

Bride and Bridegroom in Luther's Theology

Edgar Boshart
December 1977



Martin Luther

History has been strewn with moments of apocalyptic expectations and religious fervor. One moment, which only now has completed its pendular swing, was sparked by the Reformation of the 16th Century. Among other news ideas, seeds were sown which have germinated the ground of our modern experience of the intimacy of man's relationship to woman and of both to the imminent return of Christ.

Luther's time was a peak period of recurrent resurrection stories and expected last days' phenomena. For example, Frederick II became the object of a fantasy that he had resurrected and was seen to have descended into Mount Etna to await his time. Many pretenders appeared from that period, not only on the slopes of the mountain but one megalomaniac even established himself in royal estate in Neuss, Germany, not far from Cologne. He was burned at the stake.

Other strange ideas spread into all segments of the Reformation, such as an idea that it was not the Jews but the Germans who were the true Chosen People since the beginning of time.

Among the Anabaptists, a man named Bockelson replaced Jan Mattys as the sect's leader in Munster, Germany. Suggesting the innocence of God's first son, Adam, Bockelson's first important act occurred when "early in May he ran naked through the town in a frenzy and then fell into a silent ecstasy which lasted three days." Ultimately, polygamy was established and the "Kingdom of Saints" experienced a broad spectrum of sexual puritanism and some promiscuity. In August, 1534, Bockelson could probably have destroyed the Bishop's camp with a small sortie, but instead he had himself proclaimed king, the Messiah of the Last Days. Divara, Bockelson's wife, was proclaimed queen. "Christ," it was explained, "had once tried to restore the sinful world to truth, but with no lasting success; within a century, that attempt had been invalidated by the Catholic Church." Thus, the wedding of the Lord was not always assumed to be purely a spiritual affair among some leaders of the 16th century.

Another sign of the Last Days for the recalcitrant monks was the Pope and his followers, for they were viewed as the collective Church of Satan, as the antichrist, and as the loathsome beast (Rev. 13:1). A major contention with Rome then was circulating, centered around the question of marriage itself. "It's a dirty rotten business that a bishop should forbid me a wife or specify the times when I marry, or that a blind and dumb person should not be allowed to enter into wedlock," states Luther.

In spite of these isolated upsurges, the millennium expectations of Luther and his reformers did not perceive or proclaim a coming physical kingdom. But, unconsciously, they pursued the symbolism of physical marriage, often to describe the return of Christ; coinciding, incidentally, with actual physical and spiritual ramifications of marital questions which had arisen especially during this time. Luther was convinced that such a culmination of world history was real and imminent amidst growing Christian

yearning for that day.

The reformers were very ill at ease and inexpert in the handling of matrimonial questions. "How I dread preaching on the estate of marriage... I would much prefer neither to look into the matter nor hear of it," said Luther. Canon law was rejected and marriage was no longer considered as a sacrament. However, the institution was generally regarded with respect and some awe.

The problem of original sin was never fully solved for these reformers, though justification by faith, the fountainhead of Protestant salvation, was Luther's position. The original sin was disobedience, as Gerardt Groote had stated earlier. The Augsburg Confession declares, "the cause of sin is the will of evil persons, namely the devil and impious men, which without God's help turns itself away from God." Yet, all men seemed tainted with impiety and sinfulness.



Martin Luther with his family

Exactly how Adam disobeyed was subject to speculation, though Calvin and Zwingli declared the motivation to be a desire to become equal to God. Certainly, it was man's original parents, Adam and Eve, who were deceived by the devil and their lineage reaped the fruits. Zwingli and Calvin both followed Luther with attempts to find ways out of responsibility for sin, but all of mankind was clearly bound by a hereditary connection to Adam. Zwingli saw man as the object of the punishment, not the crime. Calvin states in his Institutes: "Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul..., then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh'." And for Luther, that first sin of the flesh is lust.

On June 13, 1525, Luther married Catharine von Bora. Not only were the Catholics scandalized but there also welled up some misgivings among his own supporters, including Melancthon. At first his wife was Luther's challenge "to fling in the teeth of the devil and his minions, the troublemakers, the princes and the bishops.... I should be delighted to create an even bigger scandal, if I knew of anything that would please God better." Nevertheless, the six children she bore him created the ever deepening experience of love that Luther felt for "Empress Cathe", that he would not have bartered "for France or Venice", and that made him "richer than the Papist theologians."

Luther referred often to the essential value of the oldest of all estates; "indeed all others are derived from that estate in which Adam and Eve, our first parents, were created and ordained and in which they and all their God-fearing children and descendants lived." All men should marry to fulfill the most noble work of God, the procreation of children and their education, Luther held. Marriage is also a restraining influence on sinful outbreaks of lust. Thus, the father acted as priest in the "church at home" where!... in parental love, which is similar to the love of God, children find an image of the divine heart."

It is a fact of nature that women were a gift of God, though an object of suspicion. Luther notes and accepts the sins of historical women, especially Eve, but notes that vice is certainly common to both men and women. In Luther's opinion: women are weak and responsible for several vices, "but that one good covers and conceals all of them; the womb and birth. Marriage, he said, pleases God but requires skill and grace. "But God wills that they be valued and esteemed as women and that this be done gladly and with love."

Clearly Luther distinguishes wedlock, an earthly, temporal experience, from the spiritual, eternal kingdom of heaven. But, as a holy appointment, marriage is an instrument of war against the devil. Christ himself

did not take a wife, Luther says, because he had to follow his own office and calling to preach. Any marriage reference to Christ, to Luther, was spiritual oneness between Him and the faithful of the Church.

Reformation theology recognizes that there is a connection between the marriage of church to God and marriage amongst men, a parallel between Christ and Adam. The first church in history was planned by God and located in the Garden of Eden, said Luther. This was "Adam's church, altar, and pulpit.... It was the first institution set up, even before the household...." This church is characterized as "sons of God" and Adam acted as high priest. But eventually the sons of God married Canaanite women, producing an ungodly race before the flood. Therefore, Adam and his family failed to maintain the purity of a spiritual union with God on account of the impurity of the physical union between men and women.



Martin Luther's Parents Hans and Margarethe Luther

Adam was intended to be created after the ideal image of man, but that image itself was realized by Christ, not Adam, said Luther. Thus, on this basis, Luther could deny any ultimate need for woman as a helpmate to such a perfect "distinguished and excellent" man. Instead he said, "as God's instrument on earth, Christ was under the control of the Holy Spirit. It may be said that the Spirit made Jesus what He was." Jesus did not need a wife.

The gap is an obvious one. As a lowly and common man, Jesus experienced all but one of the noblest functions of man, the taking of a woman. Not to deny Jesus this estate, however, Luther places him in the role of spiritual bridegroom to the bride, our soul; the wedding ring is faith. Together, the spiritual bridegroom with human brides await the second coming: "Is not this now a joyful piece of work, when the rich, noble, pious bridegroom Christ takes the poor, despised, wicked harlot to wed, delivers her from all evil, and adorns her with every benefit."

Is man in need of woman any longer? Such Protestantism could spiritualize human marriage out of existence. But no; Luther declares, "But when our Lord Jesus Christ comes on the last day to judge the living and the dead, God will not judge the married for they are in his ordinance... For an apple tree or some other tree which bears its kinds of fruits will not be judged on the last day because it bears apples or is defiled by caterpillars and worms. No, for it was created by God for the purpose of bearing apples and fruit. So married people, who are wedded and bear children... will not be judged because of this.... Indeed, the fact that you are married, as long as you are a Christian, will be a great glory and honor to you on the last day."