

Summing up, Luther framed a family life that cast marriage as the highest order and calling on earth, softened and redirected (while not eliminating) patriarchal leadership, spiritually and culturally elevated motherhood and homemaking, celebrated procreation and large families, and refocused adult lives around the tasks of childrearing. His own marriage to Katherine von Bora, their six children, and their busy home became the model for generations of pastors and laymen to follow.

This “Lutheran” culture of marriage, procreation, and childrearing lasted for nearly 400 years, yet unraveled in the decades after 1900. Explaining why would require another essay. However, if Luther could have observed the process, he would most probably have identified and deplored a clear turning away from the Words and will of God, and the embrace of dark choices that spurned children. In our troubled time, though, Luther’s remarkable theology of sex, marriage, and family shines as a resource and guide for building again a family-centered, child rich Christian community on earth. May it be so.

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THE FAILING AMERICAN FAMILY: A LUTHERAN RESPONSE

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A STUNNING NUMBER recently came from the U.S. Census Bureau: in 2021, the annual American population growth rate fell to near zero, the lowest figure ever recorded in the nation’s history. A major reason was a sharp fall in the birth rate, to a total fertility rate of only 1.64 average lifetime births per woman. This came on top of a stunning collapse of the U.S. marriage rate during the prior three decades. After nearly 250 years of robust openness to wedlock and children, the United States now joined the lands of Europe and Asia in demographic crisis, an “extinction event” in slow motion.

All the same, it is important to realize that eras marked by the rejection of marriage and children have happened before. In early 16th Century Europe, for example, the late Medieval Christian Church had become strangely hostile to family formation. Adapting a line from Jerome, Church leaders held that “where marriage works to fill the earth, celibacy works to fill Heaven.” Reliable estimates suggest that over a quarter of all adults took vows of celibacy, becoming priests, monks, and nuns. Alas, critics such as Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam reported abuses. As he wrote: “There is a horde of priests among whom chastity is rare.” While marriage was a sacrament in the Roman church and divorce forbidden, a long list of

“impediments” to marriage, cash payments to a willing bishop for an exception, and annulments also for sale left the marriage system confused and corrupted.

Between 1520 and 1525, Martin Luther developed a revolutionary approach to sex, marriage, and family which cut through these problems as a hot knife through butter. This included prophetic outrage over the immorality and social irresponsibility that he saw as tolerated by church leaders. “Take away those seducers, the priests and monks, who have disgraced our mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, and made harlots of them.” He also condemned the “smart immaturity” of clerics who avoided marriage and sought to lure young people away from it into unchristian and immoral ways of life.

A second impulse behind Luther’s family ethic was his rejection of lifelong celibacy as unbiblical and unnatural. He argued that God’s words in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply,” represented more than a blessing, even more than a command. This was “a divine ordinance [*Werck*] which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore.” Luther also emphasized Genesis 2:18: “It is not good that man should be alone: I will make him a helper who shall be with him.” Luther continued: “Whoever would be a true Christian must grant that this saying of God is true, and believe that God was not drunk when he spoke these words and instituted marriage.” With rare human exceptions (“not more than one in a thousand”), marriage and procreation were divine gifts from God. As the Reformer explained in his 1520 essay on *The Estate of Marriage*: “it is not a matter of free choice...but a natural and necessary thing, that whatever is a man must have a woman and whatever is a woman must have a man.”

This impulse to marriage and children rested in the very order of God’s Creation, even in the human bodies—male and female—which He had shaped. As Luther wrote in his *Exhortation to the Knights of the Teutonic Order*, “We were all created to do as our parents have done, to beget and rear children. This is a duty which God has laid upon us, commanded, and implanted in us, as is proved by our bodily members, our daily emotions, and the example of all mankind.” He described each conception of a new child as an act of “wonderment...wholly beyond our understanding,” a miracle bearing the “lovely music of nature,” and a reminder of life before the Fall. As he wrote in a beautiful passage describing the Godly home: “This living together of husband and wife—that they occupy the same

home, that they take care of the household, that together they produce and bring up children—is a kind of faint image and a remnant, as it were, of that blessed living together [in Eden].” Elsewhere, Luther described the procreation of children as “the greatest work of God.” This led him to condemn the contraceptive mentality that was alive and well in his time, labelling birth control as “barbarous” and “inhuman.”



Wedding at Cana. Folkema, Jacob, 1692-1767.

Luther believed that happiness in marriage depended on recognition that marriage, procreation, and the building of a home were “pleasing to God and precious in his sight.” Indeed, women were called by God to be mothers: “A woman is not created to be a virgin, but to conceive and bear children.”

Similarly, God called men home to serve as Christian “housefathers.” In a wonderful passage, Luther describes the father who confesses to God: “I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother.” The Reformer goes on to assure him that “when a father goes ahead and washes diapers...for his child, God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling, because he is doing so in Christian faith.”

Indeed, Luther elevated parenthood into the highest calling or task on earth. From a distinctly Christian context, he added: “Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel.” As Harvard University historian Steven Ozment concludes in his surprising book *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*: “Never has the art of parenting been more highly praised and parental authority more wholeheartedly supported than in Reformation Europe.”