Luther on Marriage:
I am a peasant’s son, and my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were peasants . . . . That I earned a bachelor’s and master’s but then took off the brown hat and gave it to others, that I became a monk, which brought me shame and greatly irked my father, that the pope and I clashed, that I married an apostate nun—who would have read this in the stars? Who would have foretold it?“

Who indeed?! Martin Luther’s Table-Talk remark was meant to tweak some—Philip Melanchthon, for instance—who wondered about reading signs and portents in the heavens, as if God were trying to tell them something. Luther never put any stock in that. Stick with sure revelation (Bible) about things that matter (salvation), Luther urged, since we can do nothing about the comings and goings of daily life anyway—nothing except trust and confess that God is in control.

But notice what makes Luther’s list of things beyond understanding: his marriage. This renegade monk nearly old enough to be the father of a runaway nun who became his wife were two unlikely people, hardly star-crossed lovers in Luther’s book. But they were a couple matched by God in that union that mirrored huge change wrought by Luther’s Reformation.

The Reformation was a revolution. It was radical not only in matters of salvation with the faith alone by grace alone message, but the Reformation also turned fundamental elements of daily life upside down. Marriage was one of those elements, part of the law’s second table about horizontal or human relationships God has established, starting with “honor your father and mother.” In Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, the God-pleasing relationships begun in the Fourth Commandment extend to wider authority and spill into civil relationships necessary for a healthy society. The Fifth Commandment focuses on the ultimate harm to one’s neighbor, and the other commandments “all teach us to guard against harming our neighbor in any way.” Those words start Luther’s Large Catechism explanation to the Sixth Commandment, zeroing in on that neighbor who is “the person nearest to [people], the most important thing to them after their own life, namely, their spouse, who is one flesh and blood with them.”

Fulfilling that commandment meant living not by compulsion but with a spirit God had intended in Eden. Recast by Luther, the commandment was no longer a means to saving merit, but a description of how God had intended life to be in Eden before things went so wrong. And while the old Adam, the old man (and woman) still stumble, renewal can succeed because of the great revolution brought by God in Christ Jesus. Both the Creed’s Second Article and the First are cast in a new light. This new theological perspective will affect how marriage is handled in daily life both on the personal level with one’s closest neighbor, the spouse, and within larger society.

Medieval Perspectives

Just how different is Luther’s approach? A blitz through some medieval ideas on marriage will offer some perspective. Medieval theologians started with the church fathers from the first centuries, though the medievals would go beyond. For their part, the early church fathers saw marriage as an institution created and ordered by God for the good of men and women. Augustine (AD 354–430) set the pattern emphasizing three benefits: procreation, the guarantee of chastity, and a forged relationship of permanent union. This permanent union was a “sacramental bond,” the roots of marriage being one of seven sacraments in later Roman Catholic theology. Augustine saw the man–woman relationship as a reminder of...
Christ–church, with the marriage bond as a kind of grace that called the other tie to mind, a grace Augustine called sacramental. The tie not only taught, it blessed. From that germ of an idea more would sprout and take root in the medieval thought which Luther eventually would revamp.

Pope Gregory VII (ruled 1073–85) marked the start of a 200+ year rise in papal authority as clergy increasingly deflected imperial and civil authority while the papacy became an autonomous player in legal matters. Popes such as Innocent III were literally king makers and breakers mixing in civil life and aggrandizing power in Rome. In the centuries after Gregory, universities were established where the attention scholars paid to ancient Roman law and the church fathers helped form the church’s own ideas on marriage. Theologians such as Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas helped build Rome’s case when it came to guiding and controlling marriage. Along with theological arguments, new canons (church decisions) were issued on marriage and many other subjects. These were collected, starting with Gratian’s *Decretals* and culminating with the *Corpus iuris canonici*—the canon law.

This rise in papal power, this thinking through of the church’s theology, and the codifying of administrative decisions put control of marriage firmly in church hands. If anyone balked at the arguments, the idea of marriage as sacrament surely gave the church a trump card.

But within its own thinking, the church trumped marriage with another life choice. Marriage might be commanded and even permitted to avoid fornication (Augustine’s second benefit), but that was only a remedy, a warding off of an evil. Celibacy, on the other hand, brought reward. How so? Theologians cited Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 7 as proof, making celibacy superior to marriage. Marriage was not bad, but celibacy was superior. Marriage might safeguard the community by limiting sins of the flesh, but celibacy would perfect the individual before God. In fact, it really took nothing special to be married other than consent to contractual relationships governed by canon and civil law—no special instruction, unlike the priesthood where study was involved. But at least in medieval thinking, marriage did give some grace; it transformed the husband–wife relationship rather like baptism transformed character, and the sacramental aspect removed any sin from marital relationships and gave help in child-raising.

