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Luther on Marriage, for Gay and Straight

Kirsi Stjerna

Martin Luther knew all about marriage.¹ He wrote, “The estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God.”² Luther was also fully aware of how complicated marriage could be on the human front; he even used the word “bitterness” to discuss different marriage-related issues.³ Regardless of the Hollywood stories of happily-ever-after, and (thankfully) regardless of the reality shows exposing outrageously dysfunctional family systems, people continue to get married, our societies still respect marriage as a worthy institution and see it important to legalize and control it; the churches continue to be invested in the ceremonies celebrating marital unions, and in shaping people’s thinking about marriage.

In this presentation, 1) I will first reflect on the urgency of the Lutheran church to move theologically to a place where our church affirms the marriage of gay and lesbian persons on par with the marriage of heterosexual persons. 2) I propose that the issue of gay and lesbian persons’ “right to marry” and the church’s joyful blessing of such unions are a “priority reformation concern” today, similar to the sixteenth-century Reformations’ promotion of clergy marriage over the church’s celibacy rules. 3) I will engage Luther’s argumentation on marriage and sexuality and the nature of his reforms in order to build a foundation for continued constructive reforms regarding marriage matters today.

Human Sexuality and the Right to Marry – a Reformation Concern⁴

Today the Lutheran church has an important responsibility to take an active role in the conversations on marriage and human sexuality.⁵ These questions

have wide-ranging ramifications in the life of the church, in Lutheran ethics, and in the quality of life for people in all walks of life. These questions have a theological background and a contemporary impact. How we deal theologically with the issue of human relations, sexuality, and human rights, in implicit and explicit ways, “translates” or communicates to the world the church’s doctrine of God and grace. How we deal with these human issues is revealing and exposes the foundations of our faith and how we interpret the gospel of Jesus – and also how we chronically fail in this task.

The church and its theologians have important opportunities and challenges here with the current debates about marriage and sexuality. To name just a few: Informed by new theological hermeneutics as well as scientific advances, theologians can work towards a healthy and theologically sound contemporary Lutheran understanding of marriage and sexuality. The church and its theologians cannot stay apart from the conversations on what is considered “normal” and what is “biblical”; it is a tender, vital task to address the problems between the two considerations. The church has a stake in the hotly debated question of who has the right to marry. Theologians are called to task to reassess what exactly is the church’s role in marriage matters today and properly advise the church to do its “job,” with the support of theological and anthropological perspectives that employ both the Scriptures and the scientific wisdom of the day, and to do so with compassion for the people whose lives are affected by what the church and its theologians say. Most importantly, the church and its theologians have an ongoing responsibility to preach, teach, practice, and fight for the equality and inclusivity of all people, in the name of the gospel of Jesus that forms the core mission for both.

Of all the issues under debate today, if there is one painfully unresolved one that requires careful, critical, and compassionate attention on the one hand, and bold action on the other, the topic of human sexuality and the right to marry is it. This is a high-priority reformation concern today. Lutherans can hardly shy away from it or wish for it to go away. The necessity of becoming involved in this discussion that affects human lives on so many levels comes with the turf of being first of all Christian – Christians care – and second by being Lutheran – Lutherans protest and reform after Luther’s own model of personal involvement in action and fiery preaching on the issues that matter. Reformation in Luther’s model is more about the well-being of the people in their daily God-given lives, and realization of the liberating power of the gospel in every person’s life, rather than protecting the church’s traditional view points and hermeneutics. Luther models a way to re-read the Scriptures in a daring manner in new situations and in light of new information, and thus reshape the tradition and hermeneutics where changes are called for.

In the sixteenth-century Reformations the primary concern that set the wheels in motion was the spiritual well-being of people. The “right to marry” was on top of the list of “must issues” to tackle – right there with necessary reforms in education, welfare, and worship, small but crucial steps taken towards democracy and equality in many ways, we could say. As the Reformers saw it, the well-being of human beings was at stake with the mutilation of the gospel message, and their theological reforms prefaced and enforced societal changes in this regard. The right to marry and have children was considered an urgent gospel issue, a theologically pertinent matter to resolve. The reforms in these areas central to daily life reflected significant changes in theological foundation and scriptural hermeneutics. The same is true today: what we think and say about marriage reflect our fundamental theological outlooks on life and reveal how we read our Bibles.

Speaking from a Lutheran perspective and in light of the original motivations for the sixteenth-century Reformations, the bottom line is: if the theology we preach and teach ceases to promote the freedom and the integrity of every person’s life and no longer supports people’s lives in their varied Christian vocations, then it is time for serious institutional self-reflection and thesis nailing. We live in that kind of a moment.

While our views and policies regarding marriage could and should reflect a radically emancipatory “Lutheran liberation theology,” the opposite is often true. Listening to the arguments made back and forth about marriage, about pre- or post-marital sex, about sexual education in public schools, or about the marriage of gay and lesbian persons, it seems that Lutherans are at times in danger of slipping into a kind of medieval Catholic mindset, honoring celibacy over sexual happiness, confusing a human contract and a love affair between two individuals with the sacraments of the Catholic church, imposing the church’s authority in marriage matters in areas that belong to the jurisdiction of the state, and in general, expressing confused and ambivalent views of sexuality as inherently bad and sinful (especially so when outside marriage or heterosexual relations). In many ways and in many corners of the Lutheran world, attitudes – and education – about sexuality are plagued with taboos of all sorts.

At the same time we as a society are vulgarizing sexuality in many ways, making sexuality a vanity issue or a “common thing” stripped of privacy and sacredness. Our ambivalence toward sexuality manifests itself especially in how we teach – or fail to teach – our children, in schools and the church. It also shows in what we require from our rostered leaders: abstinence or marriage. The ELCA’s “Vision and Expectations” document in this regard has the flavor of a medieval Catholic document, and it unfortunately can be used in ways that violate our sense of integrity and rights as human beings,

and lead to lies when people are unable to meet the written or unwritten “higher” expectations. For the sake of comparison, the written and unwritten norms around the sexuality of unmarried rostered leaders in the USA – or in North American culture more generally – are not necessarily shared with other Lutheran constituencies and global communities, particularly in northern Europe and Scandinavia.

