

MARRIAGE, LIFE AND FAMILY: REFLECTING THE HOLY TRINITY



INTRODUCTION



We live in challenging times. The sexual revolution has, in recent years, accelerated its pace and raised questions in our context which have never been asked before. Even the world of the Early Church, which was rife with sexual immorality, never came to the point of questioning either the definition of marriage and family, nor its objective value to individuals and societies.

Still, our God is not absent from the chaos. He has allowed it to come for His own good purposes. More than that, He has raised up The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and placed us squarely in this context. You were baptized for this time and place.

As with every heresy that has challenged Christ's Church, there is a bright silver lining. "God's Word shines brighter through the cross" (TLH 260:5).

- Arianism led to one of God's greatest gifts to the world: the Nicene Creed.
- Nestorius and Eutyches led the Church to develop Chalcedonian Christology.
- The medieval papacy led to a clearer articulation of the doctrine of justification.

What blessing God intends to give us through the present turmoil remains to be seen, but this much is clear. The path to seeing this blessing lies not in avoiding, but in a full engagement with the heresies of our day. And it rests upon the Word of God, repentance and prayer.

The heresies of our day center on the direct attack on the family. This, in turn, is a two-pronged attack.

- ❶ It seeks to sever the bond between woman and child, and so destroy life directly.
- ❷ It seeks to sever the bond between husband and wife through divorce, pornography and a redefinition of marriage.

The recent Supreme Court opinions redefining marriage cannot be seen in isolation from antichristian philosophies that can be traced as far back as the French Revolution, and which burst into American consciousness in the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Recent court decisions did, however, bring two things to pass. First, they have created conditions where Christians can no longer live out their faith without directly contradicting secular powers, whether

corporate, cultural or governmental. Second, the increasing frequency and intensity of these clashes have sharpened our understanding of the perichoretic relationship between holy marriage, the sanctity of human life and the integrity of the family.

At our last Synod Convention, Resolution 4-02A added a seventh mission emphasis to the six that were previously listed by the 2013 convention. Namely, “to strengthen and support the Lutheran Family in living our God’s design.”

The 2016 LCMS Convention was blessed with the foresight to recognize that the tangled threads of the sexual revolution all converge in the first estate that God ever instituted. In the garden, before the Fall, God united Adam and Eve in holy marriage and thus instituted the first human family.

This family contained within it the other two estates: the Church and the state. As such, it was the first object of Satan’s attack, and it remains the focus of the serpent’s venom.

To strengthen Lutheran families, it is our task to untangle the confusions of our day and to reweave them according to the pattern that God has designed as a glorious tapestry. In so doing, not only will Lutheran families be strengthened, but also all who are blessed to see and embrace God’s design.

Every member of the LCMS can greatly benefit from a developed thinking on the issues of marriage, life and family. Every member can benefit from clear and Gospel-centered pastoral guidance rising from the Word of God and proclaimed by hearts united in Christ (Concordia).

CLEAR PASTORAL GUIDANCE BEGINS WITH THE LAW OF GOD (TORAH).

The Law of God (Torah) paints a picture of the true man, created in the image and likeness of God. Hence, the description of true man entails a description of God Himself. The confluence of these two realities is most clearly seen in Jesus. On the cross we see the One True Man and the One True God. Both are seen in the same image.

When considering the Law of God, we do well to remember that its theological function (second use) is inseparable from theology in its proper sense as a revelation of the nature of God. By describing the image and likeness of God, the Law describes not only man’s nature, but God’s.

Moreover, by describing the true nature of man, the Law is not merely describing an inaccessible and unrealistic ideal. It is describing the real hope of humanity restored (third use). The Law exactly describes how, in the resurrection of the body, we will truly be Christ-like, which is to say, God-like (Ps. 82:6).

The doctrine of justification demands that we never delude ourselves into thinking that we can attain this beatific vision “by our own thoughts, works, or preparations” (AC IV).

Still, we must not fall prey to the Gnostic heresy that forsakes a holy longing to be conformed to the image of Christ. Nor may we hide this godly desire from unbelievers (thus hiding the lamp under a bushel).

The Law itself, *ipso facto*, is not a curse. It does not bring death, but is “holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” (ROM. 7:12–13). The *curse is sin*, and our salvation is Christ.



“The Law is a tutor which brings us, and all people, to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” (GAL. 3:24). As people of God who rejoice in Christ, let us not deny our world the tutor given for the purpose of leading them to the same Christ that we have found.

Our Law/Gospel dichotomy is useful for keeping the Gospel free of confusions that diminish it and detract from the glory of Christ. There is, however, a reductionist rendering of this dichotomy that does not give full expression to the biblical use of the Law, and thus leaves the people of God poorer and not richer. They are confused and ill-equipped to face the virulent Gnosticism of our present age.

