

# Marriage in the theology of Martin Luther – worldly yet sacred: An option between secularism and clericalism

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## Abstract

*Marriage, according to Martin Luther, is an institution both secular and sacred. It is secular because it is an order of this earthly life. But its institution goes back to the beginning of the human race and that makes marriage sacred, a divine and holy order. It does not – like the sacraments – nourish and strengthen faith or prepare people for the life to come; but it is a secular order in which people can prove faith and love, even though they are apt to fail without the help of the Word and the sacrament. The author applies this view of Luther in terms of two unacceptable extremes: the creation ordinances of Brunner and the analogy of relation of Barth. The dialectic of Law and Gospel should never be dispensed.*

*Marriage is necessary as a remedy for lust, and through marriage God permits sexual intercourse.*

*Similar is the allegory which Paul employs: that Adam and Eve, or marriage itself, is a type of Christ and the church.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When one studies the issue of marriage in the excellent electronic version of Martin Luther's works, one sees that Luther used the lemmas, "marriage" or "matrimony", no fewer than 1 991 times, spread over literally every one of the 54 volumes! No wonder that Luther (LW 45:385)<sup>1</sup> on occasion also wrote that his reflections on marriage kept him busier than any other theme in theology! One may also wish to add, tongue in cheek, that he gave quite a lot of

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<sup>1</sup> Since use is made throughout of the electronic version of Luther's works (abbreviated as LW) and the 54 volumes were published collectively in 1999, the year of publication cannot be given in references, but the volume number, followed by the relevant page numbers. The electronic version does not indicate the page numbers in the case of Luther's commentary on Biblical books. In such cases the references in this paper indicate only the number of the volume, followed by the relevant Biblical section.

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attention to marriage for someone who was a dedicated priest and only at the age of forty-two was married for the first time!

On the Saturday night before Easter Sunday, 1523, a farmer who had come under the influence of Luther's Reformation, arranged for twelve nuns to escape from the convent at Nimbschen by hiding them in herring barrels on a wagon (Lull 1999:129-139). Three of them returned to their families and the others all married later in Wittenberg, except for Katharina von Bora. Luther found lodging for her with Lukas and Barbara Cranach, a local painter and his wife, who were good friends of his. Katharina later showed signs that she would dearly like to marry Luther.<sup>2</sup> He was initially reluctant because he had been excommunicated by the Pope and banned by the emperor, and therefore had a very uncertain future. Yet Luther did decide to marry and on Tuesday night, 13 June 1525, he became betrothed<sup>3</sup> to Katharina von Bora and two weeks later, on 27 June 1525, his friend and minister, Johannes Bugenhagen, solemnised their marriage. Johannes Frederick of Saxony gave the Luthers as wedding gift the Black Convent (previously the Augustinian Convent) as a residence. Katharina immediately began a stud farm as well as a brewery, and at the same time began converting the convent into an inn for students and visitors, and even added clinic facilities to it. Six children were born of the marriage: Johannes (1526-?), Elizabeth (1527-1528), Magdalena (1529-1542), Martin Jr (1531-?), Paul (1533-?) and Margaretha (1534-1570). Moreover, they raised four foster children too.

The thesis I wish to argue in this article has as its point of departure the fact that Luther desacramentalised marriage and placed it squarely in the sphere of the world, but at the same time also added a referential meaning which placed it in a network of relationships – *coram Deo et coram hominibus*. It is therefore quite a difference to understand marriage not statically (an analogy of being), but in fact dynamically (an analogy of relation). An *analogia entis* is therefore exchanged in favour of an *analogia relationis*. This is an incredible contribution Luther made, not only to understanding marriage but also even to our understanding of reality! Through this he leads us as it were with a discourse in semiotics, past the being at hand to the inaccessible light of the transcendental. In the words of Martin Buber (1996), we could say that

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<sup>2</sup> The opinion has already been expressed that Luther married Katharina solely to illustrate his stance on marriage. But others turn this around and claim that he developed his ethics of marriage on the basis of his marriage to Katharina. These seem to be unjustified deductions. On the one hand, because his marriage had been solemnised at least 18 months after his new insights took place and on the other, because it was Katharina who insisted on a marriage to Luther. There is considerable evidence indicating that Luther did indeed love his wife (including LW 45:43; 49:117, 154).