Once this channel of grace was tapped, it could not be closed—no divorce. Augustine had spoken of “sacrament,” but the mediev als had gone well beyond. Theologians such as Aquinas saw marriage as a pipeline, not merely an image. It funneled grace into people’s lives. To make sure of the theology, canon law laid out in detail the qualifications and conditions for marriage—who could marry whom and what impediments might prevent it. With that taken care of, there then should be no reason for a proper marriage to be dissolved. So an absolute divorce (versus an annulment after discovering some condition had not been met) where a person could subsequently remarry was ruled out by church law. The sacrament could not be broken until death do them part. But the Roman church’s hold on marriage would be broken by the Reformation.

**Luther’s Reform of Marriage**

Mark Twain once quipped that “education, unlike soap and a massacre, isn’t nearly as sudden, but it’s far more deadly in the long run.” It often takes time for a significant effect to be felt. But with Luther’s reform and the subject of marriage, the effect came quickly even though there were significant lessons to be learned. Luther’s own thinking changed in just a couple of years, causing a profound effect on both theology and the political dimension of marriage.

In a sermon from 1522, Luther showed how far he had come:

What we would speak most of is the fact that the estate of marriage has universally fallen into such awful disrepute. There are many pagan books which treat of nothing but the depravity of woman-kind and the unhappiness of the estate of marriage....Every day one encounters parents who forget their former misery because, like the mouse, they have not had their fill. They deter their children from marriage and entice them into priesthood and nunnery, citing the trials...
and troubles of married life. Thus do
they bring their own children home to
the devil, as we daily observe; they pro-
vide them their own children home to the
devil, as we daily observe; they provide
them with ease for the body and hell for
the soul. . . . [Also], the shameful con-
fusion wrought by the accursed papal law
has occasioned so much distress, and the
lax authority of both the spiritual and the
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 to hear of it. But timidity
is no help in an emergency. 9

One did not have to look far to see how low
marriage had sunk. The laity could hardly show
their faces, and the clergy were worse, trumpet-
ing the virtue of celibacy, even as evidence to the
contrary abounded. Concubines were no secret
(though having a stable relationship with just
one was somehow to be applauded), and illegiti-
mate children were sometimes abandoned and
sometimes put into church office, especially if
their fathers were powerful enough. Moral and
canon law were nuanced (flaunted!) with slap-
on-the-wrist fines actually called the "whore tax"
and "cradle tax" that only assured steady, sub-
stantial income for the bishops.

Many fussed about the situation, but Luther
actually thought through a huge shift in the
approach to marriage in a matter of a few years.
As late as 1519 Luther still considered mar-
riage a sacrament, 10 but by 1520 in his Babylonian
Captivity of the Church, Luther changed his
approach dramatically. Marriage is not a sac-
rament because there is no divine promise of
saving grace and no sign instituted by Christ.
Luther also anticipates his 1522 treatise on
marriage. For example, he brings up the maze
of canon law impediments to be negotiated;
he considers conditions (e.g., impotence or
infertility) that might annul a marriage; and he
touches on divorce, detesting it so much that
he would even consider bigamy, "but whether it
is allowable, I do not venture to decide." 11

While there were still issues to flesh out, by
1520 Luther was at least certain that compul-
sory celibacy was wrong and should be done
away with. By 1522 his views really are set.

Keeping clergy from marrying meant no end
of trouble and sin. (What would Luther say
today, given scandal headlines? One hesitates
to pile on with "I told you so," but Luther told
them so.) In fact, marriage was superior to
celibacy in Luther’s view. 1 Corinthians 7 had
long been the prime text for mandatory cler-
ical celibacy. Luther concluded every individ-
ual has a gift from God. Marriage and celibacy
were both gifts, with marriage to many even
with chastity a rare gift for but a few. 12 Contra
Rome, Luther argues marriage, not cel-
bacy, was the most religious state of all because
"nothing should be called religious except that
inner life of faith in the heart where the spirit
rules," and that would be marriage, since the
relationship "must consist almost entirely of
faith if it is to prosper." 13

In contrast, clerics along with monks and
nuns are in a secular vocation. Why secular?
Because high rhetoric and all the talk of serv-
ing God aside, they primarily serve themselves,
providing for a stable, if regimented, life-
style. Luther objected to the forced celibacy
of clerical life: they flee the world where God
had put them, hiding behind vows and cloister
walls where they shun vocations or callings God
would have given them—husband, wife, father,
mother, neighbor, citizen, and more. They
adopt a self-prescribed calling and then have
the audacity to claim saving merit for following
rules they set.

