

Protestant Social Teaching

AN INTRODUCTION

EDITED BY

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Introduction

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“PROTESTANT Social Teaching,” the title of this collection, is guaranteed to invite debate. Is there such a thing? Which voices and positions should be included? Who has the right to decide? These sorts of questions are endemic to Protestantism in the modern world. And while Protestantism will always have an inherent diversity, as its shape is more of a constellation of schools than a singular institution, it once had a remarkable unity on matters of moral theology.

Additionally, many readers will see in the name “Protestant Social Teaching” a sort of imitation of “Catholic Social Teaching.”¹ Rhetorically this is true—the title was chosen with that parallel in mind. Catholic Social Teaching has proven to be an incredibly powerful mechanism for offering moral guidance to Roman Catholics and for providing an alternative to the more common offerings in magazines, talk radio, or cable news channels. Importantly, Catholic Social Teaching claims to offer a unified and coherent body of moral discipleship that integrates doctrine and practice. Many Protestants lament their lack of such a unified body of teaching. Indeed, in 2009, Stephen J. Grabill asserted, “Neither magisterial Protestants nor

¹ For a scholarly overview of Catholic Social Teaching, see David J. O’Brien and Thomas Anthony Shannon’s “Introduction: Roman Catholic Social Teaching” in their *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo III to Pope Francis*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 1–6; for an attempt at a full systematic presentation of Roman Catholic social teaching, see Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2006).

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evangelicals have a theologically unified body of social teaching.”² He then encouraged them to build such a body of thought, though he confessed that it would not be an easy task.

This book is an answer to Professor Grabill’s challenge. We do not, however, accept his premise. Indeed, we hope to offer a unified body of social teaching not by way of creation but recovery. The sixteenth through nineteenth centuries featured a coherent collection of moral and social teachings grounded in basic Protestant doctrinal understandings of God, revelation, law, and humanity. This is now largely forgotten. But it is not truly lost. The sources are still there, in so many catechisms, bodies of divinity, systematic theologies, and practical works. New publishing ventures and the continuing improvement of e-books has made the recovery of such works more accessible than ever before. It has been the central mission of the Davenant Institute to bring the fruits of this recovery to the broader public.

The relevant sources are quite literally immense. Richard Baxter’s massive *A Christian Directory* is subtitled *A Sum of Practical Theology, and Cases of Conscience*, and it covers both questions of personal piety and matters of social and political concern. All major Protestant catechisms and doctrinal manuals included commentaries on the Ten Commandments with particular applications. The Westminster Larger Catechism is perhaps the most detailed of the major confessional documents, but it was not unique in its approach or philosophy. It was simply one of the later productions. Zacharias Ursinus’s *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* contains a detailed explication of the moral law contained in the Decalogue, with forays into the death penalty, warfare, property rights, and more.³ William Ames’s *The Marrow of Theology* devotes half of its space to “observance,” which it defines as “the submissive performance of the will of God for the glory of God.”⁴ Among these latter chapters, Ames discusses distinctions among loves, duties, and justice. Works of this sort were entirely common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Martin Luther and John Calvin certainly have their catechetical discussions

² Stephen J. Grabill, “Protestant Social Thought,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 1.

³ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1852 reprint), 586–87, 596.

⁴ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. J. D. Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 219.

of the law of God, but both also offer fascinating moral discussions in their biblical commentaries. Less obvious sources also provide important moral casuistry. Martin Chemnitz's four volume *Examination of the Council of Trent* begins with basic doctrinal polemics, but moves into a discussion of sexual ethics, particularly virginity, chastity, marriage, and divorce.⁵

As one continues into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the United Kingdom and its colonies, Protestant moral and political thought influenced the development of the common law. William Blackstone's *Commentaries of the Laws of England* is typically thought of as a sort of "secular work," and not the sort of thing that one would immediately connect with ecclesiastical writers. But the Protestant imagination of the time did not divide up the intellectual world in such neatly opposed categories. When read in conversation with thinkers like Samuel von Pufendorf, John Selden, or Niels Hemmingsen, the basic family resemblance becomes apparent.