<sup>3</sup> The tradition at that time determined that the betrothal was the actual beginning of the marriage. It was also consummated with sexual intercourse, which followed the betrothal (LW 46:261). The solemnisation of the marriage that followed later, was its social dimension (Johnson 2005:127).

marriage ought not to be understood as an *I-It* matter, but as an *I-Thou* relationship. By using Augustine's distinction between *signs* and *things*, an illustrative example can be given of how Luther understood marriage as a triadic relationship, with God as the reference point of meaning.

## 2. ARCHEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE AS A SACRAMENT

Timothy Lull (1999:140) states rather the obvious when he says that people should not only read about Luther, but also in particular read Luther himself. Both are essential. His compendium of 755 pages also offers a representative version of Luther's most important primary writings (Lull 1989). However, the electronic *Luther's Works* makes it possible to find virtually all the references to marriage – and especially particular word-combinations of it – in Luther's oeuvre. The Biblical sections that Luther employs to gain a new understanding of marriage, are especially the following: Genesis (LW 1-8), Deuteronomy (LW 9), Psalm 45 (LW 10), Isaiah (LW 17), Matthew (LW 21), John (LW 22), Romans (LW 25), Galatians (LW 26-27), I Corinthians 7 (LW 28) and I Peter 3 (LW 30). Monographs and other genres about marriage are: The Babylonian Exile of the Church, 1520 (LW 36), The Estate of Marriage, 1522 (LW 45), a Commentary on I Corinthians 7, 1523 (LW 28), an Order for Marriage for Common Pastors, 1529 (LW 53), On Marriage Matters, 1530 (LW 46) and a couple of marriage sermons, 1519, 1529, 1545 (LW 44, 51).

It is clear that as regards tradition, Luther relied very heavily on Augustine's theology. After all, he had not been a monk of the Augustinian order in vain! In the subject index of *Luther's Works* one can clearly detect that this man from Africa is mentioned in virtually every volume. No wonder Luther called him a "fine man" and said that if Augustine had lived in his (Luther's) time, he would definitely have stood by Augustine's side (Van Oort 1991:55). Van Oort even goes as far as asking whether the Reformation was not merely an "Augustinian réveil"! Luther wrote to his friend, Johannes Lang, on 18 May 1517 (LW 48:42) about Augustine's importance for good theology: "Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God's help rule at our University ... Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible or on St. Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical eminence."

There are also myriad examples of marriage, where Luther relies on Augustine. I wish to highlight two material examples. In his document, *De Bono Conjugali* ("On the good of marriage"), Augustine (in Roberts & Donaldson 1979c:3.32) writing in the year 401 on the basis of his understanding of the creation of man and woman according the book of Genesis, states that the value (*bonum*) of marriage is meant for procreation

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(*proles*), fidelity (*fides*) and sacrament (*sacramentum*).<sup>4</sup> The *proles* also neutralised the sinful desire; the *fides* also had to express the dimension of love; and the *sacramentum* was meant especially to ensure the permanence of marriage when two people vowed their fidelity to each other before God (Johnson 2005:125).

Luther initially endorsed this Augustinian view. In his marriage sermon of 1519 he still (for the last time) maintains all three of these aspects unabridged. Concerning marriage as a sacrament, he states: “In the same way the estate of marriage is a sacrament. It is an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest, holiest, worthiest, and noblest thing that has ever existed or ever will exist: the union of the divine and human natures in Christ” (LW 44:10). It is clear that at this stage, Luther understood the sacramental nature of marriage primarily in terms of its permanence. He would for example invariably be very reluctant to permit certain exceptions for divorce. Matters such as impotence, adultery and refusal of conjugal rights were the only reasons and then only in extreme cases (LW 15:558; 45:30; 46:310; 54:34). He could even on occasion have preferred bigamy to a divorce (LW 36:104).

