

TOWARD A LUTHERAN THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

*The Rev. Dr. Robert A. Kelly
Professor of Systematic Theology,
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary*

November 2004

This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

Any discussion of a “Lutheran” theology of marriage must make at least two assumptions. First, God is as much at work *preserving* creation as *redeeming* creation. Second, both the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of redemption lead to an *affirmation of ordinary life*.

Another way to state the first assumption is to say that the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed and the Second and Third articles show two equally significant aspects of God’s work. In the First Article we confess our faith in God the Creator. We Lutherans sometimes call this aspect of God’s activity the “Left Hand” of God. In the Second and Third Articles we confess God the Redeemer or what we call the work of God’s “Right Hand.” Some other distinctions we have traditionally made are that God the Creator works in the “secular” world to preserve creation and enhance human life while God the Redeemer works in the “spiritual” world to save sinners for eternal life. The Lutheran tradition has also said that God the Creator works through the Law while God the Redeemer works through the Gospel. Traditionally we have seen government in its various forms as the lead institution on God’s left hand and the church as the lead institution on God’s right hand. In government God works through the rule of law to bring justice to the world whereas in the church God works through Word and Sacrament to bring the Good News of salvation to the world.

The second assumption flows from the first. It is that ordinary life in the world is good. One of the characteristics of Lutheran theology and of Protestant theology in general has been our theology of vocation, with the Lutheran theology of marriage as a subset of our theology of vocation. In his examination of the development of the modern sense of what it means to be a moral self, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*,¹ Charles Taylor characterizes the importance of Luther’s thought on vocation as “affirmation of the ordinary.”

¹. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

According to Taylor, the drawing of a distinction between “ordinary life”—the life of “production and reproduction, that is, labour, the making of things needed for life and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family”²—and the heroic life or the “good life” is deeply embedded in Greek thought. For Homer there are normal people and then there are the heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two quite different sorts of people. For Aristotle there is life—family, commerce, and labour—and there is the “good life” of deliberation about moral excellence, the order of things, and the shaping and application of the laws of the *polis* (“the city”). Aristotle sees everyday life as the infrastructure for the good life, but everyday life can never itself be the good life. The good life is for philosophers and rulers. Plato questioned whether the participation of leaders in government could be part of the good life. The Stoics went even further. They believed that the philosopher should be completely detached from labour, sexuality, and politics, which are *adiaphora*, indifferent things.

This distinction was picked up by Christianity at least as early as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who distinguish everyday or “carnal” Christians who are content with the surface meaning of the Scriptures and sacraments from contemplative or “spiritual” Christians who search for and understand the deeper meanings. Ideas of ascetic perfection and Greek views about the philosophic life became the breeding ground of the monastic sense of vocation, which supported a way of Christian life dependent on distinguishing perfect holiness from everyday holiness. The theological and spiritual writings of Christianity from 300 to 1500 are clearly based on the distinction of ordinary life from the “good life.” Even though in the Middle Ages marriage becomes a sacrament, it is still the second-best vocation, the vocation for those who cannot attain celibacy. Even among celibates, those who remain “in the world,” that is, in parish churches, are second best to those who take up the vocation *par excellence*, monasticism. In fact, words such as “vocation,” “conversion,” and “religious” apply only to monastics.

According to Taylor, the Reformation

upsets these hierarchies, which displaces the locus of the good life from some special range of higher activities and places it within ‘life’ itself. The full human life is now defined in terms of labour and production, on one hand, and marriage and family life on the other. At the same time the previous ‘higher’ activities come under vigorous criticism.³

Luther seeks to abolish the boundary separating the everyday life of production and reproduction from the good life of contemplation and holiness. The Christian is called to be holy in the midst of everyday life, not apart from everyday life. For Luther, there is no distinction between the “secular” and the “religious,” the monk and the shoemaker, the baptized and the ordained, the

². *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

carnal and the spirit-filled, the celibate and the married. All life is sanctified by God's grace in Christ, and all vocations are Christian vocations. Marriage, which had been a "second-best" vocation, now becomes a "second-to-none" vocation.

Once one has abolished the distinction between "life" and "the good life," as Luther did, not only does the monastic vocation lose all meaning—why be a monk if holiness can *not* be pursued separately from family and work in the world?—but monasticism actually becomes in Luther's view a fleeing from one's proper vocation. Once again, Taylor states the matter:

Thus by the same movement through which the Protestant churches rejected a special order of priesthood in favour of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, they also rejected the special vocation to the monastic life and affirmed the spiritual value of lay life. By denying any special form of life as a privileged locus of the sacred, they were denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming their interpenetration. The denial of a special status to the monk was also an affirmation of ordinary life as more than profane, as itself hallowed and in no way second class. The institution of the monastic life was seen as a slur on the spiritual standing of productive labour and family life, their stigmatization as zones of spiritual underdevelopment. The repudiation of monasticism was a reaffirmation of lay life as a central locus for the fulfillment of God's purpose. Luther marks this break in his own life by ceasing to be such a monk and by marrying a former nun.

What is important for my purpose is this positive side, the affirmation that the fullness of Christian existence was to be found within the activities of this life, in one's calling and in marriage and the family. The entire modern development of the affirmation of ordinary life was, I believe, foreshadowed and initiated, in all its facets, in the spirituality of the Reformers. This goes as much for the positive evaluation of production and reproduction as for the anti-hierarchical consequences of the rejection of sacramental authority and higher vocations.⁴

Specifically, this affirmation of ordinary life as it relates to marriage results in several considerations. First, the importance of marriage is magnified, and magnified as something more than a release for sexual tensions. Marriage is a positive good, a vocation through which married people please God and do good works. Second, even though the importance and divine significance of marriage is enhanced, marriage is no longer considered a sacrament. Marriage was "invented" by God the Creator as a secular vocation under the Law for all humans, whether Christian or not. Sacraments were "invented" by God the Redeemer as a spiritual means for communicating the grace of the Gospel. Marriage is part of God's left-handed work, sacraments are part of God's right-handed work. Both are important, but they must not be confused with one another. In fact, Luther saw the church's domination of marriage ceremonies and regulations as

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

part of the medieval “Babylonian Captivity” which required an act of liberation. In Luther’s view, marriage could only be liberated from its medieval servitude if it became the responsibility of the state, God’s chosen institution for the secular order, rather than the responsibility of the church, God’s chosen institution for the spiritual order. Luther went so far as to say that pastors ought to have nothing to do with performing marriages or deciding who can or cannot get married.⁵

Of course, in the post-Reformation state churches this did not happen. Rather, the church became the arm of the state for recording births, deaths, and marriages. As a result, today the Lutheran pastor in Canada is in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, our theology says that marriage is part of the First Article of the creed. Thus marriage is a purely secular action, a vocation of everyday life which is to be governed by the rule of law through government. On the other hand, the state-church roots of our own tradition and the roots of Canadian marriage practices in British custom assume that ministers of the Gospel will conduct weddings under the authorization of ecclesiastical ordination.

At weddings is the pastor a minister of the Gospel or an officer of provincial law? The answer is, Both! That is the ambiguity. Pastors are ordained by the church to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, but they are also licensed by the province to administer the law. This is not consistent with Lutheran theology, but it has been the practice of Lutherans in Canada.

What role can the minister of the Gospel (an agent of God’s Word-and-Sacrament Right Hand) play when the minister as officer of the law (an agent of God’s rule-of-law Left Hand) is at work? In the answer to that question is the core of a Lutheran response to changing laws regarding marriage.

⁵. See, e.g., Table Talk No. 4716, July 23, 1539, *Luther’s Works* 55, 363-364.