If the church continues to place an unreasonable burden on people and causes distress in their consciences by forcing people to live with lies, we will have something like a *deja vu* of the problems our Reformers addressed already centuries ago. They explicitly rejected the celibacy requirement, preached positively on sexuality and the gift of marriage, and condemned the church’s hurtful teachings that led people to live with shame in the dimension of life that was meant to be holy, enriching, and blessed by God.

*Luther on Marriage as an External, Worldly Matter*⁶

What can Luther teach us today? He wrote in 1530 in his *On Marriage Matters*:

No one can deny that marriage is an external, worldly matter, like clothing and food, house and property, subject to temporal authority, as the many imperial laws enacted on the subject prove. Neither do I find any example in the New Testament where Christ or the apostles concerned themselves with such matters, except where they touched upon consciences, as did St. Paul in I Corinthians 7 [:1-24], and especially where unbelievers or non-Christians are concerned, for it is easy to deal with these and all matters among Christians or believers. But with non-Christians, with which the world is filled, you cannot move forward or backward without the sharp edge of the temporal sword. And what use would it be if we Christians set up a lot of laws and decisions, as long as the world is not subject to us and we have no authority over it? Therefore I simply do not wish to become involved in such matters at all and beg everyone not to bother me with them ...

But since you persist so strongly in asking instruction of me, not only for yourselves and your office, but also for your rulers who desire advice from you in these matters, and ask me what I for my part would do if I were asked for advice – especially since your rulers complain that it is burdensome to their consciences to render decisions according to the spiritual or papal laws, which in such cases are unreliable and often run counter to all propriety, reason, and justice, and since

the imperial laws too are ineffective in these matters – I will not withhold my opinion from you. Yet I give it with this condition That I want to do this not as a judge, official, or regent, but by way of advice, such as I would in good conscience give as a special service to my good friends. So, if anyone wishes to follow this advice of mine, let him [her] do so on his [her] own responsibility; if he [she] does not know how to carry it out, let him [her] not seek shelter or refuge with me, or complain to me about it Let whoever is supposed to rule or wants to rule be the ruler; I want to instruct and console consciences, and advise them as much as I can.⁷

In sum, Luther addressed marriage as a “temporal realm” issue. He himself offered his advice specifically as a theologian and a pastor and a friend, with the concerns of conscience in mind. He considered this distinction important – only in this role would he get involved in discourse on an issue that belonged under the jurisdiction of the secular authority and law. He was also careful to make this point: he was offering his words on the matter because people had “dragged” him into the debates (and uttered opinions as if from his mouth and pen, which really infuriated Luther, every time it happened). For those who solicited his advice, they could have it here. For those who would ignore his first-hand arguments, they better not involve his name at all then.

It is curious that Luther wrote about marriage with significant force already before he was married himself (e.g., he preached on marriage in 1519). He was unusually knowledgeable for a bachelor, and he boldly thought outside of the box. This was mostly due to his observations in his pastoral role and in friendships, and his first-hand reading of the human stories in the Bible. He actually became the leading voice for Protestant theology on marriage, as well as a kind of “Dear Abby” or “Dr. Phil” in marriage matters in his little town of Wittenberg.⁸ He did it boldly, but with a healthy dose of holy terror as well.

“How I dread preaching on the estate of marriage!,” wrote Luther in his 1522 treatise, *The Estate of Marriage*. “I am reluctant to do it because I am afraid if I once get really involved in the subject it will make a lot of work for me and for others.” We know what he means! “But timidity is of no help in an emergency, I must proceed. I must try to instruct poor bewildered consciences, and take up the matter boldly.”⁹

What was Martin Luther’s significant offering in the matter, then? In a nutshell, he proposed that marriage is a human contract and a matter of the state, and as such it serves the well-being of the polis/human community. Luther did not wish to abolish the tradition of marriage but rather to

uphold it as an essentially “good thing” that should be used, taught, and practiced with Christian integrity. He wished to purge the institution of marriage from false, onerous teachings that cast marriage and those who marry in an unwarranted negative light, and that prevented people from marrying regardless of their quite normal (i.e., created) human desires.

Most significantly, Luther argued 1) that the marriage contract and its recognition was an issue of the state, and 2) that it was a matter between two persons and – preferably – their families. Luther made it clear that the laws of the land are to be followed and that the church has no business in confusing things.

In his *Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors*, Luther writes: “For this reason, because weddings and the marriage are worldly affairs, it behooves those of us who are ‘spirituals’ 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 All these and similar things I leave to the prince and town council to create and arrange as they want. It is no concern of mine.”¹⁰ This is an example of how the two kingdoms doctrine plays out: the legitimacy of marriage and rules circumscribing it, the conditions for its validity, and rules about eligibility for it are affairs that the government decides (be it prince, duchess, city council, or president.) This is so because marriage is a human contract, a *coram hominibus* issue, and not a sacrament. If it was a sacrament, the church would decide. If marriage was a sacrament, Luther would not leave it up to the state or the ruler to decide about these matters.¹¹

Luther on Marriage as a Voluntary Union

In addition to declaring marriage as a contractual worldly issue, the other important point Luther made (in continuity with the Catholic church’s teaching) was to underscore the validity of marriage as a union between two people who join together with a promise to one another. That is where the marital bond is formed, between two persons willing to love and care for each other. This meant that Luther, reluctantly, accepted secret marriages and betrothals. Promises are to be honored! Ordinarily though, it is to everyone’s benefit that such promises are made in broad daylight and in the knowledge and with the approval of families, and with no force, of course.¹² This consideration was to the particular benefit of women who often lacked choices in the making of marriage contracts.

As we well know, as much as marriage is a matter between two individuals committing to one another, it is also a matter between families as

well as a public contract. Luther wrote, “marriage is a covenant of fidelity” and “the estate of marriage consists essentially in consent having been freely and previously given to another.”¹³ For the protection of the private intimate union, and for the sake of accountability, Luther considered it crucial that marriage promises be given in public and with the approval of families or guardians. The validity of the marriage rests on the laws, which are public, and by marrying in public, the couple enters the protective orbit of the common law. The marriage, being at its heart a covenant between two willing hearts, serves both the individuals and the society, in accordance with the laws set for the protection of everyone concerned.