In Luther’s Appeal to the Christian Nobility (1520)
he made a case for civil rulers to step in and
promote reform when those first charged with
oversight (bishops) failed their responsibili-
ties. Conservative Luther leaned on hun-
dreds of years of imperial legal argument that
the emperor was a protector like King David
or Solomon who were not priests yet charged
to see that right teaching and worship were
practiced. Rome countered that it held supe-
rior sacred vocations, so secular rulers should
keep hands off. But for Luther the sacred-sec-
ular wall existed only in the minds of those
defending their turf. The wall came down,
and the God-pleasing nature of daily life lived
by people of faith was restored. Marriage fell
into that camp, an institution established by
God, not for sacramental grace but to get his
work done in this world through husbands and
wives, fathers, and mothers. That was a blessed calling, not begging alms or saying masses. The universal priesthood of all believers, of the baptized, put them all directly before God for Christ’s sake. Don’t be ashamed of marriage as a lesser calling. It wasn’t!

**Marriage: Three Parts**

**Luther’s 1522 treatise, The Estate of Marriage,** offered the basics of a theology of marriage in lieu of the medieval sacramental approach. It has three parts: who can marry, who can divorce and why, and how Christians live a God-pleasing life in marriage. Roots from Genesis 1:26-28 describe Adam and Eve’s creation and the charge to be fruitful and multiply, to begin the family. The burden of proof to live otherwise—Rome’s celibacy—was on those who rejected marriage.

On who should marry, Luther rejects most of canon law, keeping only rules with biblical precedent—Leviticus 18, for example, with prohibitions against marrying blood relations. The rules might once have helped in the early middle ages when Christianity was still making converts among the tribes, and the rules spotlighted the Christians with the hope of impressing the unbelievers who had no such prohibitions. But by his day, Luther saw no purpose.

But what of marrying outside the faith? Luther had a remarkable response:

> 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. You will find plenty of Christians—and indeed the greater part of them—who are worse in their secret unbelief than any Jew, heathen, Turk, or heretic. A heathen is just as much a person—God’s good creation—as St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. Lucy, not to speak of slack and spurious Christians.

Clearly, the outlook on marriage has changed. That could not happen with marriage as sacrament, but only with marriage as a matter of daily life, of the First Article of the Creed. Luther is not urging mixed marriages, nor is he divorcing marriage from God as if the Christian religion cannot help, though marriage is not the possession of the church. Still, when husbands and wives are Christian believers, one hopes they benefit from an added dimension of love and patience to weather tough times.

Further in his treatise, Luther hesitates to support divorce. With God upholding creation through families, Luther was concerned for the foundation. He expected especially believers to go the extra mile, though he recognized that sometimes divorce happens. A perspective with a husband and wife as God’s gift to each other for service rather than an avenue for selfishness and self-satisfaction goes a long way to maintaining relationships. Luther thinks of the father washing diapers not as drudgery but as an act prompted by faith, and the angels smile looking on. It’s not the work but the Christian attitude that matters.

And that was the thrust of part three: a Christian attitude amid mundane tasks. There are no special works as monks might see them, but since all people are *larvae dei,* masks of God, as he accomplishes his tasks in preserving his creation, faithful husbands and wives being just husbands and wives are doing what God wants done. Christians understand and believe this, doing the same tasks as unbelievers, yet doing good works because faith prompts their tasks.

Three years later Luther began to practice what he preached, marrying Katherine von Bora. He learned to love her, he wrote, but from the start he realized she was his gift from God. They raised children, struggled with the death of two, and set aside tasks that cried for attention in order to spend time with children who needed it. Luther’s marriage may have pleased his father and irritated the pope, but it was especially doing what God wanted in his order of creation.

**Civil Authority: A New Role**

**Luther’s radical rethinking** prompted action pro and con. Virtually every land that embraced his reformation moved to reform marriage laws, putting the weight in civil authority. Pragmatically, someone had to step in when the canon law was tossed, but this was
not just stopgap. Luther supported the rightful role God would have for secular authority. Unfortunately, with that change came an avalanche of petitions for divorce. Persistent adultery was most often cited, though other problems (e.g., failure to fulfill one’s full responsibilities having children) were mentioned. Luther was not willing to do this easily or quickly. Wittenberg averaged just over one divorce per year for adultery.

