

Sexuality and Marriage in Luther's Theology

Seminar Leader: Sammeli Juntunen

Reporter: Christopher Boyd Brown

Sammeli Juntunen: »Luther on Sex« — Luther's views must be set in context of late medieval valuation of celibacy over marriage, ideas of courtly love, and practices of marriage such as clandestine engagements. Luther's central concern is to help overcome troubles of conscience about sex. His counsel is founded in his theology of creation, established by God's will but distorted by sin, and an essentialist anthropology of humans as male and female, founded in the Bible, but also corresponding to natural law and reason as Luther understood them. Sexual responsibility is exercised within the natural orders created by God and governed by the Law; neither celibacy nor marriage is a way of salvation, but marriage is regulated by God through the worldly regiment.

Luther criticizes the medieval theology of celibacy as contrary to nature and a manifestation of self-righteousness. For all but a very few, marriage is a necessary remedy against unchastity. Within marriage, sex is not only licit but commanded. Nevertheless, Luther continues to assert the Augustinian-Stoic criticism of sex even within marriage as irrational exstasis. On the other hand, Luther's rejection of the *ordo caritatis* as fundamental theological principle might lead to a more positive appreciation of sex.

Children are central to Luther's theology of marriage, not only as the goal of sexuality but also as the central good work of married life. Luther, drawing on mysticism, speaks highly of married love – *Braut-Liebe* –, which is commanded within the estate of marriage. Although Luther gave more flexible pastoral advice in exceptional cases his normative teaching on sexuality was grounded in his sense of natural law and of marriage as part of the created order.

Robert Guy Erwin: »Neither sacrament nor covenant: Martin Luther, marriage, and the modern world« — Medieval Christian teaching and regulation on marriage developed rather late, in the canonical synthesis of a tangled matrix of Biblical texts, Roman laws, and patristic reflections. The definition of marriage as sacrament took place alongside the exaltation of celibacy as spiritually superior. Divergence from rules requiring clerical celibacy was practically institutionalized in much of Europe.

Luther's early rejection of ecclesiastical regulation of marriage was bound up with his broader rejection of canon law. Marriage belonged to the created order, not the order of salvation – though the sharp systematization of a theology of orders belongs to the 19th century, not to Luther –. As a condition of

human life, marriage is natural and universal, and belongs to the civil order to regulate, though practically Luther had to help fill the gap left by the rejection of canon law on marriage. Luther thus desacralizes marriage while seeing it as part of the social order existing after the Fall for the restraint of sin.

Luther's views are to be contrasted with Reformed and Anglican descriptions of marriage as a divine covenant as well as with Enlightenment descriptions of marriage as a contract. Luther can inform a critique of contemporary attempts to resacralize marriage as well as proposals to yield discussion of marriage entirely to the state; at the same time Luther's own presuppositions must be called into question in a secular and pluralistic world.

Harold Ashley Hall: "Some Notes on Marriage and Sexuality in the Early Church and in the Works of Philipp Melanchthon" — The theology of marriage and sexuality in the early church developed under the presupposition of fundamental agreement between Christian morality and the best pagan moral teaching. In that context, homosexuality was tolerated, though criticized, so long as it did not interfere with the social obligation to marry. The central importance of marriage was that of procreation to support the state. The praise of religious celibacy among Christians also drew on classical models of praise for celibate philosophical life. Celibacy spread from monasticism to become the model for bishops as well.

Augustine defends conjugal intercourse and the goodness of marriage while criticizing disordered sexual desire. Despite Pelagian criticism, Augustine maintained a close connection between lust and the transmission of original sin. His ideas had long influence in the Western theological tradition.

Philipp Melanchthon stands firmly within this tradition at many points. He is firmly anti-Pelagian and accepts the description of lust as primary example of the disorder of original sin. He declines to lecture on classical texts — the "Symposium" — that reflect "unnatural" sexual practices. He goes beyond Augustine in elevating marriage over celibacy, a distinctive Protestant voice within the Christian tradition. Tradition does serve Melanchthon as a source for the defense of clerical marriage.

In his writing on marriage, Melanchthon is particularly, though not exclusively, concerned with practical matters. An extended discussion was incorporated into the "Loci theologici" from 1543 on.

James Arne Nestingen: "Luther on Marriage, Vocation, and the Cross" — Luther's doctrine of vocation, standing together with justification as the "twin centers" of his theology, guides his frequent return to the subject of marriage in his writing, lecturing, and preaching: marriage is the primary context for creaturely calling as well as the place in which the cross is applied to believers.

Luther's theology of marriage is shaped by his redefinition of spirit and flesh in terms of faith and unbelief, in light of which "marriage is the most religious state of all". It is also informed by his theology of creation: Luther counts the household among the three orders in which God's creative work continues, though provisionally in relation to God's kingdom which stands beyond. The household is more primary than civil government, but also regulated by law, summarized in the Commandments and the "Haustafel". "In the Spirit", however, the demands of the law upon the household become a Christian vocation of service, one so important that Luther uses otherwise prob-

lematic language of cooperation with God to describe its work, a gracious partnership beyond law.

