

Luther on Marriage: Vocation in Creation and Cross
Image of God Conference
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I. Introduction

- Luther's theology of marriage: Self-justification for his own "spiritual incest" or reclamation of the First Article?
- The trajectory of Luther's Thought from 1519-1522
 - *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* 1519 (AE 44:7-14)
 - *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* 1520 (AE 36:3-126)
 - *Letter to Hans Luther* 1521 (Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 258-263)
 - *The Estate of Marriage* 1522 (AE 45:11-49)
- Luther's pastoral aim: "How I dread preaching on the estate of marriage! I am reluctant to do it because I am afraid if I once get involved in the subject it will make a lot of work for me and for others. The shameful confusion wrought by the accursed papal law has occasioned so much distress, and the lax authority of both the spiritual and temporal swords has given rise to so many dreadful abuses and false situations, that I would much prefer neither to look into the matter nor hear of it. I must proceed. I must try to instruct poor bewildered consciences, and take up the matter boldly" (AE 45:17)
- Luther treats marriage catechetically as a gift of God through which God creates and sustains human life (Fourth, Sixth, and Tenth Commandments, First Article, Fourth Petition, Daily Prayers and Table of Duties).
- By 1523 – two years before his own marriage to Katharina von Bora – Luther's evangelical ethic of marriage is in place. His subsequent writings on marriage (i.e. his commentary of 1523 on I Corinthians 7- AE 28:3-56; *On Marriage Matters* of 1530 –AE 46:265-320) show no shift from the position he had laid out in his 1522 work on *The Estate of Marriage*.
- Carter Lindberg: "Luther's application of evangelical theology to marriage and family desacramentalized marriage; desacralized the clergy and resacralized the life of the laity; opposed the maze of canonical impediments to marriage; strove to unravel the skein of canon law, imperial law, and German customs; and joyfully affirmed God's good creation, including sexual relations. In return, Luther was in such demand as a marriage counselor that he often complained of the burden imposed on him" (133).

II. Creation as the Arena for Marriage

- Marriage as one of the “three orders” established by God in creation: "But the holy orders established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government. . . . For these three religious institutions or orders are found in God's Word and commandment; and whatever is contained in God's Word must be holy, for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it. Above these three institutions and orders is the common order of Christian love, in which one serves not only the three orders but also serves every needy person in general with all kinds of benevolent deeds, such as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, forgiving enemies, praying for all men on earth, suffering all kinds of evil on earth, etc. Behold these are called good and holy works. However, none of these orders is a means of salvation. There remains only one way above them all. . . . faith in Jesus Christ" (*Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* – 1528, AE 37:364-365; also see the *Genesis Lectures* AE 1: 103-104).
- Luther: “He has established it (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” (LC I:207, Kolb/Wengert, 414)
- In a letter to Wolfgang Reissenbush (1525), Luther counsels him to set aside the vow of celibacy on account of God's creational design: "This is the Word of God, through whose power procreative seed is planted in man's body and a natural, ardent desire for woman is kindled and kept alive. This cannot be restrained either by vows or by laws. For it is God's law and doing. . . . Our bodies are in great part the flesh of women, for by them we were conceived, developed, borne, and suckled, and nourished, and it is quite impossible to keep entirely apart from them. This is in accord with the Word of God. He has caused it to be so and wishes it so" (Tappert, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 272- 273).
- In his *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), Luther clearly sets marriage in the context of creation: “Know therefore that marriage is an outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking. Just as I may eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride with a heathen, Jew, Turk, or heretic, so I may also marry and continue in wedlock with him. Pay no attention to the precepts of those fools who forbid it. You will find plenty of Christians – and indeed the great part of them who are worse in their secret unbelief than any Jew, heathen, Turk, or heretic. A heathen is just as much God's good creation – as St. Peter, St. Lucy, not to mention a slack and spurious Christian” (AE 45:25).