There is an important point to remember here: Luther’s context is overwhelmingly influenced by Christianity. City fathers, who took on marriage laws along with such things as poor relief the church once did, were presumably good members of the local congregation with a Christian perspective. So while the Reformers sometimes had to scold and offer correctives, they were not forcing Wittenberg into the hands of the Turks. What would they say then? In principle, marriage is still not the possession of the church but falls into the First Article and the realm of daily life. Luther knew Christians to the east who lived under non-Christian rule. When ordered to violate what God has taught, they must resist, not by violent uprising for it was not their station in life to be the ruler, but by confessing the truth and suffering consequences that might come.

Luther did not imagine the twists and pitfalls of today. He had his own. No doubt much of what Luther advises won’t resonate and might alienate today. Some think him benighted speaking of women mostly in household roles, though for his day he was remarkably progressive: elementary education also for girls, a new step; wives treated not as property but as partners as the Bible allows; and Luther honored his own wife in publicly praising her management skills in that bustling extended household and in bequeathing his estate to Katie, not to the sons, contrary to the custom of the day.

Still, Luther is worth a look. With no-fault divorce filed with do-it-yourself forms from the Internet, we can only imagine what Luther might say. Clearly the focus on what marriage is has been lost, replaced by impatient, selfish perspectives. But those wanting to crack down should remember there has never been nor will be a golden age this side of the second coming.

Notes
1 Martin Luther, Werke (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883), Tischreden, vol. 5, no. 6250.

Martin Luther, Large Catechism, in The Book of Concord, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wenbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 413 (paragraph 200). Reading not only the explanation to the Sixth Commandment but to all in Luther’s Large Catechism makes plain the deep vertical and horizontal relationships God intended—broken by sin yet restored in faith to be lived in the new life in Christ.

Ibid.


Gregory and Emperor Henry IV clashed in the Investiture Controversy. Since bishops and abbots often also served as rulers over lands given to the church, they had civil responsibilities to go with their ecclesiastical duties. In an age where symbolism counted greatly in teaching who had authority, who gave the symbols of office (the bishop or abbot) mattered much. Emperor Henry understandably wanted to bestow symbols of both secular rule and church office, but Gregory objected and, to no one’s surprise, could argue that imperial authority itself grew from papal roots. When Henry refused to cooperate, his lands were put under the interdict—sacraments suspended—and Henry was pressured to give in. Hearing that Gregory was on his way to release Henry’s subjects from their vows of obedience, Henry appeared one morning in Canossa outside the pope’s window, standing barefoot as a penitent in the snow. Gregory absolved him—and Henry promptly mixed in politics again. But the precedent was set, and the first step in a rise in papal power had been made.

If “canon law” sounds familiar from Luther’s personal story, remember Luther’s students were burning copies outside Wittenberg in 1520 in the bonfire outside Elster Gate.

Martin Luther, Luther’s Works (Philadelphia/St. Louis: Muhlenberg and Fortress/Concordia Publishing House, 1957–), vol. 45, pp. 36–37. [Hereafter LW; so, for example, LW 45:36–37].

A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage, in LW 44:10f.

LW 36:105. Luther was thinking out loud about hypotheticals in an effort to preserve marriage—though the ideas would come home to roost with Philip of Hesse a few years later. Philip had a notorious libido rarely kept in check and a politically arranged marriage he cared little for. Finally he was moved to confess and promised to stay faithful to one mistress(!) but wanted to make this a more honorable relationship. With divorce from the first wife no option—a legitimate marriage—Luther and others counseled a second marriage but with the promise that Philip would keep this private. Old Testament patriarchs were no precedent to set a rule but an example of weakness, so Philip should keep things to himself. Instead, he spoke openly, cited the advice given, and had a grand reception for wife number two. For that both Philip and Luther in different ways faced censure under imperial law and great embarrassment. It was not a shining moment but an effort to salvage bad out of a worse situation.

LW 28:16-17.

LW 28:17,19.

LW 45:11-49.

LW 45:25.

LW 45:40.

LW 49:117. June 21, 1525, letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf. The root word diligo has the connotation of cherishing beyond or more than romantic passion. (St. Bernard wrote De diligendo Dei, that is, On Desiring God—clearly intending a deep cherishing, not passion.) Luther writes he had the first while the second came in time.

See the chapter in Witte, Law and Protestantism, for examples of the fallout. Witte’s excellent chapter (and book) certainly takes theology into account, but the material is especially useful for the sober look at the legal aspects of daily life that take center stage in his account.