Luther gave specific advice on the matter (based on his theology and in light of the laws of the land):

1. There should be no secret engagements; they lead to no good!¹⁴
2. If one does become engaged secretly, while being engaged to another in public, as a rule “public engagements take precedence over secret engagements.”¹⁵
3. If one has twice made a promise to marry, then of the two public engagements, the first one is valid, and a punishment should be imposed on account of the second.¹⁶
4. Once engaged, “Intercourse with another man or woman after engagement is adultery” and punishable. Thus monogamy begins from the promise to spend life together.¹⁷
5. Forced engagements are not valid; parents should be reasonable here with their children.¹⁸

What should the church’s role in these matters be? The church’s role is to pray, bless, and support people in this holy estate. It is the church’s role to teach and model to young people about marriage. The church’s role is also to offer a ritual of celebration to mark the union and to explicitly support people in their new life in this particular Christian estate. As it is today, so also in Luther’s time people wanted church ceremonies and found it meaningful to celebrate the beginning of the couple’s life together in the church and with its public blessing.

Luther wrote in the *Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors*, “However, when people request of us to bless them in front of the church or in the

church, to pray over them, or even to marry them, we are obligated to do this.”¹⁹ We are obligated to do this, Luther said. That is an interesting statement – obligated why? Because that is what the church does; it walks with people. By its participation and with its rituals, the church both teaches and enforces the experience of the holy in marriage in particular, and also promises to support the couple’s holy living in their marriage.²⁰

Luther on the Holiness of Marriage and Sexuality

Marriage as a Christian estate according to Luther is serious business, and people need the church’s help and guidelines for living in that vocation honorably. Holier than the vocation of the monastics and ascetics, marriage is important not only for the society’s well-being; it entails God’s holy intent on a larger scale. Marriage provides a structured platform for holy living, and in marital love one can experience and express sacredness in a unique way. Christians are to excel and model for others this holy vocation. The starting point for this is the public mutual agreement between two persons, bound in accordance with the laws of the state.²¹

Using the Bible as his primary sourcebook, Luther taught that the marital holy union and the honorable estate is created and instituted for the benefit of both men and women. Reading the book of Genesis (particularly chapters 1-2), Luther argued that God deemed it not good for the human being to be alone, thus God created partners, made of the same flesh and bone.²² Men and women, created of the same flesh, by the same God, are commanded to love one another with the passion with which Christ loves the church, and to love their partner as they love their own bodies. Luther appreciated love, including physical love, as an essential force in human relations; he saw an explicit divine intent for human beings to love each other physically.²³

It is important to notice that Luther’s thinking about marriage does not start with sin. Marriage does not exist originally because of sin. Marriage continues regardless of sin. Post-fall, however, marriage involves sin just as is the case with other dimensions of life; the desire that was to unite lovers blissfully in paradise has now the potential to get out of whack and drag one with wrong impulses and in the wrong directions. Nevertheless, marriage is in God’s orbit.²⁴ Luther wrote, “Intercourse is not without sin; but God excuses it by his [God’s] grace because the estate of marriage is his [God’s] work, and he [God] preserves in and through the sin all that good which he [God] has implanted and blessed in marriage.” Sexuality and marriage, thus, should not be considered in any way more tainted than other dimensions in life.²⁵

More problematic is the temptation of human beings to make ill-advised decisions with their desire(s), and this makes them vulnerable. In addition, most devastating is the satanic awareness that comes to cloud human beings' sense of who they are, in themselves and in relation to others. What sin brought to human life, including intimate relations and sexual expression, was not primarily a disorderly "lust" (although that is part of the post-fall human experience as well) but the diabolically distorted awareness and sense of ugliness of what originally was created good, a diabolical false awareness that filled human beings with an ungodly shame about who they are as God's images.²⁶

The good news in the midst of the devastating alterations in post-fall human experience is this word about marriage: "...this is your comfort, that you know and believe how your estate is pleasing and blessed in God's eyes."²⁷ Also good news is this: that the fall and the sin that entered human life did not change God's original intent that people unite, love one another, and procreate. The fall did not change what was the beauty of the created design for the images of God as men and as women, as sexual beings: "And God saw all that God had made, and look, it was all very good."²⁸

This is an important point to keep in mind: in creation, everything was very good. When talking about human beings, regardless of age, sex, orientation, etc., we are talking about God's images whom God considered as Good. What would be the alternative? Surely there are not misfits or accidents in God's kingdom?

With his biblically based theological arguments, Luther continued to remind his listeners of the godly design of human beings, created in two sexes, and commanded to unite, in flesh. Luther concluded that God had seen a formal union between people as a good thing, an estate and an arrangement that God from the beginning of time desired for human beings' own good and protection. God had chosen such a union as a channel for an intimate blessing. The intimacy in such a union not only resembled divine love for human but also allowed for God to channel grace through the most intimate of human relations – the sexual relationship.²⁹

Marriage is about a particular reality and expression and experience of holiness in life, while it is not sacramental holiness or a blessing in the way baptism and the Lord's Supper convey grace. Marriage, to Luther, is in a different category as a unique channel for God's grace to support people and society *coram hominibus*. As said before, it is not the church's means of grace – only two rituals rise to that level with Luther, baptism and the supper – but God's grace can be understood to be channeled to people's lives through the holy intimacy of two people, "outside" the church and its means of grace.