This should also help to explain what we mean by "Protestant." It is true that the word means relatively little in the twenty-first century. It is mostly a negation—not Roman Catholic. But this was not its intended meaning. Originating with the "protest" at the Diet of Speyer in 1529, the name Protestant initially applied to Lutherans. Fairly quickly the churches and theologians now known as "Reformed" were also included in this broader grouping. Indeed, Strasbourg was one of the original cities involved in the protestation, and so the term "Protestant" applied to both the Reformed and Lutheran churches.⁶ It did not, however, extend to the Anabaptists, who viewed themselves as a refounding rather than reforming movement and who also had unique positions on anthropology and law. This use of "Protestant" for the Lutheran and Reformed churches can be found in the seventeenth century itself.⁷ While Lutherans and the Reformed did not see themselves as a united church, and while they had certain important disagreements, they largely did agree on prolegomena (which is to say the role of reason and revelation), the doctrine of God, anthropology, the natural law,

⁵ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent Parts II & III*, trans. F. Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007) Part II, 717–66; Part III, 15–226.

⁶ See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), xx, 171–79.

⁷ For instance, William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants, A Safe Way to Salvation* (London: Lichfield, 1638).

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and most matters of politics. Where disagreements did arise, they could also be found within each community rather than merely as Lutherans against the Reformed or vice-versa.

So, the “Protestant Social Teaching” of this book is a common understanding of the moral law, a shared exegesis of relevant biblical texts, and the continued reception of earlier Christian writers on the part of both Lutheran and Reformed theologians and statesmen. The foundations of this teaching are found in the Reformation era, namely the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but its legacy continued on into the nineteenth centuries among select writers and thinkers. Among the most select, it continued even into the twentieth.

This framework also explains the scope of our sources. We have prioritized what is common to the Protestant Reformation. This usually means what is most basic among the thought of its writers and churches. While many of the chapters in this volume do extend their discussion into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they do not interact with movements which began in those centuries. Writers who are uniquely bound to contemporary issues are avoided entirely. Political debates limited to the United States or time-bound cultural disputes are deprioritized in favor of more principal and abiding matters. In this sense, our Protestantism is resolutely catholic. We are attempting to uncover and pass along perennial and ecumenical Protestant truths. Later topics and more specific ones, including controversial and divisive ones, are entirely appropriate items for discussion and investigation, but they must wait for future installments. The present study is introductory. But if we succeed in our task, many of the categories needed for such future essays will be uncovered by our work here.

This approach also shows how our understanding of Protestant Social Teaching differs from Catholic Social Teaching. The content will be strikingly similar. It is the form which differs. There is no central institution, no magisterium, which intervenes to resolve moral and social teaching for Protestants. Our churches do not say, as Rome does, that they are “the authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law.”⁸ Rather, Protestant Social Teaching exists more like a common law, an ongoing but

⁸ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae: Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Paul VI, On the Regulation of Births* I.4, Vatican Website 1968, accessed August 31, 2022 https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

nevertheless ascertainable collection of consensual exegesis of the Scriptures and moral philosophy, a philosophy built upon Protestant principles.

One of these principles is that of the natural law and original righteousness.⁹ A basic moral guidance can be discerned in virtue of humanity's rational nature. Sin causes men to repress this morality or misuse it, but it is never fully lost to the human consciousness. The work of Christ, too, is a restoration of the original righteousness possessed by mankind due to his having been created in the image of God. Protestant Social Teaching, then, does not point man beyond a rational morality towards a new and heretofore unknown frontier. Rather it redirects him back to his own rational morality. The Reformers taught that the human conscience can and eventually will grasp God's truth. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the human conscience, as it is renewed, will *be grasped* by God's truth. As a human being grows in a truer and better knowledge of God, he grows in the knowledge of himself, and as he grows in a truer and better knowledge of himself, he grows in the knowledge of God. Thus, rather than retreating to a final ecclesiastical interpreter, Protestants equip men to progress in understanding.