Augustine (in Roberts & Donaldson 1997a:26.50) furthermore distinguishes in the sacrament (which he regarded as especially, but not solely, baptism and Holy Communion) between the action (*signum*) on the one hand and the Divine grace (*res*) bound to it on the other hand. And this he linked in turn to Christ who came to full expression in the new covenant. The gulf between God and humans is therefore bridged by “sacred signs”. The best-known definition that Augustine consequently used for a sacrament, was that it expressed a “visible sign of invisible grace”. But to him it was also stronger than merely “express”. In fact it also *brought about* grace. It is indeed also correct to claim that Augustine invariably maintained this double meaning of the sacrament, namely a “significative-spiritual” as well as an “effective-realistic” understanding (Kinder 1958:1322).

Now Luther’s reaction to this is important. In his writing, *The Babylonian Exile of the Church* (1520), he questions for the first time the sacramental character of marriage. This entailed that Luther could clearly declericalise the Roman Catholic understanding of marriage. He points out that the Vulgate translated the  $\mu\upsilon\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\rho\iota\omicron\nu$  of Ephesians 5:32 as *sacramentum* and that this contributed to the misunderstanding (LW 36:93). But his real argument is stated in his explanation of his Statements in 1521. It was not the mechanical working of the sacrament that brought salvation, but the *faith* accompanying it:

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<sup>4</sup> For a useful exposition of Augustine’s view of marriage, see Clark, A E (ed) 1996. *St Augustine on marriage and sexuality*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

From all this, I think it is clear that faith is necessary for the sacrament, a faith which does not doubt that it receives everything which the words declare and the sacraments signify ... This saying, taken from the teachings of St. Augustine, holds true, "Not the sacrament but the faith in the sacrament makes righteous and saves."

(LW 32:17)

An argument he used was that we do not read anywhere in the Bible about a promise of salvation that is linked to marriage. Moreover, marriage was not instituted by Christ, nor is it a sign of something else. Although he invariably maintains the Augustinian distinction between *signum* and *res*, after 1520 he no longer applied it to marriage:

We have said that in every sacrament there is a word of divine promise, to be believed by whoever receives the sign, and that the sign alone cannot be a sacrament. Nowhere do we read that the man who marries a wife receives any grace of God. There is not even a divinely instituted sign in marriage, nor do we read anywhere that marriage was instituted by God to be a sign of anything. To be sure, whatever takes place in a visible manner can be understood as a figure or allegory of something invisible. But figures or allegories are not sacraments, in the sense in which we use the term.

(LW 36:92)

It is important, however, to take into account that the concept of "sacrament" has undergone a particular *Wirkungsgeschichte* since Augustine. It is therefore correct instead to claim that Luther was dealing with an amalgam of Augustine's opinion, scholastic theology and Canon Law. As far as marriage is concerned, we can call it a period of increasing sanctification, in terms of this period up to the Reformation. The two divergent approaches in the nineteenth century of the two monks, Radbertus and Ratramnus of the Corbie Monastery, still respectively maintained the double nature of Augustine's legacy (Adam 1981:45). In the twelfth century, however, a third aspect came to the fore, in that besides the *signum* and the *res*, mention was also made of the *forma* (Kinder 1958:1323). (This was naturally following in the footsteps of Aristotle's fourfold premise of causality.) The *signum* was now understood as the material element, the *forma* as the presence of God in the element and the *res* as the effective result that it held for human beings. Thomas Aquinas called these three aspects the mere signs (the *sacramentum tantum*), the compounding of two substances (the *res et sacramentum*) and its fruits for

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those involved (the *res tantum*) (McGrath 2006:435-436). As regards to marriage, Aquinas hereby identified the *forma* of the sacrament with the *fines* as the corporeal intercourse between man and woman (Marsh 1958:320-321) and consequently explained procreation as the real reason for marriage. The sexual urge is then endured in terms of this purpose and limited room is also granted for it. In particular, Dominican theology rigorously maintained this ontological and undiluted understanding of the sacrament. This therefore brought about the meaning of the so-called mechanical accomplishment of salvation (*ex opere operato*). It means therefore that besides the element of “signification” as Augustine understood the sacrament, the elements of “transubstantiation” and “sanctification” were added. Therefore, in terms of this, the Council of Florence (1439) formally declared marriage a sacrament and the Council of Trent (1564) would later ratify this too. Through the ensuing centuries, the Roman Catholic Church persisted with these seven sacraments. The reason was probably because they kept on clinging to the conviction that the church, as institution of salvation, was the intercessor between God and humans (Adam 1981:56).