Luther on Necessities with our Bodies

In marriage, even after sin, Luther saw a godly, blessed way to live out human relations, and thus sexuality. In defense of God's good creation plan and the gospel that was to liberate people to live fully in that plan again post-fall, Luther attacked the many rulings of the church and impediments that unnecessarily prevented people from marrying and thus hindered people from experiencing the God-created possibilities for men and women. When Luther talked about the right and need to marry, he made a point about all of this being in the same category with the necessity of bowel movements and eating and drinking.³⁰

Luther wrote, "It is more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance [*werck*] which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. Rather it is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder. It is a nature and disposition just as innate as the organs involved in it. Therefore, just as God does not command anyone to be a man or a woman but creates them the way they have to be, so he [God] does not command them to multiply but creates them so that they have to multiply. And whenever men [people] 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

Luther talked about men and women and their natural desire to be with another human being in a physical way. He spoke of heterosexual unions. With our modern understanding of human nature and sexuality, we do not need to be hetero-normative; we can expand Luther's arguments to appreciate the nature of maleness and femaleness and sexuality more broadly, more inclusively based on the realities we know. We can apply Luther's arguments on 1) the natural desire in all human beings, and 2) his respect of the goodness of God's creation in every image of God, male or female, gay or straight, and 3) we can develop these arguments towards a contemporary Lutheran position that honors the natural desires and needs of gay and lesbian persons just as well as heterosexual persons, and protects their rights for love, for marriage, and for parenthood (when so desired).

Drawing from Gen 1:27, Luther reminded his listeners that God created humanity in two classes, men and women. God saw God's creation as pleasing and called the creation good. "Therefore, each one of us must have the kind of body God has created for us. I cannot make myself a woman nor can you make yourself a man; we do not have that power. But we are exactly as he [God] created us: I am a man and you a woman." Luther continued, "Moreover, he [God] wills to have his [God's] excellent handiwork honored as his [God's] divine creation, and not be despised. The man is not to despise or scoff at

the woman or her body, nor the woman the man. But *each should honor the other's image and body as a divine and good creation that is well-pleasing to God himself [Godself]* "Again, as it is not in your power not to be woman, so it is not your prerogative to be without a man. *For it is not a matter of free choice or decision but a natural and necessary thing.* Whatever is a man must have a woman and whatever is a woman must have a man."³²

What if we were to read these words without assuming that women always love men and vice versa, or that we are all always comfortable in our bodies and sex and gender notions, or that the only reason for our sex and sexuality is to generate babies? The words from Genesis and Luther's interpretation of them have been used to argue that only men and women can and should marry, and that they should do so mostly for the purpose of procreation. These words have been used to argue that there are clearly only men with men's bodies and women with women's bodies and that the two opposites – always, and only – are attracted to one another.

We know better than Luther in this regard. It is not so simple to define who is a woman and who is a man and what is meant by these concepts. Today we know that the physical features we are born with are really only one dimension of what constitutes our gender and sexuality. We know that we have ways to "adjust" our bodily existence to better match our identity. We know we cannot change natural forces of love and attraction. What comes to us naturally, comes to us naturally and inevitably, in terms of whom we love and how we experience ourselves as men and as women. We "know" certain things naturally, we feel on the basis of who we are. We can be attracted to the opposite sex, or we can be attracted to the same sex, and this is how it is from birth, in a most natural way.

Today we know too much to just keep holding on to the old assumptions of what Christian theology says about human sexuality and marriage. We can be Luthers of our day and dare to reinterpret our central concepts and experiences, such as maleness and femaleness, sexuality and sexual/gendered realities. Luther advanced his times' conceptions of these things; in his footsteps, so can we.

Once we acknowledge Luther's good efforts, and as long as we understand the words "man" and "woman," "maleness" and "femaleness" with fluidity and breathing room, we can in many ways appreciate the essentials of Luther's teaching on the beauty of gendered human experience and of the godliness and goodness of marriage, an institution resting on God's good intent, for the benefit of God's images, male and female, in heterosexual or homosexual relations – for those willing and suitable for the estate.

Luther's views are helpful already in terms of how to approach the topic, as well as what gravity to give to it in our most precious task: the

education of children. Luther was very clear on this. Because of the holiness aspect of marriage, on the one hand, and because it is an honorable estate with legal binding, on the other, people need to approach it with proper respect, earnestness, and right intent. For these same reasons, young people need to be educated on the meaning and proper respect of marriage. Luther wrote, "we honor this godly estate of marriage and bless it, pray for it, and adorn it in an even more glorious manner. For, although it is a worldly estate, nevertheless it has God's Word on its side and 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 We must also do this in order that the young people may learn to take this estate seriously, to hold it in high esteem as a divine work and command."³³

We can appreciate with Luther what an important task we have in educating our children on these matters and in instilling in them faith in the tradition. For example, in his *Estate of Marriage* (1522), Luther gave advice on how to encourage young people to overlook the many mundane rational reasons to wait for marriage, and just go for it, trusting in God who provides.³⁴

Luther on the Right to Marry and Natural Necessities that Please God

In the *Estate of Marriage* (1522), Luther addressed the question that is very much on the table today: who has the right to marry, "which persons may enter into marriage with one another"? A second, related point that Luther addressed is the biblically founded incentive to "Be fruitful and multiply." The question for us is, what do we mean by "being fruitful and multiplying," does it refer to biological parenthood only, and does that define marriage?

We look at Luther's words (quoted above) again, and intentionally without the preconception that they refer only to heterosexual persons and relations: "It is more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance [werck] which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. Rather it is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder. It is a nature and disposition just as innate as the organs involved in it. Therefore, just as God does not command anyone to a man or a woman but creates them the way they have to be, so he [God] does not command them to multiply but creates them so that they have to multiply. And whenever 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.”³⁵ Natural disposition, innate, as created by God – these are powerful, important words to consider. If we take these words to heart, and consider them applying to persons who are gays and lesbians just as well as to heterosexual persons, we can make progress in preparing a way for all persons who so wish to enjoy the blessings of marriage and parenthood.

The concepts of nature and the natural are complicated and come with baggage. The confusion about these terms shows in debates on whether gay and lesbian persons should have the right to marry and be parents, since they cannot procreate the ‘old fashioned’ and ‘natural’ ways. One could read Luther’s words to suggest that God created men and women only and exclusively for the purpose of multiplying, that therein lies the worth and purpose in this life as men and women; that marriage is only for men and women; or that only marriages that produce children are valid and blessed; or that sexuality is to be geared only for the purpose of producing children (meaning, no sex for fun, even in marriage); or that women’s worth is only in becoming mothers, biologically speaking, and within marriage, etc.