No claim can be made to a "seamless garment," in Protestant Teaching, at least not if that means that there is never moral disagreement between pious and serious Christian thinkers. Indeed, as Aquinas would remind us, "the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects."¹⁰ Where a matter is closer to the basic principle, greater clarity and agreement should be expected. As a moral question becomes more specific and dependent upon circumstance, greater diversity of judgment should be expected and greater liberty allowed. And so we do not look to a final ecclesiastical interpreter who intervenes to put a stop to difficult questions. The boundaries of Protestant Social Teaching are not so much institutional as they are categorical. The authority derives from recognizing the truth of the moral argument itself.

It is because of this framework that it should go without saying that the various contributors to this volume do not pretend total agreement with one another. Indeed, some authors register their own disagreement with certain

⁹ See the discussion of mankind's original righteousness and its implication on ethics in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 544–46.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II, q. 94, a. 4, co.

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aspects of the Protestant tradition they are explaining! Certain chapters are predominately historical and descriptive. Others are more constructive. Some are critical. It is our hope that this approach will allow the actual truths of the tradition to speak louder than any individual voice, and that it will invite the reader into this critical engagement, so he can see which arguments truly persuade. Even so, we believe a basic and compelling unity is there to be seen.

In fact, readers will notice that the majority of our essays do not begin with the Protestant Reformation but rather the early church and even pre-Christian writers. In this, we are merely following in the example of our Reformation forefathers, for they too pointed beyond themselves to the older sources and ultimately to the truth and authority of God's Word. And so, at the end of all our studies, it is our goal to use the traditional interpretations and arguments to more clearly highlight the content of God's two books, the Holy Scriptures and the light of nature. As understood by its own articulators, Protestant Social Teaching is *merely Christian* Social Teaching. May our world discover it afresh.

VI.

Sex, Marriage, and Divorce

ONSI AARON KAMEL & ALASTAIR ROBERTS

LIKE THE great reformers of the Western Church before them, Protestants carried out their task with the works of St. Augustine in one hand and the Bible in the other. Although John Calvin no doubt overstepped in claiming that Augustine's theology belonged exclusively to the Reformation in its conflict with Rome, it is true that the Reformers inherited, revived, and built upon the insights of Augustine in the realm of marriage and family life. At the same time, they allowed the Scriptures, and particularly the gospel of Christ's triumph over the forces of sin and death, to speak to them afresh. At their best, the Reformers offered an account of marriage and family that successfully synthesized the insights of St. Augustine with the teachings of the Scriptures, ultimately affirming both the severe reign of the flesh with its lusts and Christ's victory over it.

This account of Protestantism's teachings on marriage and family begins with St. Augustine's understanding of sex, marriage, and family after the Fall; turns subsequently to the Scripture's teachings on the same themes; and finally concludes by examining the synthesis of the Reformers.

ST. AUGUSTINE ON SEX, MARRIAGE, AND THE FAMILY

Marriage was as fraught a topic in Augustine's day as it is in ours, albeit for very different reasons. For Augustine's Christian contemporaries (as for

Augustine himself), celibacy was considered a higher vocation than married life; those who devoted themselves to celibacy freed themselves for unceasing prayer and singleminded devotion to the things of God. On this, the early church was in agreement. But some Church Fathers regularly went beyond this, insinuating that celibacy was the only morally respectable vocation. More radical champions of virginity, including St. Jerome, claimed that there was no sexual intercourse before the Fall; indeed, in his *Letter 22* to the wealthy Roman woman Eustochium, Jerome wryly claimed, “I praise marriage, I praise wedlock, but it is because they give me virgins.”¹ Often attending the elevation of virginity and celibacy over marriage was the denigration of marriage and family life. In that same letter to Eustochium, Jerome writes mockingly of the “drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants... the cares of household management, and all those fancied blessings which death at last cuts short.” In one of his more generous moments, Jerome grants that married women “are not as such outside the pale; they have their own place.” But ultimately, Jerome enjoins Eustochium to refrain from associating with married women and even widows who refused celibacy while their husbands lived.

