

# The Radical Idea of Clerical Marriage:

## *How ministry households transformed during the Reformation*

### Introduction

### Outline

1. Picture of the Medieval world: enforced clerical celibacy
2. Reformers begin to marry  
*Case studies*
3. Biblical and Theological issues in clerical marriage

## 1. Picture of the Medieval world: enforced clerical celibacy

### a. Historical context

#### *i. The rise of celibacy in the early church: virginity as inherently superior to marriage*

- Celibacy was practiced from around the second century by those desiring to be wholly devoted to God.
- Monasticism, which developed from the second century, had built into it from the beginning a celibate life.
- By the fourth century, Jerome would write, “Marriages fill the earth; virginity [fills] heaven.”

#### *ii. Clerical celibacy in the Middle Ages*

- First Lateran Council in 1123 finally enforced clerical celibacy, but it was already the norm.
- Pope Gregory aimed to make clerical celibacy the rule so that priests would be unhampered by the concerns and demands of family, be free of the ‘flesh’, and be wholly devoted to God and the Church.
- This pattern of being free from the concerns of family is one that some Reformers would imbibe, even when allowing for clerical marriage.
- As a result of sanctifying the priestly office in such a way, the Catholic Church de-valued the position of being an earthly husband and father, meaning that all earthly fatherhood was “de-sanctified and rendered powerless.”<sup>1</sup>
- Celibacy further entrenched the barrier between clergy and laity in the Middle Ages and became “the badge of clerical status.”<sup>2</sup>
- Luther wrote about how people viewed celibacy in his time:

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<sup>1</sup> F. Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350*, trans. J. Sondheimer, (London: Weidenfeld, 1993), 270.

<sup>2</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 373.

“Everybody was fully persuaded that anyone who intended to lead a holy life acceptable to God could not get married but had to live as a celibate and take the vow of celibacy.” (LW 1:35)<sup>3</sup>

iii. *The result - The great divide*

- Clerical celibacy pointed to the exalted status of the clergy, and the divide that existed between clergy and laity.

- Helen Parish:

"The exaltation of virginity over marriage ... built upon the division of the sacred and the profane, the human and the divine. Clerical celibacy was visible testimony to the sacrificial function of the priest at Mass, and to the elevated nature of the priestly caste, which stood astride the divide between earth and heaven."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Reformers begin to marry

*“In what amounted to a highly visible act of doctrinal iconoclasm, votaries left the cloister and parish clergy took wives.”<sup>5</sup>*

During the Reformation, clerical marriage became a tangible expression of departure from the Catholic Church and a tangible expression of the gospel.

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Derusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther : the radical marriage of a runaway nun and a renegade monk* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2017).144

See also: “When I was a boy, marriage was considered so infamous on account of impious and impure celibacy that I thought I could not think about married life without sin. For all were convinced that if anyone wished to live a life holy and acceptable to God, he must never become a spouse but must live a celibate and take the vow of celibacy.” From *Lectures on Genesis* (LW, 1: 135).

<sup>4</sup> Parish, Helen, *Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Parish, *Clerical Marriage*, 1.



### Case study 1: Germany and Luther

- He wrote in November 1524, "According to my present state of mind I have no intention of marrying, not that I am insensible to the emotions of the flesh, being neither wood nor stone, but because I have no desire to, and daily expect to die a heretic's death."<sup>6</sup>
- On Tuesday, June 13, 1525, Martin Luther and Katie Von Bora married in a very modest ceremony in Wittenberg. Two weeks later, they had a public celebration of their marriage at the city church, followed by a wedding banquet back at their home, an old monastery.
- Later on, he wrote about the difficulty making adjustments: "I was alone, and now there's someone else here. In bed, you wake up in the morning and see a couple of pigtales on the pillow."<sup>7</sup>
- Melancthon wrote: "You may perhaps, wonder that at a time like this, when the good are suffering at every hand, he does not suffer with them, but rather, it seems, devotes himself to revelry and compromises his good name, at the very moment when Germany is in special need of all his mind and authority."<sup>8</sup>
- Luther's lawyer from the Diet of Worms, Hieronymus Schurff, wrote, "If this monk takes a wife the whole world and the Devil himself will laugh and all the work he [Luther] has done up to now will have been for nought."<sup>9</sup>

### Case study 2: England and Cranmer

- He married Margaret in 1532, probably in July, with Nuremberg Lutheran reformer Andreas Osiander apparently officiating at the wedding. Margaret was the niece of Osiander's wife.
- The Act of Six Articles was eventually passed on 5 June 1539. It meant that any priest or other person who had taken a vow of chastity but had freely and maturely married after July 12, 1539 was guilty of a crime, punishable by death.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Martin Luther to George Spalatin, November 30, 1524. Cited in Derusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther: the radical marriage of a runaway nun and a renegade monk* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2017). 146-47.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *ibid.* 160

<sup>8</sup> Cited in *ibid.* 163

<sup>9</sup> Quote from H. A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. E. Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image Books, 1992), 196. See Coulton, *Hitting the Holy Road*, 264-65. Other Reformers, such as Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, had to send his wife away when clerical celibacy was again re-instated for a period of time in the English Reformation.