- Civil laws rightly govern marriage. This is reflected in Luther's *A Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors* appended to the *Small Catechism* (see Kolb/Wengert, 367). Here Luther writes "'So many lands, so many customs,' says the common proverb. For this reason, because weddings and the married estate are worldly affairs, it behooves those of us who are 'spirituals' ('clergy') or ministers of the church in no way to order or direct anything regarding marriage, but instead to allow every city and land to continue their own customs that are now in use" (Kolb/Wengert, 367-368). Note the liturgical structure of Luther's rite: vows are said at the church door and then the couple comes before the altar for the Word of God and prayer.
- While marriage is a creational estate, that does not mean that Luther understands it in a secularist fashion. In the marriage booklet, he writes: "For although it is a worldly estate, nevertheless it has God's Word on its side and it is not a human invention or institution, like the estate of monks and nuns. Therefore it should easily be reckoned a hundred times more spiritual than the monastic estate, which certainly ought to be considered the most worldly and fleshly of all, because it was invented and instituted by flesh and blood and completely out of worldly understanding and reason" (Kolb/Wengert, 368). God has instituted marriage in creation and His children live within it by faith in God's promises.

III. Marriage in the Context of Vocation

- A foundational document for Luther's doctrine of vocation is his 1520 treatise on Christian freedom: "We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor" (AE 31:371). Living outside of self, marriage becomes the place for both faith in Christ and love to the neighbor who is near (spouse, parents, children).
- Leif Grane notes that for Luther "the place where the two kingdoms are held together is the calling" (Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, 174). In his or her vocation, the Christian is living in the "eschatological overlap" (Kolden) of this world and the world to come.
- The introductory sentence to the "table of duties" in the *Small Catechism* identifies marriage as a holy order: "A Chart of Some Bible Passages for the Household: Through these verses all kinds of holy orders and estates may be admonished, as through lessons particularly pertinent to their office and duty" (*Small Catechism*, Kolb/Wengert, 365). The medieval two-track approach to life (religious vocation on a higher level with the life of the laity on a lower level) is broken. Marriage is a worldly estate occupied by spiritual people who are now holy through faith in Christ alone.

- Marriage is the place for cross-bearing. Luther's marriage rite introduces a reading from Genesis 3:16-19 with these words: "hear also the cross that God has placed upon this estate" (Kolb/Wengert, 370).
- In a letter written in 1538 to Valentine Hausmann, the burgomaster of Freiberg, Luther counsels him to patience in bearing with his wife in a troubled marriage. He is not to desert his wife on account of the difficulties nor deal with her legalistically. Luther writes: "To speak in spiritual terms, however, you are aware that God has hitherto exalted you and blessed you with many rich gifts. Perhaps this would not be a good sign if it were not relieved by particular misfortune which serves to humble you and compels you to acknowledge God and seek your comfort in him alone" (Tappert, 285)
- Bearing the crosses of marriage is entailed in the service of the neighbors in this estate (spouse, children): "Now observe that clever harlot, our natural reason...takes a look at married life, she turns up her nose and says, 'Alas, must I rock the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and sores, and top of that care for my wife, provide for her, labor at my trade, take care of this and that, do this and that, endure this and endure that, and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves? What, should I make a prisoner of myself? O you poor, wretched fellow, have you take a wife? Fie, fie upon such wretchedness and bitterness! It is better to remain free and lead a peaceful, carefree life; I will become a priest or nun and compel my children to do likewise. What then does the Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says 'O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock this little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is pleasing in thy sight'" (*The Estate of Marriage* – 1522, AE 45:39-40).

IV. Conclusion

- In a wedding sermon of 1531, Luther says "God's word is actually inscribed on one's spouse. When a man looks at his wife as if she were the only woman on earth, and when a woman looks at her husband if he were the only man on earth; yes, if no king or queen, not even the sun itself sparkles any more brightly and lights up your eyes more than your own husband or wife, then right there you are face to face with God speaking. God promises to you your wife or husband, actually gives your spouse to you saying, 'The man shall be yours. I am pleased beyond measure! Creatures earthly

and heavenly are jumping for joy.’ For there is no jewelry more precious than God’s Word; through it you come to regard your spouse as a gift of God ad, as long as you do that, you have no regrets” (WA 34:52.12-21, quoted by Hendrix, 347).

IV. For Further Reading

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