The reformation was much more multifaceted than what is sometimes acknowledged. Some narratives of the reformation could make you believe that Luther was the single reason for it all, and that he emerged from out of the blue. In reality it was a process that spanned over several centuries, and had a multitude of actors, in which Luther functions as the triggering factor.

The reformation revolved around the disputes over religious practice and one of the central disputes was the issue of clerical celibacy. Since the 12th century priests in the Catholic Church had not been allowed to marry. However in reality it was very common for a priest to have a concubine, children and a family life. The reformers turned against this hypocrisy and in the wake of the reformation many of the foreground figures, people like Zwingli, Karlstadt, etc. married.¹

For Luther the celibate life of the Catholic clergy and nuns became one of his primary targets. He was convinced that it could lead to no good and attacked it based on his Biblical interpretation. Firstly, marriage was ordained by God, it was instituted in the creation of Adam and Eve. Secondly to ensure the propagation of humankind, God had the sexual desire implanted, for which the only accepted release was in the marriage between husband and wife.

Therefore, priests, monks, and nuns are duty bound to forsake their vows whenever they find that God’s ordinance to produce seed and to multiply is powerful and strong within them. They have no power by any authority, law, command, or vow to hinder this which God has created within them. If they do hinder it, however, you may be sure that they will not remain pure but inevitably besmirch themselves with secret sins and fornications. – The Estate of Marriage, 1522, LW XLV, pp. 17-49²

Nonetheless marriage was much more to Luther. It had both practical and emotional aspects. Husband and wife were supposed to share the burden of work and complement each other. This also applied to the emotional life. The “bridal love” in Luther’s eyes was the thing that would sustain the marriage through the hard times of illness, labour and poverty. It must be pointed out that this image did not mean equality in any modern term, neither is he advocating marriage by love. What he is promoting is a rather a union between man and woman with a sense of mutual respect and dependence.

As a way to demonstrate his opposition towards celibacy Luther both participated in priest weddings and helped nuns escape from convents. He himself however remained a bachelor until 1525 when he
married the former nun Katharina von Bora, whom he had assisted in her escape from a convent two years earlier. She and the other nuns had been offered marriages to help provide for them, but Katharina had turned everyone down until Luther himself agreed to marry her. Due to his status as an outlaw during this time he had initially been reluctant to start a family, but he would later state several reasons for his change of mind.

Indeed, the rumour is true that I was suddenly married to Katharina in order to forestall the unrestrained gossip that commonly swirls around me... Nor did I want to pass up this fresh opportunity to comply with my father’s wish for progeny. At the same time, I wanted to confirm what I have taught by practising it; for I find that many people are still timid despite such great light shed by the gospel. God has willed this thing to happen. I feel neither passionate love nor burning to my spouse, but I cherish her.³

It might not have been love at first sight, but they would with time develop a strong affection for each other. The life of the couple is well known compared to the other reformers because Luther did not hesitate to describe his domestic life and consequently their marriage, soon it became a model for the evangelical clerical marriage. Their household soon grew in size and became an exceptional open house. A lot of students and friends were constantly a part of the Luther family. Katharina played a decisive role in this enterprise. She turned out to have a good head for business and was soon in charge of several properties that provided this expanding household with all it needed. For Luther and his work this support was invaluable and he became dependent on it and it was not uncommon for him to ask for her opinion on different matters.⁴

To understand the emotional side of Luther the family man, his reaction to the death of Magdalena (his second daughter) is helpful. She was deeply loved by her parents and died 13 years old after a long illness. Her death left them devastated and Luther had a hard time dealing with his emotions. Theologically he knew he should rejoice that Magdalena had joined Christ in his eternal kingdom, but his deep grief prevented him from doing this. He felt like he had experienced death himself, and describes how he had her so deeply engraved in his heart that not even Christ could take it away as Luther thought he should.¹ In this hard time for Luther we see a devastated family bound together by love and deep care. This sorrow for a lost child is of course hardly unique, but it still lets us see that what started as an arranged marriage, very much out of convenience, had evolved to something much deeper. It shows us that Luther, no matter how devoted he was to his work, had strong emotional ties to his family. This incident demonstrates Luther’s dual view on his marriage. It was both a source of satisfaction and a cross to carry. For Luther this was enough for him to see why some people tried to avoid marriage, but good or bad he remained convinced that the marital state was something that everyone (with few exceptions) was called to enter.⁵

To study Luther’s teaching on marriage and later his own relationship with Katharina is to take a step into a chaotic world where old truths are being turned upside down. In many ways Luther and the reformation expands on the marital status. It is no longer a hindrance, but rather an advantage for a person seeking a spiritual life to engage in marriage. This is demonstrated in Luther’s own life and by his and his wife’s example, when they in flesh lived out his teachings.

However all this leaves the modern reader with some questions. Is his interpretation of Jesus and Paul really correct? Both lift up the celibate life as something to strive for. Luther addresses it, but leaves us with no satisfactory answers. We also have to ask ourselves the question where Luther’s teaching puts the ones that for various reasons are unable to enter marriage. Many churches have a tendency to subconsciously view the unmarried as someone who is yet to be completed and thus reduce them

¹ Hendrix 76-77.
to the margins. This is one of the challenges for the branch of Christianity that is soaked in the Lutheran heritage. How can we embrace Luther’s teaching on marriage and at the same time acknowledge and support every part of the body of Christ as it goes out in service?

ENDNOTES

1 Hendrix, 70-71.
2 Luther, 100.
3 Hendrix, 74.
4 Nicols, 46-47.
5 Luther, 186-187.
Bibliography