- At this stage, Margaret Cranmer returned to Germany with their children, where she remained until it was safe to return during the reign of King Edward VI.
- The *Six Articles* were repealed under the first Parliament of Edward VI in December 1547.<sup>10</sup>
- The bill allowed for clerical marriage, however its wording showed it was still far from being viewed as a positive good – it was simply better than clergy committing sin.<sup>11</sup>

Part of it read:

Although it were not only better for the estimation of priests and other ministers in the Church of God, to live chaste, sole and separate from the company of women and the bond of marriage, but also thereby they might the better intend to the administration of the Gospel, and be less intricated and troubled with the charge of household, being free and unburdened from the care and cost of finding wife and children...yet forasmuch as the contrary has rather been seen, and such uncleanness of living...have followed of compelled chastity...it would be better...that those which could not contain...live in holy marriage, than feignedly abuse with worse enormity outward chastity or single life.<sup>12</sup>

- A month after the ban on clerical marriage was lifted, Spanish reformer and disciple of Melancthon, Francisco Dryander, wrote to Thomas Cranmer from Cambridge on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1549:<sup>13</sup>

I also hear that a praiseworthy reformation has taken place in matters of religion: it has not yet seen the light, but its promulgation is daily expected. It is generally reported that the mass is abolished, and the liberty of marriage allowed to the clergy: which two I consider to be the principal heads of the entire reformation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Edward VI, c.12. See Carlson, 3.

<sup>11</sup> For the text, see 2/3 Edward VI, c.21. Cited in *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Lewis Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation : 1526-1701* (Cambridge, Eng.: James Clarke & Co, 1994), 279-80.

<sup>13</sup> Dryander had been appointed Greek Reader at Cambridge University the previous year, in 1548.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, *Cranmer in context : documents from the English Reformation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1989), 66.

*“I shall not belong to those who are accused of attacking Rome, like the Greeks fought Troy, only to be able to be able to take a wife.”*

*-Calvin*

- “Always keep in mind what I seek to find in her, for I am none of those insane lovers who embrace also the vices of those they are in love with, when they are smitten at first sight with a fine figure. This only is the beauty which attracts me: if she is chaste, if not too nice or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about my health.”

- Letters of John Calvin 1:141

- He eventually married Idelette in 1540.
- John and Idelette have a little boy who dies at 2 weeks, and another little daughter dies at birth and another premature baby.

“The Lord has certainly inflicted a bitter wound in the death of our infant son.”

- His wife dies March 1549 having just turned 40.

### 3. Biblical and Theological issues in clerical marriage

#### a. Sola Scriptura

#### b. Faith active in love: The relationship between justification and sanctification

- **Faith formed by love:** as a person co-operates with God's grace, as they love God and love their neighbour, faith is formed in them, and the end of the process is salvation.
- **Faith is active in love:** Reformers reframing of justification and sanctification.<sup>15</sup>
- And for Luther, Marrying Katie was his "good work".<sup>16</sup> He married her in what he considered obedience to Christ.

#### c. Priesthood of all believers: the chasm closes

- On this gap between priests and laity, Luther wrote:

They have sought by this means to set up a seed bed of implacable discord, by which clergy and laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth...here, indeed, are the roots of that detestable tyranny of the clergy over the laity.

- Luther deemed this as unscriptural:

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the "spiritual estate"; princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the "temporal estate"... all Christians are truly of the "spiritual estate," and there is among them no difference at all but that of office, as Paul says in I Corinthians 12:12.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Borrowing from chapter 8 of "Faith Active in Love: Reformation" in Lindberg, *Love : a brief history through western Christianity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Derusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther : the radical marriage of a runaway nun and a renegade monk* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2017). 152-53.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to The Christian Nobility of the German Nation*.



**Justification by faith → Priesthood of all believers → expressed in clerical marriage**

- By demolishing the demarcation between the spiritual and temporal “estates” and making every aspect of life a sphere in which to honour and obey God, marriage and family became just as valid a sphere as celibacy in which to live the Christian life.

Conclusion