### **3. LUTHER’S THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM**

Paul Althaus began his standard work at the time about the ethics of Martin Luther, by stating categorically that Luther’s entire ethics had been wholly determined by the centre of this theology, namely *the justification of the sinner solely through faith in Jesus Christ* (Althaus 1965:11). The theory of justification is therefore the indicator of the course and also the source of Christian ethics. Naturally, the implication is clear. Salvation cannot in any way be vested in the teleological fulfilment of ethics. Salvation is and remains purely and simply *grace*. Ethics is moreover aimed only at one’s neighbours. For this reason, all ethical acts towards one’s neighbours must be driven by the right relationship with God (Althaus 1965:15-16). Luther (LW 31:563) expresses this by seeing the First Commandment as the preconception of the Second Table. This makes all human conduct free and in terms of the justification, also holy before God. God’s love flows through us like a stream of water in a riverbed. But human beings must naturally first be redeemed so that they can perform this function.

This means that righteousness can never be the property of human beings either. It does not belong to us. It is *alien* to us, because it is Christ’s righteousness which is *imputed* to us. In his lectures during 1515-16 on the Epistle to the Romans, Luther became convinced that the classical understanding of righteousness was wrong (McGrath 2005:220). Now three important moments are important to his understanding. Firstly, that human

beings are *passive* in righteousness. Secondly, righteousness is possible solely because of God's *grace* and thirdly, it is clear that human beings are capable of *nothing good* (LW 54:260-378). Faith is therefore always because of *Christ* and never because of faith. *How* people came to faith in the first place, was clearly a radically new point of view which Luther brought to the fore (McGrath 2005:221). Righteousness is now no longer to be understood in terms of God Himself, but in terms of what God *does* to the sinful person. This is expressed as a whole on the cross of Christ and our faith in it:

Take note, therefore, of a new righteousness and a new definition of righteousness. For one usually says: "Righteousness is the virtue that renders to everyone his due." Here it is stated that righteousness is faith in Jesus Christ or the virtue by which one believes in Jesus Christ, as in Romans 10:10: "With the heart man believes unto righteousness"; that is, if anyone wants to be righteous, it is necessary for him to believe in Christ with his heart.

(LW 27: Gl 2:21)

This suddenly makes it clear that Luther increasingly broke away from the *via moderna* that wanted humankind to play a role in redemption. Consequently, righteousness is, on the basis of his theology of the cross, nothing other than a *iustitia Christi aliena* – in other words, an alien righteousness (LW 51:19). Since God declared that all of humankind was righteous (LW 35:371, 52:79, 54:401), human beings are simultaneously righteous and sinners (*inter alia* LW 34:152, 41:111, 43:228, 51:16). With this, Luther deliberately digressed from Augustine's Neoplatonism and grounded the flesh: spirit tension not anthropologically, but teleologically; a tension which can only be resolved eschatologically (LW 37:118). Now this implies that God declared human beings to be what they are supposed to be and they can live in creation as God intended them to live. Our vocation is therefore not to be without sin, but to control it: "We believe that the remission of all sins has been without doubt accomplished, but we daily act in the expectation of the total removal and annihilation of all sin. It is those who labor toward this who do good works" (LW 32:213).

Luther also reasoned against this background when he told three nuns in 1524 that the oath that they had sworn in their order, could be set aside and they could just leave the convent (Mennecke-Haustein 2002:430). Asceticism and celibacy fly in the face of God's intention for creation. Luther had no liking for this Gnostic dualism of monasticism.

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The revealed God governs the world in a double manner: the spiritual and the worldly kingdoms: “For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that – no thanks to them – they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace” (LW 45:91). These are as it were God’s right and left hands (LW 52:191). Luther applies this to ethics in particular (LW 45:88-93). This implies that God has two kinds of laws, namely the spiritual laws that teach righteousness and establish a spiritual kingdom where the faithful must live, and then again the worldly laws for those who cannot comply with the spiritual laws. Luther (LW 45:31) applies this to adultery, pursuant to Matthew 5:32, when he says that the faithful must not divorce, irrespective of adultery, but that the option of divorce does exist solely because of sin. These are also the vantage points from which one should look at marriage: from human beings (*coram hominibus*) and from God (*coram Deo*). Both these vantage points are essential (Lazareth 1994:237).