Where to start to say, “No, that’s not it”? Take the idea of procreation as being definitive for marriage. If we want to go that route, we should also take to heart Luther’s idea that in Paradise women gave birth to a litter at once – and repeatedly! That was his sixteenth-century male perspective of an ideal situation – hardly appealing to any woman in any era. In addition, as we know for a fact, many marriages are enjoyed without children, and persons can live perfectly happy lives “single.” And if we continue down this same road, no self-respecting woman would consider her primary purpose for existence to be in the role of “lust control” for men, even though Luther “sorrowed” for women for having to deal with this disorderly lust and the failed attempts to control it.³⁶

We do not need to like some of these statements from Luther, while we can appreciate his effort and interest. Here are some ideas on how we can make sense of things with Luther, and with the Genesis texts. 1) We understand marriage as a bond between two persons, out of which children may or may not result, and as an estate well suited for men and women to have off-spring if they so wish and are able – whether from conception or in parenthood through adoption, surrogacy, or foster parenting. Luther – a biological and a foster father himself – had no idea how many options we would have with parenting and procreation, no idea at all. In addition, with Luther and especially the Reformation mothers, we can think of parenthood beyond biology by reckoning with “family” as a much larger category. For example, Katharina Schütz Zell talked about the office of a “church mother,” a calling for those caring for the commonwealth and for their

neighbors. As a Christian estate, parenting is a broad category and involves all citizens.

2) We can understand Luther’s powerful words about the necessity of marital copulation and baby-making as his way of addressing the innate sexual drive and nesting instincts he observed in human beings; already before his own marriage he was looking for constructive ways to handle it. He talked about this yearning and necessity as something that God made and that we cannot undo even if we tried. He actually worried that there is physical harm as a result of the sex-drive not being fulfilled. He had the opinion of his time’s physicians to attest to this: use it or get foul!³⁷ We can attest that while not all of us have a burning desire and necessity to have children, we all know what sexual desire is about and appreciate Luther’s concern. We can swear by Luther’s main insights that we are born with our sexuality and sexual desires and need to love and be loved (such was his main argument against the medieval church’s celibacy rules). Unlike Luther, however, we can imagine the application of sexuality outside the marriage contract. Unlike Luther, we can imagine marriage and sexual intimacy between both heterosexual and homosexual persons; and not just imagine, we celebrate that reality.

3) We take Luther’s words on “men” and “women” with some grains of salt, when reading his interpretation of Genesis and words about marriage and gender. He considered human beings to have two sets of gender-specific gear that divides people in different “classes,” as he says, but we know that sexual and gendered experiences are much more complex than the “two or three classes” Luther imagines.

Related to these kinds of questions, in his *Estate of Marriage* Luther made a point about eunuchs, with an attempt to imagine a “third category” for human beings. He recognized three kinds of eunuchs: those who have been so from birth, those made so by others, and those who have made themselves so. Luther excused only these people from the expectation to multiply. “Apart from these groups, let no man presume to be without a spouse.”³⁸ He suggested that only eunuchs, castrated persons, can honestly live without sex. For the rest of the folks, sexless life is not an option, and even dreaming of such life is fooling oneself and leading into trouble and sins. These sins involve the church, in Luther’s wise opinion, as the culprit of setting impossible standards with which people are prone to fail.

We cannot underscore enough what a huge discovery sexuality was for Luther, the one-time monk, and then a father of six and a happy spouse of Katharina. Once tasting the apple, he did not see it reasonable at all to expect sexless life from people – other than eunuchs and those with a spe-

cial gift from God for God's purposes. Luther considered as a special group those people who "are equipped for marriage by nature and physical capacity and nevertheless voluntarily remain celibate." "Such persons are rare, not one in a thousand for they are a special miracle of God. No one should venture on such a life unless he [she] be especially called by God" (Jer 16:2).³⁹

From the beginning with his initial dismissal of celibacy, Luther's advice on sexual matters was radical and fresh in many ways: for one, as he recognized the needs for sexual intimacy, he made an explicit point of recognizing women's needs and rights in this area. He was crystal-clear about the spouses' mutual responsibility to meet the sexual needs of one another, and he showed incredible flexibility in imagining alternate scenarios when people struggled. Quite radically, for example, Luther could advise the husband to come to reasonable arrangements to make sure this aspect of marriage was fulfilled for his wife, with him or with someone else; the same was true for both spouses.⁴⁰ While he was considering only heterosexual relations, we can expand his reasoning to include gay and lesbian and transgendered persons in our creative solutions.

The bottom line we gather with Luther is that people are created out of love and for love and with the capacity to love, and that physical love is a crucially important dimension of an individual's life. To try to hinder, ignore, or suppress that created desire – without a special gift from God – would be devilish. It is the devil, Luther claimed, who creates spider webs out of human commands and vows that confuse people and make them try to abstain and live unmarried, when it is against their nature and God's desire for their happiness. Not to consider marriage as God-ordained and pleasing to God is to fall into the devil's lies and into various sins.⁴¹

Who, then, gets to marry? Here is an area where we can really learn from Luther's progressive vision and his way of adjusting hermeneutics in a new situation. On the basis of his Reformation insights and Reformation theology, Luther severely criticized the Catholic church and its regulations in these matters, considering marriage to be the right of everyone. One by one, he demolished the so-called impediments, showing their "silliness."

The impediments for marriage that Luther criticized were many: Reasons of consanguinity or affinity through marriage, legal kinship, or spiritual relationship – all these reasons Luther deemed foolishness. The same with other kind of impediments, such as unbelief, crime, episcopal prohibition, defective eyesight and hearing, limited mental capacities, etc. Luther's basic over-arching point was that it is important to marry, God wants us marry, thus the church should not stand in your way, so go ahead and take as your spouse whomever you wish, even a Turk, or a Jew, or a heretic (these are

major compromises from Luther who condemned both the Jews and the Turks for ungodliness and thus damned).⁴²

Most intriguingly, Luther demolished all kinds of impediments, even unbelief. His radical answer to a question that still has legs in our days, "May I marry a Turk?," was a firm "Yes!" He explained an important point: "Know therefore that marriage is an outward, bodily thing like any other worldly undertaking. Just as I may eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride with, buy from, speak to, and deal 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."⁴³

