

## **Martin Luther and a Biblical View of Marriage**

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One of the most scandalous aspects of the Reformation, according to its opponents, was how the Reformers reinterpreted the spirituality of marriage. The standard line during the long medieval era had been that a robust Christian life could only be found in a state of celibacy. The early medieval author Bede (died, May 735 AD), maintained that the apostolic injunction to “pray always” could not be fulfilled if one was married and engaging in sexually intimate acts.

Not surprisingly the requirement of celibacy for vocational ministry became an unbearable burden for many medieval priests, monks and nuns. Far too many of them were celibate but not chaste. The Reformation solution to this scandal of sexual immorality was to go back to the Scriptures and recover a truly biblical view of marriage.

### **Luther's 1519 sermon on marriage**

Even before Martin Luther's 1525 marriage to Katharina von Bora, for instance, he had given serious thought to the meaning of marriage. In a 1519 sermon, he noted that "a woman is created to be a companionable helpmeet to the man in everything." In other words, for most people, marriage was vital to true godliness. Indeed, Luther went on to note, "the love of a man and woman is (or should be) the

greatest and purest of all loves." In fact, Luther asserted, if Adam and Eve had not fallen, this love would have been "the loveliest thing."

As it is, though, the fall has deeply tainted marriage and human thinking about this divine institution, and for many it had become simply a context to give freedom to "the lust of the flesh." Medieval Church authorities had used this as a key reason to urge people to embrace celibacy.

Luther, and the Reformers in general, did the opposite. Luther urged men and women to marry, but to recognize the great goal of human sexuality: the procreation of children. As he noted in this sermon, the bearing and raising of children was a much greater work than "all the pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem,

or Compostella [in Spain]" or the building of churches.

## **A letter on marriage**

Two years later one of Luther's friends, the humanist Nikolaus Gerbel, who was a lawyer in Strasbourg and who died in 1560, got married and Luther wrote to congratulate him on November 1, 1521. It is not known how the two men had met but it is clear that by this point in time they had a fast friendship. Luther was happy for Gerbel's marriage, for by it the lawyer had escaped from the evils of the medieval perspective on celibacy. In fact, Luther went on,

*I am daily gaining more insight into the godless lives of the unmarried of both sexes, so that nothing sounds worse to me than the words monk, nun, priest, for I regard a married life of deep poverty as paradise in comparison.*

The medieval church had long supposed that the celibate life of a monk or nun was the nearest thing to the experience of the angels in paradise. Luther did not agree! In fact, the temptations to which the unmarried were exposed revealed the godlessness of the Roman church more than anything else since it dictated celibacy for those called to ministry and ardently promoted it. As Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther's own pastor in Wittenberg, put it, "It is faith, and not virginity, that fills paradise."

Luther's own marriage Luther himself married in June of 1525. A group of nuns had escaped from a nunnery in the town of Grimma and gotten to Wittenberg, where Luther found himself acting as a marriage broker. By 1525 all of them had found husbands except for one, Katherina von Bora. They were married on June 13, 1525. When asked why he

had married an ex-nun, Luther replied that it was to spite the Pope! This playful remark has its roots, of course, in Luther's analysis of medieval monasticism and his determination to retrieve a truly biblical view of marriage.

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