

CHAPTER VI

LUTHER'S FAMILY LIFE

1. The Roman Church and Marriage of Priests

As is generally known, the church of Rome teaches that the unmarried estate is more honorable than the married estate, and it forbids its priests to marry. The threefold vow of poverty, chastity and obedience is taken by each monk and nun, and the vow of chastity is a vow never to marry. Nuns are regarded as “married to Christ the heavenly Bridegroom” and monks are considered “married to the holy Bride, the Church of Christ.” The garb of a nun is reminiscent of the wedding veil, and the ring which she wears on her finger a token of her marriage only to the heavenly Bridegroom, and this type of life is to be preferred to that lower type in which a woman actually marries and has children. When St. Jerome was asked why God told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” if the unmarried estate was so much holier, he replied that at that time it was necessary to populate the earth with children, but that now it was necessary to populate heaven with saints. The endless stories of immoral priests and of illegitimate children which stain the pages of medieval history to the present day are the fruits of this unnatural state to which the Church of Rome subjects her clergy.

2. Scripture on Marriage of Pastors

With the return to the Bible as the sole authority on matters of faith and life, there came also a return to the biblical doctrine concerning marriage. Rather than presenting marriage as something on a lower level with the unmarried estate as something higher, the Scriptures assert that “Marriage is honorable in all.” (Hebrews 13:4) Specifically, Scripture states that “a bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife,” and that he is one that “rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity.” (1 Timothy 3:2-4) These inspired words from the pen of the apostle Paul clearly show that while Paul felt that for good reason he himself should remain unmarried, nevertheless, God did not intend that all ministers of Christ should remain unmarried. Peter, whom the Church of Rome hails as their first pope, was married, for in the gospels we read that the Lord Jesus healed Peter’s wife’s mother of the fever. “Don’t we have a right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas?” (1 Corinthians 9:5).

3. Lutheran Pastors Begin to Marry

Luther and his colleagues began to teach that it was pleasing to God for the clergy to marry, and many Lutheran clergy not only taught this but practiced it as well. Originally Luther and his colleagues lived together as monks in the monastery at Wittenberg (Black Cloister), but one by one these colleagues found wives and moved out of the monastery and founded homes of their own. In 1524, Luther was almost alone in that large monastery building. The feminine touch evidently was lacking, for one account tells us that no one made Luther’s bed for a whole year, and that it became moldy with perspiration. Many persons told Luther that he ought to set an example and marry like his colleagues. His reply was that he was, since the Diet at Worms,

under the sentence of death. He never knew when he might die as a martyr. Therefore he felt that to have a wife and children under those circumstances would not be for the best.

4. The Nuns at Nimbschen

However, something happened which changed things. In the cloister at Nimbschen, near Grimma not far from Wittenberg, were a number of nuns who had read Luther's teachings and were impressed by them. These nuns, therefore, desired to leave the cloister and take their places in the world which they believed God had intended for them. They appealed through a trusted messenger to Luther and his colleagues to help them escape. Luther at last consented to help them. Supposedly, on the night before Easter in 1523, nine of them climbed down from the convent walls where a man with a wagon load of empty herring barrels was waiting for them. Each climbed into a herring barrel, and away they went toward Wittenberg. As they passed a certain toll gate at a boundary line, the gatekeeper asked the driver what he had in his wagon, and when he replied "herring," no further questions were asked. When these ex-nuns arrived at Wittenberg they had to be provided for, and Luther and his colleagues found husbands for some of them and homes for others.

5. Katherine von Bora

Among them was a certain young lady by the name of Katherina von Bora. At first a home was found for her in the house of the burgermeister or mayor of Wittenberg, Philip Reichenbach. A little later the burgermeister found a suitable husband for her in the person of a certain pastor named Glatz. Katherine informed Luther that she was not interested in Pastor Glatz. Her womanly intuition seemed to be correct, for he later turned out to be unworthy. However, in order to convince Luther that she was not opposed to marriage as such, she told Luther's friend Amsdorf that if, for example, either he or Dr. Luther should ask her to marry, she would not object. Amsdorf told Luther, and it appears that Luther took the hint.