While emphasizing the freedom to marry, Luther underscored that nobody should be coerced into marriage – neither by parents nor by the government. "That is to be sure no marriage in the sight of God."⁴⁴ Marriage is a union that must be voluntary. Without the will and "I do," there is no marriage. This is one of Luther's most basic arguments, as well as the central part of the wedding ritual he outlined in his *Marriage Booklet*. A choice and freedom are essential in establishing a marital union. This is one of the few areas in life where Luther underscored the factor of choice. It is also noteworthy that the choice would not work that well the other way around. Luther cherished the freedom to marry and to choose whom to marry, while he denied human beings' "own" freedom to stay celibate, that is, to abstain from sexual relations. With this conviction Luther ridiculed the futile vows of celibacy: "If you would like to take a wise vow, then vow not to bite off your own nose; you can keep that vow."⁴⁵

The one impediment for marriage Luther considered with extra care had to do with sexuality. If people are unfit for marital relations, they should not marry. Luther says explicitly that if a wife or a husband is unfit for marriage – meaning sex – they could divorce, or not get married in the first place. The inability to fulfill the natural sexual needs of one's spouse would be grounds for a divorce. Here again we have proof of how important Luther deemed sexual life and happiness.⁴⁶

Sins and crimes, on the other hand, should not be an impediment as sins and crimes do not change the person's natural being in this regard. Marriage should not be regarded as something only perfect, that is, non-sinning, persons would qualify for. Nor should church regulations put obstacles in people's way in this regard.⁴⁷ For example, regulations regarding times and episcopal prohibitions were, in Luther's opinion, plain rotten business: "It is a dirty rotten business that a bishop should forbid me a wife or specify the times when I marry, or that a blind and dumb person should not be allowed to enter into wedlock."⁴⁸ Marriage belongs to all, and the church should

teach it and support those who marry, with full gusto, with gospel ammunition, and with common sense. This was Luther's solemn argument.

Concluding Thoughts

We see what Luther did with the impediments invented by the church. We see how he broke traditions, with a new reading of his Scripture, enlightened by his time's understanding of human life, and by his own experiences and observations of life.⁴⁹ His passion to preach the gospel of liberation and his trust in God's tangible grace in human life guided his re-visioning of the "holy while worldly" institution of marriage and human sexuality, with the best of intents.

We end with Luther's precious words on children. As a father himself, and even before, he saw children as a gift from God, "an eternal treasure" from God. He could not imagine the world without children who were the embodiment of God's grace. Similarly, he understood the well-being of the world to depend on the care of the children and their souls.⁵⁰ Any attempts to erect obstacles for parenthood, this most important responsibility and a gift with a theological bearing, was against Luther's gut-knowledge and biblical knowledge. It would be diabolical to prevent people from entering the calling of parenthood he deemed as most holy and most difficult and a central piece in God's design for human life on this earth.

Luther had an uncanny appreciation of the fundamental experiences parenthood brings about, and he was revolutionary in how he both saw a theological meaning in parental experiences and drew important theological insights from the parental realities for his imagination of God and God's love, sin and grace, and salvation. With Luther, we can argue, and forcefully so, that excluding people from this gift and responsibility and foundational life experience because of their sexual orientation is not theologically warranted. Regardless of how we consider the ultimate reason for marriage, or whether we personally want or can have children, we get Luther's point: we cannot afford nor do we have the rights to exclude any people so willing from this holy calling and responsibility. Rather we do well to support one another in that holy task, in our personal lives, in our societal ways, and in the church.⁵¹

Luther gives us much food for thought and building blocks for arguments to not only support but promote the right to marry and the right for parenthood for all people who so desire. Luther gives us many fruitful arguments to continue to consider marriage as a gift, as a choice, and as an institution worth having faith in. Remembering Luther and the sixteenth-century Reformation stirs us to think again about our church's role in

marriage matters in the first place, and secondly, about the ways the church can support every person who wishes to enter that estate, which is noble, serious, and pleasing to God – Luther's words – while extremely complex.

Notes

- 1 Luther citations are from the critical edition of his works: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1906-61); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930-85); *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912-21). These are abbreviated as WA, WA DB, WA Br, and WA TR. English translations are from *Luther's Works, American Edition*, 55 vols. plus 20 vols in the New Edition (Philadelphia/St. Louis, 1955-). Abbreviated as LW.
- 2 *Vom Ehelichen Leben // The Estate of Marriage* (1522), LW 45:38; WA 10/2:294,30.
- 3 LW 45:39, 42; WA 10/2:295,7-298,9.
- 4 The reflections here are my own, designed as an introduction to the main part of the presentation, our conversation with Luther. A substantial amount of outstanding literature is available on the matters of human sexuality, as well as Reformation history and theology, but due to space limitations and in order to preserve the focus, these references are omitted.
- 5 Soon after his installation Pope Francis made a comment about sexuality matters dominating public conversation while more important issues were being ignored, namely solidarity with the poor and the alleviation of human suffering caused by poverty and related tragedies. While the Pope's point is well taken, until there is equality for people in their sexual orientations as men and women, in their most fundamental way of being, the urgency to address sexuality matters continues, and one could actually hope for an amplification of the discussion until the desired results are achieved.
- 6 This presentation focuses solely on Luther's works, apart from explicit conversation with secondary sources on the topic, the rationale being to build an argument with Luther's own words concerning the specific questions at stake.

The primary sources are: *Ein Sermon von dem ehelichen Stand // Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* (1519), LW 44:(3)7-14; WA 2:(162) 166-171. *Vom Ehelichen Leben // The Estate of Marriage* (1522), LW 45:(13) 17-49; WA 10/2:275-304. *De captivitate babilonica ecclesiae // On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:92-106 (= pp on marriage); WA 6:550,21-553,21. *Ein Traubüchlein für die einfältigen Pfarrherr // A Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors* (1529), with Small Catechism, in *The Book of Concord* (ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000) 367-371; LW 53:110-115; WA 30/3:74-80. *Von den Ehesachen // On Marriage Matters* (1530), LW 46:(261) 265-320; WA 30/3:205-248. *De votis monasticis Martini Lutheri iudicium // Judgment on Monastic Vows* (1521), LW 44:(243) 251-400; WA 8:(564) 573-669.

