

NEWSBRIEF

LUTHER ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Born in 1483 in Eisleben, Martin Luther was raised in nearby Mansfeld under the strict and loyal parenting of Hans, a miner, and his wife, Margaret. Though of the common people, Hans came to own two mines, and Margaret was ever dutiful in tending Martin, the eldest child, and his siblings. Martin's intellectual gifts were apparent, and his parents had high hopes for him when he was sent to schools in Magdeburg, then to Eisenach where he enjoyed the hospitality and refinements of the Cotta family, and at 17 he entered the University of Erfurt.

Young Luther upset expectations when in 1505 he suddenly switched from a lawyer's training to becoming an Augustinian monk. Though this began a strained relationship with the elder Luther (which ameliorated after Martin attained the priesthood), it was young Luther who endured the worst crisis of vocation. He was acutely sensitive to late-medieval anxiety about the afterlife and whether God's mercy or wrath would have final say. Martin entered monastic life to resist temptation, do God-pleasing works and earn salvation, yet he agonized about damnation and doubted his worthiness for salvation.

Luther's works-centered monastic experience prepared him for his liberating discovery of the Gospel—a discovery that opened the way for his revolutionary ideas of marriage and family. His initial break with Rome over the indulgence controversy is usually dated to All Hallows Eve in 1517. A certificate of indulgence purported to transfer the extra merits earned by Christ and the saints to remit the purchaser's penalties of purgatory. Luther retorted that salvation is not a matter of human purchase based on fear of hell or

purgatory, but is the free gift of redemption purchased with the suffering love of God in Christ.

Since indulgences were related to the sacrament of penance, the entire sacramental system of salvation was put into question. Luther put the “promise” of God at the center of the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: God gives the promise of forgiveness of sin and salvation, and we are simply to trust the promise (i.e., become justified by faith)! Whereas Luther saw God active and humans passive, his opponents saw humans active and God passive. Moreover, he was convinced that those who practice spiritual receptivity give the most telling witness to ethical activity. Luther’s reforming insights were in large measure formed by 1520, then in 1525 he was married!

During these years, Luther advanced his evangelical (“gospel-centered”) view of marriage. One element was his expanded notion of “calling”: whereas the medieval Church identified “calling” with the cloistered life of celibate priests and nuns which left secular life behind, Luther held that all the baptized are to live-out their calling to be Christian in religious *and* secular walks of life. This is because God is at work redemptively in the Church (the kingdom on the right), as well as creatively in society (the kingdom on the left). Luther’s teaching of these “two kingdoms” (distinguishing God’s work of redemption in the church and creation in the civil realm) expanded the vocational meaning of the traditional “estates” or “orders” of church, state and family. Marriage and the family are transferred from the realm of redemption to the realm of creation, and the Christian home becomes a place of Christian calling where parents and children love and serve each other as Christ served.

This teaching dismantled Roman clericalism in which church rule dominated society, and instead opened the way for Christians to express their callings under God’s non-redemptive management of earthly life. Marriage, no longer inferior to celibacy and virginity, is elevated to serve the closest neighbors, who are spouse and

children. Now, more than simply a “remedy against sin,” marriage becomes a holy calling wherein the fruits of faith build family and society according to God’s good purposes.

Luther’s own marriage is a story of daring drama and loving commitment. In 1523, to practice what he preached about marriage, Luther arranged for the placement of nine nuns who had escaped the convent in Nimbschen in wagons that usually hauled barrels of herring and beer. The last to be placed was 24 year old Katherine von Bora, a woman of piety and learning who could at turns be aloof or outspoken. She openly suggested that perhaps Luther himself was available, and through the mysterious alchemy of attraction, Martin, 42, and Katy, 26, married on June 13, 1525.



**KATHERINE VON BORA AND MARTIN LUTHER
IN THE YEAR OF THEIR MARRIAGE**

Their affection deepened, and after 9 years they expanded to a family of three boys and three girls. They often enjoyed games and music, conversation and prayer, and the mutual affection between Martin and Katy was punctuated by witty teasing.

Both parents grieved mightily over the loss of their young daughter, Magdalene, though they were much comforted when to Martin's question, "Are you glad to go to your Father in heaven?", she replied, "Yes, dear Father, as God wills" (*Table Talk*, Luther's Works, vol. 54, p. 430). Katy also exemplified such confidence when once, near death, she repeated Ps. 31:1, "In thee, O Lord, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame" (*ibid.*, p. 374).

Many remarks of Luther exhibit the patriarchalism of his day; e.g., "Women ought to stay at home; the way they are created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon to keep house and bear and raise children" (*ibid.*, p. 8). However, it is his prophetic evangelical teaching on marriage which would later undermine that attitude and increasingly redefine women's witness of Christian calling. Yet clearly from the first, his evangelical theology asserts that marriage and family are divine callings; that marriage is not only a remedy for lust but positively expresses the Creator's will; that while created by God, marriage can be regulated by the civil realm; and that marriage and family express in very ordinary ways the Christian calling to manifest faith active in love.

Recent generations of Americans have witnessed huge changes in patterns of marriage, co-habitation and family structures. Families today are blended; headed by single parents or couples, straight or gay; are often inter-racial and multi-generational; many couples marry later, and more couples choose not to have children. Amid these changes, Luther's teachings affirm two constants: marriage and family are gifts of God, and the Christian home is as necessary as ever to cultivate Christian faith and love for the sake of our closest neighbors as well as those farther away.

(*NEWSBRIEFS*, this one written by Paul Seastrand, were produced by the Quincentenary Task Force of the Montana Synod—ELCA to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017).