Now in the law of Moses God established two types of governments; he gave two types of commandments. Some are spiritual, teaching righteousness in the sight of God, such as love and obedience; people who obeyed these commandments did not thrust away their wives and never made use of certificates of divorce, but tolerated and endured their wives’ conduct. Others are worldly, however, drawn up for the sake of those who do not live up to the spiritual commandments, in order to place a limit upon their misbehavior and prevent them from doing worse and acting wholly on the basis of their own maliciousness.

(LW 45:31)

It is immediately clear from this that Luther placed marriage squarely in creation and not in salvation. Therefore marriage is a matter of the Law and not of the Gospel. It is God’s bulwark against sin, and in no way a sanctifying means of grace. Although earthly and physical, marriage is nothing less than an *ordinance of creation* (*inter alia* LW 1: Gn 2:23). In fact, according to Luther, marriage is the most basic ordinance of God and both the other ordinances also rest on it (see Althaus 1965:91). Just as a man cannot be a man and just as a woman cannot be a woman, so too a man cannot live without a woman (but Luther does not reverse this phrase). It is the inherent nature of human beings to be in a relationship with the opposite sex (LW 44:341, 45:390). We must not, however, see the three ordinances of God’s creation – marriage, church and State – neither too narrowly nor too statically



(Nestingen 2003:35-36). Marriage for example means the entire familial household, its maintenance too. Moreover the ordinances are also a *dynamic* matter. God as it were maintains his creation through marriage. So the church is an event and the State is a function. Therefore Luther places marriage, on the basis of his exegesis of Genesis 45:19, according to his classification of the Ten Commandments, also with the Fourth in addition to the Sixth. That is why the fundamental aim of marriage is also to conceive children and raise them in the ways of God (LW 44:11-12).

For this reason, it is also possible for Luther to play marriage off against celibacy and to go so far as describing it as an even more important matter than celibacy (LW 28:19). I Corinthians 7:7 was at that time understood as Paul's expression of a longing that everyone should be unmarried as he was and that according to verse 29, it is better to remain unmarried. Luther reads verse 7 differently, however, and in fact in the sense that everyone has received a particular *gift* from God – a few received the gift of abstinence and the majority received the gift of marriage. Marriage is therefore the “most religious state of all” because only this – and not celibacy – leads to a real inner Spiritual life (LW 28:17). Now this means that Luther has suddenly declared that the traditional monastic orders are secular because they merely offer ordinary physical care (LW 28:18). This is a revolutionary insight by Luther and can be compared with the “general priesthood” that was made accessible to all believers. The implication ought to be clear: in no way do ordinary folk (lay people) have a poorer spiritual relationship with God than the office-bearers do.

#### **4. THE ETHICAL APPEAL OF THIS PARADIGM**

Researchers into Luther's understanding of marriage, such as Nestingen (2003) and Lazareth (1994), hold the view that for the theme in question, two matters in particular must be pertinently raised, namely marriage as a *remedy* against sin and marriage as the *vocation* of the believer. It is nevertheless a good idea to take note of the moral state of affairs at that time, before examining these two aspects. Hendrix (2000:170) points out that, in the sixteenth century in Europe, marriage and women were regarded as being at a precariously low level. Marriage was in a total state of decline. Luther himself expressed his displeasure about this. His fiercest attack against clerical promiscuity was perhaps in 1522 with his document, “Against the Falseness in the Spiritual Office of the Pope and Bishops”. The next set of random phrases from the work of Luther clearly indicate the moral crisis of his day (see Lazareth 1994:238-249):

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- “What we would speak most of is the fact that the estate of marriage has universally fallen into such awful disrepute.”
- “Finally, is it not lamentable that we Christians tolerate open and common brothels in our midst, when all of us are baptized unto chastity?”
- “Erfurt has not been much better than a brothel and beer hall.”
- “Especially do we call on the army chaplains to warn, correct, and threaten the soldiers, including the wild, tough, coarse mercenaries who are such experts in all sorts of profanity, swearing by God’s passion, by the wounds of Christ, by the French sickness<sup>5</sup> ...”
- “There are many young men who feel that they are justified to take ‘one last fling’ before assuming the vow of sacerdotal celibacy.”
- “Once you douse the lights, all women are the same.”
- “If the wife refuses, let the maid come.”
- “It is certainly a fact that he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality.”