For treatments on the topic in English, from different angles, see: Christopher Boyd Brown, "The Reformation of Marriage in Lutheran Wedding-Peaching," *Seminary Ridge Review* 15/2 (2013) 1-25; Scott Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church* (Timothy Wengert, ed.;

- Lutheran Quarterly Books; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 169-189; John Witte, Jr., "The Mother of all Earthly Laws: The Lutheran Reformation of Marriage," *Seminary Ridge Review* 15/2 (2013) 26-43; John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1997).
- 7 LW 46:265-267; WA 30/3:205,12-32 (printed in Wittenberg in 1530, then again in 1541, and twice more). Luther then concludes his introduction: "Well then, let us in God's name get down to the business at hand and summarize these opinions and this advice of mine in several articles and points, so that they may be understood and retained that much the better." (LW 46:267; WA 30/3:206,35-37).
 - 8 See LW 46:(261) 265-320; WA 30/3: 205-248.
 - 9 LW 45:17; WA 10/2:275,2-4,8-9.
 - 10 *Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors*, in *The Book of Concord*, 367-368.
 - 11 Luther explains that the Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament derives from confusion in understanding the word *mysterion* in the New Testament epistles (e.g., Eph 5:31-32; 1 Cor 4:1) as always meaning *sacramentum*. See his arguments in *De captivitate babilonica ecclesiae // On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:92-106, esp 92-96; WA 6:550,21-553,21. The definition of sacraments and their proper use being one of the main reforms Luther preached, the re-definition of marriage was among the priority issues.
 - 12 LW 44:7-14; WA 2:(162) 166-171. Luther offers that parents should make it explicit to their children that they do wish to advise their offspring, and also, "My advice is that parents persuade their children not to be ashamed to ask their parents to find a marriage partner for them." (LW 44:11; WA 2:169,20-24).
 - 13 LW 44:10-11; WA 2:168,38; 169,11-13.
 - 14 LW 46:267, 268-280; WA 30/3:207,1-2 (30/3:207,15-217,32).
 - 15 LW 46:267, 281-289; WA 30/3:207,3-4 (30/3:217,33-224,6).
 - 16 LW 46:267, 289-297; WA 30/3:207,5-7 (30/3:224,7-230,15).
 - 17 LW 46:267, 297-304; WA 30/3:207,8-10 (30/3:230,16-236,6).
 - 18 LW 46:268, 303-310; WA 30/3:207:12-13 (30/3:236:7-240,9).
 - 19 *Marriage Booklet*, in *The Book of Concord*, 368,2-4.
 - 20 Considering Lutheran marriage traditions today: The church's role has little if anything to do with the validity of the marital union in the eyes of the law, unless an arrangement is in place with the state that gives that authority to the clergy/church on behalf of the state. In some contexts the clergy serves as the official whose "officiating" and signature actually does make the marriage legal; but the church functions in that capacity only as far as the state authorizes it. This has been the case, e.g., in Finland. In some other contexts, e.g., in Germany, couples visit the town hall or an equivalent for the binding of the union first, followed by a church ceremony.
 - 21 Luther considers marriage as fundamentally God's doing, something God instituted, since God "brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them." For this reason, it is notable, Luther interprets from Gen 1:28 that "The estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God." (LW 45:38; WA 10/2:294,27-30).
 - 22 LW 44:7-8; WA 2:166,15-26. LW 45:17-19; WA 10/2:275,11-277,10.
 - 23 See Luther's reflection on different forms of love: false love (that seeks for money and possession), natural love (parental), and married love (bride's love): "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.'" (LW 44:9; WA 2:166,29-30, cf WA 2:177,22-168,9).
 - 24 E.g., LW 44:7-8; WA 2:166,15-168,12.
 - 25 LW 45:49; WA 10/2:304,9-12.
 - 26 Luther explains this, e.g., when interpreting Genesis 3 and Adam and Eve's reactions post-fall: Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nudity – their created beautiful state – and their most glorious organs, and made girdles for themselves. They wished to hide from God and their mutual relationship became tainted with shame, and an ongoing struggle for power ensued. Luther grieves over this calamity when interpreting Gen 3:7: "Therefore this is an excellent description of the corruption which has taken the place of original righteousness and glory. It was glory for man not to realize that he was naked. Moreover, what can be a greater depravity than that the nakedness which formerly was a glory is now turned into the greatest disgrace? No one blushes because of healthy and sound eyes. Distorted or weak eyes are regarded as less becoming and bring on shame. So in the state of innocence it was most honorable to go about naked. Now, after sin, when Adam and Eve see that they are naked, they are made ashamed, and they look for girdles with which to cover their disgrace." (LW 1:165-166; WA 42:124). "Out of this corruption which followed because of sin there followed another evil. Adam and Eve not only were ashamed because of their nakedness, which previously was most honorable and the unique adornment of man, but they also made girdles for themselves for the purpose of covering, as though it were something most shameful, that part of the body which by its nature was most honorable and noble. What in all nature is nobler than the work of procreation? This work was assigned by God neither to the eyes nor to the mouth, which we regard as the more honorable parts of the body, but to that part which sin has taught us to call the pudendum and to cover, lest it be seen." (LW 1:167-168; WA 42:126).
 - 27 *Marriage Booklet*, in *The Book of Concord*, 371,15-16.
 - 28 Ibid. Also, with Gen 1:27 Luther writes: "So God created man ... male and female ... divided mankind into two classes, namely, male and female, or a he and a she. This was so pleasing to him [God] that he himself [God] called it a good creation [Gen 1:31]." (LW 45:17; WA 10/2:275,18).
 - 29 LW 44:7-8; WA 2:166,15-168,12. Also, LW 45:17-18; WA 10/2:275,11-276,31. The other area where people come as close to the experience of divine love is childbirth and parenthood, per Luther's observation.
 - 30 LW 45:17; WA 10/2:275,11-276,31.
 - 31 LW 45:18; WA 10/2:276,21-31.
 - 32 LW 45:17-18; WA 10/2:276,1-5; also WA 10/2:275,18-276,8. Italics mine.
 - 33 *Marriage Booklet*, *The Book of Concord*, 368,3-4.
 - 34 See LW 45(13) 17-49; WA 10/2:275-304. Luther advised boys to marry at 20, girls at 15-18, and not worry if they had enough funds to have children. "Let God worry about how they and their children are to be fed. God makes children; he [God] will surely also feed them." (LW 45:48; WA 10/2:304,2-5).
 - 35 LW 45:18; WA 10/2:276,21-31.
 - 36 For Luther's discussion on the effects of the fall on sex, gender, and gender relations, see his interpretation of Genesis 3, e.g., LW 1:163-169; WA 42:122-127.
 - 37 "It is certainly a fact that he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality." (LW 45:45; WA 10/2:300,23-24). This is so in light of what and why God created. Luther argues, referring to the physicians' observations: "If this natural function is forcibly