It is in this context that St. Augustine’s contributions to the debates of his day should be understood. For Augustine, the fundamental problem facing marriage after the Fall is the problem of the passions or “concupiscence” (fallen desire). In reflecting upon our passions after the Fall, Augustine took as his point of departure biblical texts such as Romans 7, in which St. Paul remarks that, despite his mind’s submission to the law of God and his will’s desire to follow the law of God, nevertheless “I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Rom. 7:23, ESV). For Augustine, this text indicated that, after the Fall, human passions had become a law unto themselves, insubordinate to the will and the intellect, and that these sinful passions act, mysteriously, *even against man’s will*.²

¹ St. Jerome, *Letter 22*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>.

² Onsi A. Kamel, “The Beloved Icon: An Augustinian Solution to the Problem of Sex,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no. 4 (November 2020): 318–29, 319, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642>.

Sex was a paradigm case of this phenomenon for Augustine. For, in sex, the passions act independently of the mind and the will (Augustine gives the common example of being aroused against one's will). And crucially, this is a feature of sex itself after the Fall, not only a feature of unmarried or adulterous sex. In other words, the problem of lust does not simply go away once one is married.³

This position might seem to have radical implications for marriage, from a contemporary point of view. Can married sex really be *sinful*? Or to put our question more pointedly: given Augustine's claim that sex is always compromised by sin, how can we conclude marriage is not likewise fundamentally compromised? Does not the Apostle Paul say that one of the goods of marriage is precisely that those without self-control have a means not to burn with passion (1 Cor. 7:9)?

Augustine, far more than many of his contemporaries, realized that marriage and family are not evil, but are great goods. As he wrote in *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, "Matrimony, therefore, is a good, in which the human being is born after orderly conception; the fruit, too, of matrimony is good, as being the very human being which is thus born; sin, however, is an evil with which every man is born."⁴

Augustine carefully distinguishes between sex before the Fall (sinless because there was no lust), sex after the Fall (sinful because of the lust which always attends sex), marriage (which is good in itself and bad only insofar as the lust which attends the sexual act is present), and procreation (which is again good in itself and bad only insofar as the lust which attends the sexual act is present). For Augustine, then, the lust inseparable from the sexual act, not marriage, was the necessary evil. But lustful sex is a very minor "evil" at that—provided sex is used to bring Christian children into the world rather than for gratification of lust. In sum, St. Augustine carefully preserved both his capacity to reckon fully with humanity's disordered sexual appetites and the good of marriage, family, and children. Many today find Augustine's

³ Kamel, "The Beloved Icon," 320.

⁴ St. Augustine, "On Marriage and Concupiscence," trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, rev. Benjamin B. Warfield, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 5, ed. by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>.

views distasteful, but the Reformers largely adopted them, not least because they believed them to be scriptural.

HEARING SCRIPTURE

Given that the Reformers rooted their teachings on marriage in Scripture, it is important to understand the broad contours of the scriptural narrative concerning marriage and family before looking directly to the Reformers' own teaching. Hermeneutically, the Reformers followed the model of Christ, who, when asked why he did not permit divorce even though the Law of Moses did, replied, "From the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). Like Christ, the Reformers turned to Genesis.

Prior to the Fall, the goodness of marriage and family is connected to the goodness of the entire created order, and after the Fall, the disorder of marriage and family is likewise connected to the disorder of the creation. Genesis 1–2, as has been commonly noted, features God forming dimensions of creation and then dividing them: day is separated from night, waters above are separated from waters below, the waters below are separated from the land, female is separated from male, and so on. These great asymmetric pairings aren't antagonistic dichotomies—two things fighting against each other—but pairs whose terms are interlocked yet distinct, representing the creative order as one of an interplay between two elements. The cosmic order is rhythmic and beautiful.