Luther explicitly states in contrast to this that marriage is to him a “clinic” or in other words a “remedy” against sin:

But if you cannot avoid being joined to a woman without sinning, use the remedy shown by God. And if you do not seek the function of bringing children into being, at least seek the remedy against sin, in order that fornication and adultery may be avoided as well as pollutions and promiscuous lusts.

(LW 5: Gen 28:3)

He bases his ethics in this regard especially on the interpretation of I Corinthians 7 about which he states, besides his commentary on the Epistle to the Corinthians (1523), also in at least two separate documents (The Estate of Marriage [1522] and On Marital Issues [1530] that it should play a pertinent role. Against the background of the “alien righteousness” it means that human

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<sup>5</sup> The “French Disease” is syphilis.

beings still remain sinners, and must continuously fight against sin. Sin is then also not merely making the wrong choices, but a corrupted being. From God's ordinances of creation alone, can the Christian now be free. Precisely in this lies the appeal of the Christian (LW 32:213). Luther (LW 51:378) deals extensively with the Sixth Commandment in his sermons about the Catechism (1528) and places a particularly high premium on a chaste lifestyle. When a man is about 20 years old and a girl 15 or 18 years, Luther (LW 45:48) states that they ought to marry. He says this against the background of a very realistic view of human sexuality (Lazareth 1994:248). He goes as far as saying, "It is certainly a fact that he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality. How could it be otherwise, since God has created man and woman to produce seed and to multiply?" (LW 45:45).

It appears that Luther gradually worked out a proper evangelical set of ethics about marriage. In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) the foundation is laid for the declericalisation of marriage when its sacramental character is abolished and it is declared an ordinance of creation. It is in truth highly exceptional not to marry and is a *gift* granted to very few: "Such persons are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God. No one should venture on such a life unless he be especially called by God" (LW 45:21). In the years subsequent to this, Luther developed his marital ethics further by seeing it against the background of his theological paradigm as the fruit of the Spirit within the social orders. In other words, marriage is regarded as sacred again and it forms an important keystone in the whole of his theology. It is not only there to combat licentiousness but is in truth also instituted by God (according to Luther's understanding, especially of Gn 45:19 and I Cor 15:25). That is why it should be regarded not merely negatively ("remedy against sin"), but also positively as the "noblest and most precious work" (LW 45:46) and, even better, as the "most religious state of all" (LW 28:17). As stated above, Luther repeated the triple aim of marriage that he derived from Augustine (fidelity, procreation and sacrament) for the last time in 1519 and speedily replaced it with fidelity – procreation – and *love* (Hendrix 2004:172). For this reason, Lazareth (1994:256-257) is correct in asserting that one can best observe this development in Luther's commentary on I Peter, where it is clear that the monk's habit of his earlier work has been replaced by the evangelical garb of his later works. Here he speaks of the "priesthood of the baptised" and that fidelity and love are the *fruit* of faith. The internality of faith is the driving force for the externality of good works (LW 40:148, 44:33). Ebeling (1977:178-197) illustrates this beautifully on the basis of the relationship between faith and love. Husband and wife are equal partners in the marriage in a holy covenant where respect and trust are

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reciprocal: “Both should conduct themselves in such a way that the wife holds her husband in honor and that the husband, in turn, gives his wife the honor that is her due. If this were observed, peace and love would reign” (LW 30: I Pt 3:7). In this kind of relationship, the faithful are also basically without Law. This vocation makes the faithful in marriage, what Adam and Eve were supposed to be, free and joyous creatures of God on earth:

Therefore, those who are married should be cheerful and confident and grateful to God that they are in an estate which has been ordained and blessed by God, of sure hope and assurance that God will keep his ordinance and blessing, regardless of whether it annoys the devil, the pope in Rome, and therefore prompts them to condemn this estate.