6. Luther's Marriage

On June 13, 1525, Katherine von Bora became Mrs. Martin Luther. The wedding was a big event in Wittenberg. All seemed happy except Philip Melanchthon. At that time he believed that while marriage for priests was not wrong, those who had already taken vows to remain unmarried should keep them. The answer to this was that vows to do something that is contrary to the law of God and the law of nature are not binding. It reminds one of a rhyme which was once seen on the bulletin board of a neighborhood church. It read: "The Lord hates a quitter, but he doesn't hate him, son, when a quitter's quitting something that he shouldn't have begun." Luther's father was especially pleased when his son married, for he had never favored the monastic life for Martin.

7. The Luther Parsonage

Luther and his wife made the old monastery their home, and perhaps this set the pace for many years for the size of the average Lutheran parsonage. Though there was considerable

difference in age (Luther was 42; Katherine, 26) the marriage proved to be a happy one. Someone has said that while Luther was the head of the house, Katherine was the neck, and whenever the neck moved, the head was forced to move. Luther referred to his wife as his “Lord Katie,” and the letters which he wrote to her reveal his devotion to her and to the children she bore him. The following is an example written from Eisenach in 1540: “To my gracious girl, Katherine Luther von Bora and Zulsdorf at Wittenberg, my darling: Grace and peace, my dear girl and wife, Kate. Your grace must be informed that we all are here—God be praised!—fresh and sound; we eat like behemoths (see Job 40:15) and drink like Germans, and are joyous. For our gracious Lord of Magdeburg, Bishop Amsdorf, is our messmate. God be with you. Amen. Make the children pray. There is an indescribable and unbearable heat and sterility here day and night. May the dear last day come soon. The Bishop of Magdeburg greets you kindly. Your beloved Martin Luther.”

8. Luther’s Children

God blessed Luther with three boys (John, Martin, and Paul) and three girls (Magdalene, Elizabeth and Margaret). Elizabeth died in infancy; Magdalene died when she was about twelve years old. Her death touched the “Herr Doktor” greatly. He confessed a little later that he was ashamed of himself, and that he had “wept like a woman.” None of these three boys followed their father’s profession, but all of Luther’s children lived honorable lives.

In addition to Luther, Katie, and the children, Katie’s “Aunt Lena” lived at the “parsonage” as well as several other relatives, and there were always a number of students who boarded there. (See Appendix I). At the table, the students had the habit of writing down what the “Herr Doktor” said, and these students’ notes have been collected in what is known as “Luther’s Table Talk” (See Appendix C)

9. Luther’s Last Years and Death

Luther enjoyed comparatively good health, but in his letters to his wife during the years after 1540, he made frequent reference to “the stone” which from time to time troubled him. We may conclude that perhaps he developed kidney stones. In the year 1546 he made a journey to Mansfeld. While in the territory he also preached at Eisleben, the town of his birth and baptism, and here he became dangerously ill. He had realized for some time that his health was poor and that he had but a short time to live, but he hoped at least to be able to return to Wittenberg and die there. He remarked just two days before his death: “I will not tarry any longer; I will go to Wittenberg and there die and give the worms a corpulent Doctor for food.” But he never returned to Wittenberg; he died in the town of his birth on February 18, 1546, between two and three in the morning.

Shortly before Luther’s death, Justas Jonas asked the solemn question: “Venerable father, will you remain constant to Christ and the doctrines which you preached?” Luther replied with a decided “Yes.” Thus the great reformer died in the faith which he preached to others at the age of sixty-two. Katie survived him six years and then unfortunately met with a traffic accident. She was driving a wagon and two horses along a road beside a pond when the horses became frightened, began to run, and the wagon was overturned. Katie was thrown into the icy waters of the pond and contracted fatal pneumonia.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the Roman Catholic teaching concerning marriage?
2. What does the Bible have to say about the marriage of priests?
3. Why was June 13, 1525, an important date not only for Luther but also for the Christian world at large?
4. Name some famous persons who were reared in Protestant parsonages.
5. Was Luther's household a true example of a Protestant parsonage, and if so, why?
6. Why was Luther's last "yes" of such significance? Can you name some important persons who were not willing to die according to their own teachings?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Read *Luther, Biography of a Reformer*, Chapter 9, "Building the Reformation," pp. 143-156; Chapter 10, "The Family Man," pp. 157-174.

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