The goodness of marriage, as the union of an interlocked yet distinct pair, must be understood in the light of this broader creational order. In marriage, maleness and femaleness establish the primary bonds of our natural relations and the source of our given identities. We have been empowered as male and female to bring forth new images of God and of ourselves, as we see in Genesis 5:1–3. Creating man as male and female is itself a forming and filling act with regard to the human race. "Male and female in the image of God" is the standard unit of humanity, much as the basic unit from which the entire system by which humanity is measured is to be derived. That unit is the germ of social formation, and the engine of social filling. So as regards form, the order of the pattern of humanity is one of disjunction—characterized by two distinct forms—in an inseparable and dynamic relation.

Furthermore, although we tend to frame our discussions of marriage and the relationships between men and women in terms of the binary face-to-face relationship between the sexes, Genesis does not present marriage

this way. This is crucial for understanding Protestant teaching on the family. Marriage is presented in Genesis in terms of a wider calling within the world. Marriage was to be the way men and women fill out God's purpose in the world; it is the means by which we fulfill our natural vocations as humans.

The fall into sin, however, disorders this original dispensation. Healthy sexual realities have been marred by the Fall in various and extensive ways. Sin, bodily dysfunction, and psychological disorder undermine the loving one-flesh union that should exist between a husband and wife, often shattering it by divorce, perverting it by oppressive male dominance, or destroying it by myriad other means. In the Fall, the order established by God breaks down.

The Fall was chiefly the fall of the man. He failed in his task of serving and keeping the garden and of upholding the law concerning the tree, allowing the woman to be deceived when it was his duty to teach and to protect her. The woman, for her part, failed in her calling as the helper. In the parallel judgments that follow, both the man and the woman are told that they will experience frustration in the fundamental area of their activity, the man in his labor upon the ground, the woman in her labor and childbearing. Both will be frustrated and dominated by their source: the woman will be dominated by man, and the man will return to the ground. The consequences of the Fall cut to the heart of men and women considered individually and as married: they have become corruptible, subject to their lusts, and doomed to decay.

In the book of Leviticus especially, and in the Pentateuchal code more broadly, the truth of the corruption inherent in fallen flesh is extensively communicated. Bodily emissions, both typical and abnormal, render one unclean (Leviticus 15), as does childbirth (Leviticus 12), the breaking out of the corruption of the flesh in the scale disease described in Leviticus 13–14, or contact with dead bodies (Numbers 19). The fallen flesh is contagiously corrupt, and this corruption is most pronounced wherever the flesh most exerts its natural powers, our sexual functions and faculties being focal points of its activity and communication.

When the Apostle Paul wrote concerning the problem of the "flesh," the term likely functioned to name the vast complex of corruption that, through the purity code, had been partially raised into practical consciousness for him and many of his Jewish hearers. This is why Paul remarks, "If you live according to the flesh, you will die: but if by the Spirit you put to death

the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom. 8:13, ESV). The Apostle establishes a parallel between living after the flesh and doing the deeds of the body; to refuse to live after the flesh is to tame the body, to resist the natural tendencies of our corruption.

The connection between “flesh” and human sexuality in Augustine is neither arbitrary nor a relic of a more prudish age; in making this connection, Augustine is articulating a deeply scriptural grammar in his own idiom. Although not infrequently obscured in contemporary translations, the term “flesh” in Scripture often functions as a euphemism for the penis (the Hebrew term being *basar*—see, for example, Exodus 28:42, Ezekiel 23:26, among others). The penis represents not only the generative capacities of all “flesh,” but also the nature of flesh in its fallen, corrupt form.