(LW 51:361)

## **5. THE RELATIONAL AND ANALOGOUS MATRIX OF MARRIAGE**

It is striking that Luther time and again shifted marriage from the sixth (man and wife) to the fourth (parent and child) commandment. Although Lazareth (1994:255) may be right in saying that what is happening here, is about the former monk who could more comfortably deal with family matters than with marital matters, this nevertheless accords with the ethics Luther upheld about marriage. As mentioned above, marriage as an ordinance of creation should be understood far more broadly and could even rather be typified as the household (Johnson 2005:129). Therefore it becomes a matter for society (*coram hominibus*). It is to the benefit of cities and countries (WL 45:44). But it is also more than that. It is also a reflection of the relationship between Christ and his church: “Granted that marriage is a figure of Christ and the church; yet it is not a divinely instituted sacrament, but invented by men in the church who are carried away by their ignorance of both the word and the thing” (LW 36:95). It is sacred (*coram Deo*). In terms of the Divine vocation it must also in effect precisely express inner faith in the righteousness of Christ. In other words, it is about the double commandment to love that must materialise, or stated differently, God’s love for us which must be reflected to the world.

In his interpretation of Psalm 45 Luther drew an analogy of the marital relationship with the relationship of Christ and his church. He makes the following sensational statements:

These things are greater than human speech can present or our heart comprehend. Still it is represented faintly in marriage, where the supreme love of the bridegroom is for the bride, one faith, one body, and one mind. Between Christ and the church the relation is real, whereas in physical marriage we find only images and representations of tiffs [sic] spiritual marriage, where Christ is the bridegroom and everything He has He gives to the church

(LW 12: Ps 45:10)

Now it is clear from this that marriage is a faint representation of the actual relationship between Christ and his church. It has already been shown that Luther could go along with Augustine's understanding of marriage, though to him it was also a sacrament. The fact that it was a "visible sign of an invisible grace" was sufficient for Luther (LW 3: Gn 17:7). Augustine naturally did not know about the mediaeval "sanctification" element of the sacrament. Instead, he formulated the *ex opere operato* notion of the sacrament in contrast to the Donatists who did not want to recognise the sacraments where the so-called *traditores* served it and consequently developed a theory of *ex opere operationis*. Therefore, according to the Donatists, the *administrator* of the sacrament is decisive to the working of the sacrament. Augustine rejected this (McGrath 2007:424-425). What Luther basically rebelled against, therefore, was marriage as a sacrament in the sense developed by the Scholastics, who understood it to mean that it *existed in its own right*. In other words, the sign (*signum*) is released from the thing (*res*) and is presented as absolute. Stated differently, marriage now becomes presented *ontologically* as existing in itself. The sign becomes the thing itself. Consequently the three-part classification of *subject – sign – thing* is reduced to the two-part classification of *subject – object*. In this way, not only is the matter (thing) lost, but also the dynamics of the context. Augustine (1997b:7.21) uses a special example in his *De Civitate Dei* to illustrate this case.

Augustine recounts there the rite in honour of Liber, the god of liquids, semen and fertility. At that time in the Italian village of Lavinium, this month-long festival reached its climax when the festival celebrants worshipped a man's sexual organs to honour Liber. An image of the male sexual organs was displayed and brought into the square on a wagon. At the end of the festival, the matron of the community draped a laurel crown around it with the intention of showing the highest honour to fertility. This deed was not even permitted in the theatres. And through this, Augustine now says, the gods were multiplied in the thoughts of the impure hearts. Where we deal here with the physical castration of the penis, we are really dealing with the castration of the *sign*, Ticciati (2007:165) asserts in her excellent analysis of this narrative.