- restrained it necessarily strikes into the flesh and blood and becomes a poison, whence the body becomes unhealthy, enervated, sweaty and foul-smelling. That which should have issued in fruitfulness and propagation has to be absorbed within the body itself. Unless there is terrific hunger or immense labor or the supreme grace, the body cannot take it; it necessarily become unhealthy and sickly. Hence, we see how weak and sickly barren women are.” (LW 45:46-47; WA 10/2:301,5-12).
- 38 LW 45:18; WA 10/2:277,5. In the same context Luther talks about men who seek women’s company “and are quite effeminate.” (WA 10/2:279,10). He wrongly assumes that these men surround themselves with women because of their desire for them. Regarding eunuchs, see LW 45:19-22; WA 10/2:277,1-278,9; 279,7-14.
- 39 LW 45:45; WA 10/2:279,19-21.
- 40 Luther advised husbands unable to fulfill their conjugal duties towards their wives to let them have another arrangement to take care of this issue. He wrote, “if a woman who is fit for marriage has a husband who is not, and she is unable openly to take unto herself another ... 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.” (LW 45:20; WA 10/2:278,19-28). Luther went as far as to declare that if the husband refuses this arrangement and that way fails to honor his conjugal duty, the wife should flee to another country and marry again. This advice Luther had given already when still timid; now he was standing on a firmer ground and wished to offer “sounder advice in the matter, and take a firmer grip on a man who thus makes a fool of his wife.” (LW 45:20-21; WA 10/2:278,29-31; cf WA 10/2:278,32-279,2).
- 41 “This is why the devil has contrived to have so much shouted and written in the world against the institution of marriage, to frighten men away from this godly life and entangle them in a web of fornication and secret sins” (LW 45:37; WA 10/2:294,8-11). The devils’ lies about marriage are in striking contrast to God’s word about marriage: God says that God is pleased with marriage, and God does not lie. (LW 45:38, 42; WA 10/2:294,29-30; 298,9-18). “And whenever 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.” (LW 45:18; WA 10/2:276,29-31).
- 42 LW 45:25; WA 10/2:283,1-7. On the various impediments dictated by the medieval Catholic church, see LW 45:22-30; WA 10/2:280,16-287,11. Impediments he attacked are: blood relationship, affinity through marriage, spiritual relationship, legal kinship, unbelief, crime, public decorum/respectability, solemn vows/monastic, error, servitude, holy orders, coercion, betrothal, episcopal prohibition, restricted times, defective eyesight or hearing, and spouse unfit for marriage and for conjugal duties – the last one constituting grounds for divorce. (LW 36:96-103; WA 6:553,22-558,7).
- 43 LW 45:25; WA 10/2:283,8-12.
- 44 LW 45:28; WA 10/2:285,19.
- 45 LW 45:27; WA 10/2:284,22-23.
- 46 LW 45:33-35; WA 10/2:290,5-292,5; on grounds for divorce, LW 45:30-35; WA 10/2:287,13-292,6. Also, *De captivitate babilonica ecclesiae // On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:103-106; WA 6:558,8-560,18.
- 47 According to Luther, sex is good for any day for any condition. If one tries to regulate sexual activity with inane rules that lead to abstinence, which is impossible without God’s special help anyway, such foolishness can lead to fornication and other transgressions as people look for ways to release their sexual energy; abstinence can also make one sick. (LW 45:45-46; WA 10/2:301,5-15).
- 48 LW 45:30; WA 10/2:287,3-11.
- 49 “I base my remarks on Scripture, which to me is surer than all experience and cannot lie to me. He who finds still other good things in marriage profits all the more, and should give thanks to God. Whatever God calls good must of necessity always be good, unless men do not recognize it or perversely misuse it.” (LW 45:43; WA 10/2:299,10).
- 50 “God makes children.” “Got macht kinder.” (LW 45:48; WA 10/2:304,2). Quoting St. Cyprian, Luther wrote, “One should kiss the newborn infant, even before it is baptized, in honor of the hands of God here engaged in a brand new deed.” (LW 45:41; WA 10/2:297,5-7). In his criticism of monastic vows and in illustrating holiness in marriage and parenthood, Luther made a radical argument that tells of his respect for parenthood and also of the godliness of children: “Therefore, I say that all nuns and monks who lack faith, and who trust in their own chastity and in their order, are not worthy of rocking a baptized child or preparing its pap, even if it were the child of a harlot. This is because their order and manner of life has no word of God as its warrant. They cannot boast that what they do is pleasing in God’s sight, as can the woman in childbirth, even if her child is born out of wedlock.” (LW 45:41; WA 10/2:297,10-15).
- 51 E.g., Luther wrote, “A wife too should regard her duties in the same light, as she suckles the child, rocks and bathes it, and cares for it in other ways; and as she busies herself with other duties and renders help and obedience to her husband. These are truly golden and noble works.” (LW 45:40; WA 10/2:296,12-15). “Likewise, when a father washes diapers, he may be ridiculed by some as an effeminate fool, but “God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling – not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.” (LW 45:40; WA 10/2:296,30-297,1; see also LW 44:12-14; WA 2:169,38-170,7 on the theological and spiritual importance of good parenting: for the eternal benefit of the parents themselves, for the good of society, and as a divine service for the child as a gift from God).

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