It is in this context that we begin to understand the logic of the covenant sign of circumcision and its connection to marriage and family. Just as humanity must be cleansed of the corrupting influences of the flesh to be fit for God’s presence (hence, the reason for the purity codes), so human generative capacities must be made fit for God’s service. Put another way, after the Fall, marriage and family life come under the domain of the flesh; therefore, to be made fit once again for divine service, they must be cleansed.

It should come as little surprise then that, in Genesis 17—immediately after promising to be God to Abraham, to make Abraham “fruitful,” and to remain faithful to Abraham’s “seed”—God institutes circumcision of the male generative organ as the sign of his covenant with Israel. God’s people are to prune, tame, and cultivate their generative capacities so that they serve God’s purposes. Prior to circumcision, men “are possessed of a blemish before” God, taught the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi.⁵ Luther likewise connected the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision to divine judgment. Circumcision is the means by which God displays the spread of corruption from the first parent to all humanity.⁶ Calvin sees in circumcision a dual symbolism: in appointing circumcision, God manifested to us that whatever “comes forth from man’s seed... is corrupt and needs pruning,” thereby to induce us to mortify our flesh, but circumcision also attests the

⁵ Rabbi Yisrael Herczeg, *Sapirstein Edition Rashi: The Torah with Rashi’s Commentary Translated, Annotated and Elucidated*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn, NY: Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, Ltd, 1995), Gen. 17:1–9.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15–20 in Luther’s Works*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), Gen. 17:10–11.

blessing given to Abraham.⁷ Thus, in demonstrating the need for humanity to cut off the flesh if it is to bear good fruit, circumcision is the sign both of human corruption and of the promise that, once the flesh is cultivated (in the New Covenant, by baptism and the circumcision of the heart), it becomes a great blessing, a gift of God, and even, as attested to Abraham, the means by which God overcomes sin and death.

In its own language, which is not identical to Augustine's but which nevertheless communicates the same truths, Scripture affirms the original goodness of sex, marriage, and family, their subsequent enslavement to corruption, and their ultimate redemption and reconsecration for divine service. Through baptism into and faith in Christ, the seed of Abraham, Christians have crucified the flesh with its lusts, and, provided they make no provision for the flesh, become fitted again for divine service. The Reformers will show us that, like our very bodies, sown in corruption and raised in incorruption, marriage and family life fall under the curse of the flesh but are simultaneously redeemed for service to God.

REFORMING THE FAMILY WITH THE BIBLE AND ST. AUGUSTINE

The Reformers were, like Augustine, dealing with a church that often denigrated marriage as bad and unpleasant and which upheld celibacy in fairly extreme terms. As in many things, however, the Reformers were also heirs to Augustine's views of concupiscence, which gave them a suspicion of the realm of the flesh. The key achievements of the Reformers are therefore to be found in their simultaneous adoption of Augustine's insights with their very positive appraisal of the estate of marriage, rooted in a renewed emphasis upon the redemption of the created order by Christ's triumph over the powers of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Luther's teachings on marriage have as their backdrop his conflicts against late-medieval monasticism and, simultaneously, his fight against mankind's perennial denigration of marriage and family. In his *Judgment on Monastic Vows*, Luther castigates the understanding of religious vows and monasticism prevalent in the Church in his day, arguing, among other things, that such vows had become attempts to attain justification before God on

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.XIV.21; John Calvin; *Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 453-454.

grounds other than faith.⁸ But Luther also kept up sustained attacks against the devaluation of the family. For instance, at one point he says, “I have always taught that we should not despise or disdain this walk of life, as the blind world and our false clergy do, but view it in the light of God’s Word.”⁹ For the Reformers, the Scripture—not false clergy and not the world—is more certain than any experience or worldly wisdom, and therefore Christians should allow the Scriptures to teach them what to think about marriage and family. There are four major points of Reformational teaching worth highlighting in this context.