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Here Augustine wants to make a theological judgment about the prostitution of idolatry where the metaphorical statements about God became lost and your god became that on which you set your heart. That is why it is so important to perceive the thing behind the sign. Otherwise we will not come to God and remain one-dimensionally captive in our consumerist world. In summary, only in relationships does marriage exist for Luther too. For this reason he can say that marriage is a “type of Christ and the church” (LW 1: Ef 5:32), a “figure of Christ and the church” (LW 36:95, a “symbol of this great sacrament or mystery in Christ and the church” (LW 41:164) and a “kind of outward allegory” (LW 36:94).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Marriage is for Luther an institution which is therefore simultaneously worldly and sacred. It is secular because it is an ordinary earthly institution and in no way carries a sacramental meaning. It also goes back to the creation of the first man and woman, when God led Adam and Eve to each other by the hand as it were and gave them to each other. But it is also sacred because it is an ordinance of creation and was therefore instituted by God self. Yet it does not sustain faith nor does it prepare human beings for eternal life as a sacrament does, but is merely the fruit of people whom God has declared righteous in faith. This dialectical view of marriage – law and gospel – on the one hand eliminated the Canon Law of the time, and on the other hand placed marriage in the greater context of God’s relationship with creation, in particular as a foreshadowing of Christ’s relationship with the church. It is important that this double movement should be held continuously in a dialectical tension with each other. The moment that one movement is relinquished, the other becomes absolutised. We can illustrate this on the basis of Emil Brunner who took the movement of the ordinance of creation to an extreme, and then again on the basis of Karl Barth who developed the spiritualisation of marriage to unacceptable extremes.

Emil Brunner develops a *theologia naturalis* on the grounds of Luther’s declericalisation of marriage, which would eventually bring him in stark contrast with Barth’s revelatory theology. He supports Luther’s ordinances of creation and describes them as implanted in the nature of every person so that everyone instinctively knows God’s ordinances. This fits in with God’s creation (Brunner 1939:329). Sin did not abolish it and the sinful human remains aware of these ordinances. This ordinance of creation is as it were the wisdom of God to compel people who have been separated from one another, to have fellowship (Brunner 1939:194). In this way, the ordinance of creation is a natural instrument for placing human beings in fellowship and nurturing expectations about them. Therefore Brunner bases monogamy on

this. Man, wife and child form the natural relationship of meaningful existence (Brunner 1939:330). Natural love is therefore monistic and directed at the opposite sex<sup>6</sup> (Brunner 1939:334).

Karl Barth would like to take this second movement of Luther's to its logical conclusion. Since the covenant is the internal foundation of creation, creation only comes fully into its own in the creation of the woman in Genesis 2 and the person who stands in relation to his/her equal (Barth 1970:337). Now this makes human beings multiple or pluralistic: "Er ist jetzt ein Pluralis" (Barth 1970:352). However, for him it is nothing other than the prefiguring of the relationship between Christ and his church (Barth 1970:373). With this, he explains faith in creation as the extrapolation of faith in salvation. Creation's *esse verum et bonum* is concrete and real for the first time in Christ. This implies that the reconciliatory creation is the real creation first, and the initial creation is therefore uncompleted and unreal. The question can now justifiably be asked whether Barth did not assume that the relationship between creation and reconciliation was teleological rather than analogous? The implication is vast: creation is not merely an illustration of reconciliation, but in fact the *proof* of it! Or stated differently, "sign" and "thing" are inverted: creation becomes the *significare* and reconciliation the *esse*. With this, marriage becomes spiritualised and is made into something it is not. Luther's demythologising now augers a remythologising. On the basis of probably the poorest exegetical exercise in his entire *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth (1970:368) now argues that the creation of woman took place solely for the sake of the reconciliatory death of the Son: taking the rib from Adam's side indicates the blood that flowed from the crucified Jesus' side and resulted in his church! In the same way that Luther performed a double action on marriage by first secularising it and afterwards declaring it to be sacred again; Barth took the last-mentioned action to extremes and unfortunately allowed the first movement to vanish into the sand. Barth states, "coitus without co-existence" is a demonic matter, but unfortunately ends in co-existence without coitus.

In conclusion, it seems justifiable to say that Luther offers us a sociological perspective of marriage. He presents a *tertium datur* for a reduced physiological individualism and a spiritualised abstraction. In Luther's theology, Law and Gospel can be as little divided from each other as the crucifixion and the resurrection can be understood without each other.

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<sup>6</sup> One could deduce from this that the ordinance of creation leaves no room for the homosexually oriented person. The yardstick is the purpose of creation and for this reason, homosexuality is contrary to nature.

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