, carnal, and foolish matters, He is wordy beyond measure, in order that we may know that the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him (Ps. 147:11). For if we believe and are sure of the freely offered mercy of God, we should not doubt that everything we do pleases God very much and that He has numbered even the hairs of our head (cf. Matt. 10:30), yes, that the kisses and embraces are pleasing to Him, likewise the removal of that stone. All these things are recounted in this passage as very great and extraordinary works in the eyes of God and the angels. God could not forget them but wanted them recorded for our instruction and consolation.«⁸⁶

Luther does not dismiss the ardor and delight of new love as frivolous. They will not sustain a couple through the challenges of years of married life, but such enchantment is a real fine place to start.

X Conclusion

Human beings are fallen creatures. For Luther our sexual nature is no more and no less vitiated by sin than our other qualities and abilities. Sexuality still unfolds in the wondrous way God intended it to: men and women are drawn to one another; they fall in love and discover for themselves that it is not good for the man to be alone; they long for children. God has created marriage to make these things possible. God has formed us to want what God wants: that we leave our parents and cleave to our spouse; that we be fruitful and multiply. In the fallen world marriage grants additional blessing, although Luther does not regard it as a sacramental means of saving grace. God does not call a person to marriage in general; God calls you to be married to a particular person. The word of God's command and favor

⁸⁶ LW 5, 283 ≙ WA 43, 624, 12-22.

is spoken over *this* union. It is absolutely clear that this is the spouse you are to have and no other. The certain boundary will frustrate couples at times, but its clarity is also a kindness. Husband and wife can persevere in the demanding work of marriage, confident that their efforts are pleasing to God, their failures forgiven, and their commitment to one another enduringly blessed.

The same is true in the realm of the family. Its routine activities are hardly glorious in human eyes, but for God they are acts of praise. In tending to the needs of those who populate our daily lives we carry out our calling to be little Christs one to another. Regarding the responsibility of parents for their children in particular, Luther speaks sternly. One's child, like one's marriage, is a sacred trust. A parent who violates a child by abuse, betrayal or neglect falls under the wrath of God. Luther recognizes that it does indeed take a village to raise the young, and in such cases he expects the wider community – collateral relatives, friends of the family, the civil authorities, the pastor – to intervene.

Luther holds marriage in the highest regard as the created norm for the life of Christian and non-Christian alike. He is clear, however, that no one is saved by matrimony – or the absence thereof. Marital status is an adiaphoron. One can wed or not as one pleases; in terms of salvation it is of no importance to God. However, in terms of sexuality marriage is the deal-breaker. Fulfilling conjugal obligations is the only legitimate form of sexual activity. God beholds sex within marriage and declares that it is still good, covering its lustful deficits with grace.⁸⁷ But outside of marriage sexual activity plunges a person into a morass of sin and condemnation. It is hardly surprising that Luther did not take a new view on this matter. Unfortunately, it makes it difficult for many of his contemporary heirs, who do not share that judgment, to appreciate what Luther does have to say to those who choose to marry and to the communities obliged to support their family life. On these matters he gives us much worth taking to heart.

⁸⁷In his sermon on H 13,4 from January 1531 Luther speaks beautifully of the coverlet – Decke – which God spreads over the bed shared by the married couple, »damit es geschmückt wird und ein schön, rein, unbefleckt bette heisst, [...]«; WA 34 I, 74, 10 f.