First, marriage and family are divinely established. God created marriage in the beginning, and therefore “it is a divine and blessed walk of life.”¹⁰ Indeed, Luther argues that marriage is the first institution, existing before all other human institutions (such as the government) both in time and importance. The means by which children enter the world—the bond of love uniting a man and woman—is pre-political, prior to legal structure, prior to economic transaction. Marriage, therefore, takes precedence over all other natural vocations; it is more to be revered than the offices of bishops and princes and emperors. Luther goes so far as to say that marriage is, for the majority of people, “solemnly commanded by God,” since God created humans for it.¹¹ Although, contrary to many popular conceptions of his position, Luther was forthright that there are “rare exceptions whom God has especially exempted... by a high, supernatural gift” of chastity, his emphasis was on marriage as the normal and, indeed, normative state of human affairs.¹²

Second, marriage is a great good, and the greatest good of marriage is the generation of children in service of God: “The greatest good in married life, that which makes all suffering and labor worthwhile, is that God grants offspring and commands that they be brought up to worship and serve him,”

⁸ Martin Luther, *Judgment on Monastic Vows*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. James Atkinson, vol. 44, *Christian in Society I* (St. Louis: Fortress Press, 1966), 273.

⁹ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord (New Translation): The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles P. Arand, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 209.

¹⁰ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 209.

¹¹ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 211.

¹² Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 211.

says Luther.¹³ Marriage and the propagation of children are God's chief means of making Christians. The baptized children of Christian parents are the ordinary objects of God's salvation. The glory of marriage in God's sight—its superior status, which places it above all other natural institutions—is a result of its function in God's plan of salvation. Marriage is ordered to the generation and salvation of children. And to God, "there is nothing dearer than the salvation of souls."¹⁴ Marriage finds its purpose beyond itself. It is in virtue of this extrinsic purpose that it constitutes the fundamental institution of natural life while being simultaneously ordered to the ultimate good of man, heavenly life.

Third, the relationship between man and woman is framed by the larger creation and man and woman's shared vocation under God within it. Carefully examined, this assumes and provides meaning to gender distinction. But it also entails the dignity of both spouses' work in the household as well as an elevation of the work of the household itself. The fact of a gender distinction finds its meaning in the divine commission to the human community, in the tasks that lie at the heart of man's (and the family's) vocation. Exercising dominion and filling are not tasks that play to male and female capabilities and callings in an indiscriminate manner, but rather tasks where sexual differentiation can often be particularly pronounced. In the task of exercising dominion and subduing the creation, the man is advantaged by reason of his greater physical strength. On the other hand, the burden of bearing children, of filling the world, chiefly falls upon women. In the task of being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth, we see a different weighting of the callings but nevertheless an equal dignity afforded to both.

Even after the Fall, this dimension of the status of family life has not changed, and in fact, this primordial vocation takes the mundane, unattractive, and often dangerous work of the household and transfigures it into divine service, a means of worship. Though fraught with pains and dangers, childbearing, Luther proclaimed, is a divine work. Luther even exclaimed that men "should now wish to be [women] for the sake of this very work alone."¹⁵ By the same token, the works necessary to sustain marriage

¹³ Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," in *The Christian in Society*, vol. 1, in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vols. 44—47, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 46.

¹⁴ Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 46.

¹⁵ Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 40.

and family life—household chores, changing diapers, and all the rest—are “all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels.” Looked at with unbelieving eyes, these tasks are menial, unpleasant, undesirable. But when seen with the eyes of faith, these tasks participate in all the grandeur of the creational order; done in faith, they are our contributions to the originary task with which all mankind is charged; done in faith, they become our dignity and glory.

Such care of the household is for men as well as women. When a father changes diapers, for example, and “someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool... God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling.”¹⁶ Rather than complaining about their lot, parents should confess to God, “I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers.”¹⁷ We should be confident, Luther teaches us, that in serving our families, we are doing God’s will, fulfilling our calling as men and women in God’s world.