The family is also a place particularly characterized by the cross amid the troubled but shared relationships of household life, a place therefore also where the Spirit brings repentance out of despair and resurrection comes out of the deep freedom of the forgiveness of sins. Luther's marriage with Katherine von Bora was both matrix and exemplar for these insights.

Pernilla Parenmalm: »The calling to parenthood and parenting: reflections on Luther's view of men, women, and Vocation« — Luther's ideas must be seen in the context of late medieval society and religion, including changing opportunities for women's work in rural and urban environments both in common with a husband or alone, witchcraft, and prostitution. Religiously, virginity — especially for women of the upper classes — was considered superior to married life.

Luther set his description of marriage in polemical opposition to monastic life, as a superior context for good works, located within the temporal regiment and the status *oeconomicus*. He recognized sexuality as an important and healthy element in human life.

Especially important is Luther's understanding of married life and parenthood as a vocation, an antidote to human egocentricity. It is a gift of God, though it has been corrupted by sin. He gives special attention to the work of raising children as part of the vocation of marriage. Parents are to show love for their children by teaching and disciplining them. If the parents fail in their primary responsibility, however, the civil authorities should intervene. Luther's sense of marriage as vocation was expressed in his testament which appointed Katharina as guardian.

Luther's emphasis on honor and obedience within hierarchical relationships within the family raises questions in contemporary perspective. Limits on obedience are not always clearly developed. However, Luther's understanding of reciprocity in relationships is helpful and challenging for contemporary ethics.

Christopher Boyd Brown: »The Reformation of Marriage among Luther's Students« — The wedding sermons of Luther's students — here, especially Johann Mathesius (1504-1565), Cyriacus Spangenberg, (1528-1604) and Hieronymus Mencil (1517-1590) — were a key means by which Luther's theology of marriage was — selectively and creatively — transmitted to a large public. Though Luther preached a few such sermons, his students were largely responsible for developing the genre using material from Luther's Genesis lectures, Table Talk, and treatises as well as medieval precedents.

Lutheran preaching, however, abandons the medieval subordination of praise of marriage to the praise of celibacy. A very wide range of Biblical texts, especially Old Testament narratives, serve as the basis for sermons — the New Testament epistles have a surprisingly small role —. Wedding sermons gave clergy opportunity for presenting themselves as »Hausväter« as well as pastors and for both critique and defense of popular customs.

Lutheran preachers give little attention to moral critique of sexual activities within marriage. The crucial boundary is between marriage and everything that takes place outside. Sin attending married sexuality is relativized by the understanding that all human activity is inevitably attended by sin. They also use language of »delight« and »play« to describe marital relations and praise passionate love between husband and wife.

Lutheran preaching about the »Ehecreutz« is a key application of the *theologia crucis* to daily life and a contrast to medieval preaching in which such misfortunes as the birth of handicapped children were understood as divine punishment for particular sexual sins.

In describing relations between husbands and wives, patriarchal authority is presupposed, though the sermons labor to emphasize reciprocal obligations, such as the husband's duty to heed the advice of a godly wife. They regard the household as a place of emotional solace and relative informality in contrast to the strict roles assumed in the public sphere.

Jeannine Olson: »John Calvin's views of marriage and divorce as evidenced in the marital laws of Geneva« — About a year after Calvin arrived in Geneva in 1536 he and the other pastors proposed to the city council, which ruled the city, that the council appoint a committee to deal with marital matters and discipline, given the absence of the canon law of the Church of Rome. The council did not accept this proposal. However, when Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541

after his years in Strasbourg (1538-1541), he could press the issue again. In the mid-1540s he proposed laws that gradually took effect. They were formally accepted in 1561. Young people could marry without parental consent at the ages of eighteen for women and twenty for men. The impediments to engagement and marriage were those of close relationship. First cousins could not marry, for instance. Also infectious disease could be an impediment as could the discovery that the bride was not a virgin. Engagements were enforced. Within six weeks of the engagement, couples were expected to marry, which they did at a regular worship service before the sermon. Once married, divorces were granted for adultery or for extended absence, assuming the spouse was dead or had abandoned the marriage. They were difficult to obtain, and more men successfully obtained them than women. Brutality was not a reason for divorce although it was discouraged. The ultimate penalty for repeated adultery was death, although this was exceptional.

Darci Drehmer also participated in the seminar.

Seminar über Luthers Briefe

Seminarleiterin: Ute Mennecke

Berichterstatter: Johannes Schilling

Luthers Briefe lohnen immer und immer wieder die Lektüre, als Quellen für sein Leben und Werk, als Zeugnisse ihrer Zeit und ihrer Epoche, als literarische Texte.

Ute Mennecke, Professorin für Kirchengeschichte an der Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Bonn und selbst Autorin eines ausgezeichneten Buchs über