

LUTHER'S MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

I. The Medieval Background

- A. To be a “real” Christian, you abandoned worldly life and were ordained a priest, or took vows to become a monk or nun.
- B. Living under the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience made a person truly worthy and devoted to God. This belief was held so deeply and fervently that monastic vows were often taken to be as efficacious as baptism!
“It may reasonably be said that through entering a religious order a person attains remission of all sins...wherefore it is read in the *Lives of the Fathers* that those entering a religious order attained the same grace as the baptized” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*).
- C. Luther's own reflections: When I was a boy, marriage was considered so infamous on account of impious and impure celibacy that I thought I could not think about married life without sin. For all were convinced that if anyone wished to live a life holy and acceptable to God, he must never become a spouse but must live a celibate and take the vow of celibacy” (*Lectures on Genesis*).

II. Luther's on Marriage

A. An institution of God

1. What God has instituted cannot be wicked, “dirty,” or beneath Him
2. Though tainted by sin (lust) it is not intrinsically sinful, but remains a holy estate
3. Is commended to us in Holy Scripture

- B. A “New” Understanding of marriage. As Pless explains, for Luther, marriage “not a sacrament that bestows forgiveness, but there is no higher social calling where faith is exercised than that of the family. Marriage is the arena for faith and love. Hence the pope has no authority to impose vows that run counter to creation.”

“This is a true definition of marriage: Marriage is the God-appointed and legitimate union of man and woman in the hope of having children or at least for the purpose of avoiding fornication and sin and living to the glory of God. The ultimate purpose is to obey God, to find aid and counsel against sin; to call upon God; to seek, love, and educate children for the glory of God; to live with one's wife in the fear of God and to bear the cross; but if there are no children, nevertheless to live with one's wife in contentment; and to avoid all lewdness with others” (*Lectures on Genesis*).

C. Marriage in the *Small Catechism*

1. A gift of the First Article: “God...also gives me...wife and children”
2. Protected by the Fourth, Sixth, and Tenth Commandments: “Honor your father and your mother; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”
3. Received with thanks as daily bread in the Fourth Petition: “a devout husband or wife, devout children”
4. Lived out in the vocations described in the Table of Duties: To Husbands; To Wives; To Parents; To Children

D. Concrete reforms of marriage

1. 1520 – priests should be able to marry, but monks and nuns should still be bound by their vows
2. 1521 – vows which are taken contrary to the Gospel (i.e. believing that God is appeased by making a vow of celibacy) are not binding, therefore monks and nuns are free to marry. True chastity is a gift of God, not forced upon people against their will and nature.
3. In other writings, Luther writes against secret engagements and church laws on marriage.

III. Luther’s Own Marriage

A. Katharina von Bora

1. Born January 29, 1499 to a nobleman
2. After her mother’s death in 1504, she was placed in a nunnery in 1508/9
3. Took vows in 1515 at a convent where her aunt served as abbess.
4. Escaped the convent and journeyed to Wittenberg in 1523 with eight other nuns by hiding in empty herring barrels. Luther found homes for all of the escaped nuns, except Katharina.

B. Luther and the prospect of marrying

1. “They will never force a wife on me” (1521)

2. "I have not been, and am not now inclined to take a wife. Not that I lack the feelings of a man (for I am neither wood nor stone), but my mind is averse to marriage because I daily expect to death decreed to the heretic" (1524).
3. "To spite the pope and devil and to please my old father I will marry" (1525).
Kilcrease: "Luther saw the devil as attacking creation and its orders (family, church, state) by drawing people away from their status as creatures and towards a desire to be God. Justification by faith was understood by Luther as freeing people to enjoy their status as creatures and their vocation within the created orders. Within these, marriage was most central. Consequently it was up to him to give a good example to the Church he was trying to reform."

C. Luther and Katharina Marry

1. Not out of romantic feelings for one another, but in view of marriage as a profession and a divine vocation.
2. June 13, 1525 (Luther was 41, Katharina was 26)

IV. The Luther Home

- A. The "Black Cloister," the former monastery where Luther lived, became the *Lutherhaus*, given to Luther by the elector, along with a stipend. The average number of people in the home was 25.
- B. Managing the funds, arranging for servants, tutors, providing food, attending to the many guests to see Wittenberg's most famous citizen – all fell to Katharina who became known for her energy, thriftiness, and skill in running a home.
- C. Food: Luther gardened, Katharina managed the orchard and kept a fish pond, as well as a barnyard, and brewed beer.
- D. Katharina became a master of herbal remedies as Luther suffered from several maladies.
- E. Growing love and appreciation for Katharina
 1. "I would not give my Katie for France and Venice together."
 2. "Katie, you have married an honest man who loves you; you are an empress."
 3. "I would not exchange my poverty for the wealth of Croesus."

V. The Luther Family

A. Six children, four of whom lived to adulthood

1. Hans – June 7, 1526
2. Elizabeth – December 10, 1527 – August 3, 1528
3. Magdalena – December 17, 1529 – September 20, 1542
4. Martin – November 9, 1531
5. Paul – January 28, 1533
6. Margaretha – December 17, 1534

B. Permanent guests: nine children of relatives, Katharina's aunt, tutors, and a lady teacher

C. Very strict, yet also a kind and generous father.

D. All who for any length of time took up residence with the Luthers were considered members of the family and were expected to conform to the family customs: study the Catechism, pray, and attend the family devotions, which included Luther's "Home Sermons."

E. Luther on the cross and joy of marriage's highest gift: "The best thing in married life for the sake of which everything ought to be suffered and done, is the fact that God gives children and commands us to bring them up to serve Him. To do this is the noblest and most precious work on earth, because nothing may be done which pleases God more than saving souls. If the need were to arise, all of us should be ready to die in order to bring a soul to God. So you see how rich in good works the estate of marriage is. God lays souls into the lap of married people, souls begotten from their own body, on which they may practice all Christian works. For when they teach their children the Gospel, parents are certainly their apostles, bishops, and ministers."