Fourth, the Reformation contradicted Roman Catholic teaching by permitting divorce on the basis of Scripture. Luther believed that Scripture gave three grounds for divorce. The first ground of divorce, according to Luther, is when the husband or wife is “not equipped for marriage” because of bodily deficiencies (those who are, in Christ’s parlance, born eunuchs).¹⁸ The second ground of divorce is adultery, and here Luther appeals to Matthew 19. He argues that Christ permits divorce in such cases, “so that the innocent person may remarry.” Crucially, Luther held divorce in such cases to be open to both parties, not just men. The third and final ground of divorce is abandonment, manifested either literally, as when one party refuses to live with the other, or figuratively, when one party “deprives and avoids the other, refusing to fulfill the conjugal duty.”¹⁹

Calvin allowed only one ground of divorce: adultery. Those who seek other reasons to divorce, he writes, “ought justly to be set at naught, because they choose to be wise above the heavenly teacher.”²⁰ Not even one spouse’s leprosy—or, in modern terms, one spouse’s completely and utterly

¹⁶ Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 40.

¹⁷ Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 39.

¹⁸ Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 30.

¹⁹ Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 33.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, in *Calvin: Commentaries*, trans. and ed. Joseph Haroutunian and Louise Pettibone Smith Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 383 (commenting on Matt. 19:9).

debilitating communicable illness—justifies divorce. To those who demur that such illness makes social and sexual intercourse impossible, thereby undermining one of the reasons St. Paul gives for marriage in the first instance, Calvin simply replies that God will give spouses what they need if they obey his command to remain married. Like Luther, however, Calvin does affirm that “the right” of divorce “belongs equally and mutually to both sides, as there is a mutual and equal obligation to fidelity.” The wife’s right to the husband’s body differs in no way from the husband’s right to the wife’s, for the husband “is not the lord of his body.”²¹ Thus, divorce may be permitted in the case of adultery.

Although there was some diversity among the Reformers concerning precisely how narrow Scripture’s grounds for divorce are, the Reformers speak with one voice in insisting that those who divorce “tear [themselves] in pieces, because such is the force of holy marriage, that the husband and wife become one man.”²²

CONCLUSION

The Reformers upheld the divine institution of marriage and family life, contended that its good consisted first but not only in the generation of children for the purpose of worshiping God, and insisted upon the indissolubility of marriage save on scriptural grounds. Because of their deep commitment to Scripture, few have managed to match the beauty and profundity of the Reformers’ teachings on marriage and family life, even as their vision was not without its errors and overstatements.²³

In tension with this extraordinarily positive vision of marriage, the Reformers also matched St. Augustine’s pessimism about human nature left to its own devices. They saw clearly that in the fall of humanity, the order established by God broke down—not completely, but catastrophically. Death and sin entered the world, taking up residence in our flesh as their chief site of operations. As a result, “nobody is without evil lust,” Luther tells

²¹ Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 384 (commenting on Matt. 19:9).

²² Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 380 (commenting on Matt. 19:5).

²³ See Matthew Lee Anderson’s chapter “Procreation and Children” in this volume for more on this last point.

us.²⁴ And yet, while “intercourse is never without sin... God excuses it by his grace because the estate of marriage is his work, and he preserves in and through the sin all the good which he has implanted and blessed in marriage.”²⁵ Such is God’s power that even from evil he works good. Although the flesh is fatally compromised by sin, God quickens the dead, calling those things which are not into being (Rom. 4:17). In the divine dispensation, the dead flesh brings forth life.

This is the deep insight of the Reformers: marriage and family are disordered by the Fall, but they are also means by which this disorder is overcome. Fraught with pain and danger, filled with work both menial and numbing, marriage and family are, nevertheless, for those to whom they are given, means of salvation.

²⁴ Martin Luther, “Treatise on Good Works” in *The Christian in Society*, vol. 1, in *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, vols. 44—47, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 106.

²⁵ Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 49.