Please bear with me here, I don't want to be too slight in characterizing the problem, but neither do I want to get side-tracked into another topic — important as it is.

The reductionist reading of Law and Gospel tends to preach the Law only until repentance is achieved and then leave it entirely in the rear-view mirror, while radical grace is amplified. While this may be appropriate in some situations of pastoral practice, it cannot be the only pastoral practice.

If we do not help our people think more deeply about why, exactly, God pronounces sin as sin, we withhold from the people of God a full view of the hope of heaven, and in the meantime, leave them ill equipped to answer Satan's challenges to the Gospel.

WE LOOK AT THE FIRST TEMPTATION

In the first temptation, and see how Satan drew Eve's attention to the one thing God was withholding from Adam and her. We often want to scream at the pages of Holy Writ to help her see all the many and varied gifts that He did give to them.

Our people are being tempted in the very same way. Rather than trying to help Eve after the fact, we can help our Church and our world in the present. We can

redirect their attention to the infinite number of good, life-giving and fruitful gifts of this world so that they are better equipped to live in faith, hope and love.

To do this, we will need to see and understand the gifts of God implied in the Law. Just as God's command, “do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” implied, “I give you every other tree of the garden.” So also, “Honor your father and mother. Thou shalt not murder, and Thou shalt not commit adultery,” imply untold gifts and blessings.

We need to tell of them more clearly and deliberately.

THE ANALOGY OF MOSES

Moses climbed Mount Nebo and saw the Promised Land, even though he couldn't enter it. The Law of Moses gives us a vantage point to see Christ more comprehensively than those who are actually on the ground in the Promised Land. This is an advantage that we should take, without ever losing sight of the fact that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring us across the Jordan to walk in the place that we see through the Law.

I have been using the word *Torah* at strategic places in this extended introduction. Let me explain why.

For the Old Testament believers, the Torah is the revelation of Yahweh. It is not just the revelation from Yahweh about His will for mankind's behavior. It is also the revelation of Yahweh *about His own identity*. In fact, these two aspects of God's revelation must be absolutely and unfailingly held together if we are to remain orthodox. For the totality of Christ is, at one and the same time, the revelation of the One True God, and the revelation of every true man.

To address the manifold and frightening perversions of humanity that are rampant among us, and are even insinuating themselves into the Church, let us return to a deep reflection upon the Holy Trinity.



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TRINITY

The Holy Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — created and gave gifts reflecting Himself, especially the gifts of marriage, life and family. As the Holy Trinity is the unity of three, so also marriage, life and family form a unity of three that echoes the reality of God. This is our starting point. We must be clear from the start that the priority to strengthen and support families is no mere social program but is “a high doxology” unto the Holy Trinity (See Martin Franzmann, “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth” *LSB* 834:4).

Marriage, life and family is a *trinity* testifying to the Holy Trinity: Those in Christ are of the Bride married to Him (*EPH. 5:25-33*); the Father raises the dead and gives life (*JOHN 5:21*); and together they form God’s family called, gathered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit always leading us to “hear the word of God and do it” (*LUKE 8:21*).

The eternal Father is “the fountain and source of all goodness” (Post-Communion Collect, *LSB*, 201), who eternally begets the Son and who with the Son sends forth the eternally proceeding Spirit. To speak of God is to speak of relationships in the fullness of their distinctiveness, unity, reciprocity and complementarity.

Families are not human constructs subject to change, but creations of God sharing His unchangeableness. The first family was created when God drew Eve from the side of Adam and gave them to one another in holy marriage (*GEN. 2:18-25; 1 TIM. 2:13*). Fundamentally, the household — considered as a creation of God — comes into being through holy matrimony. The household, not the individual, is the irreducible unit of human society.

Today’s culture constantly seeks to divide humanity into solitary individuals who, in turn, become absorbed into a collective whole. Such thinking twists the Trinitarian categories of person and relationship into individualism and collectivism. Overturning every natural familial bond, it attempts to reshape God’s creation contrary to human nature apart from the image of God.

Christian theology, on the contrary, renounces every effort to isolate and individualize the human being — with the same unyielding determination as it refuses to divide the Holy Trinity, recognizing the inherent relationships of human existence as God-given and fundamental to human identity.



MARRIAGE

“It is not good for man to be alone” (GEN. 2:18). These words, spoken in a world not yet under the curse of sin, sound like a contradiction. After declaring all things “very good” (GEN. 1:31), God spoke the words “not good” about man in his isolated state. Mankind was not created for autonomy, but for relationship. Man was created for woman, and woman for man. Their very bodies were made different in order to become one.

Marriage is not an afterthought. It is the crowning act of God’s creation because this great mystery was intended from the start to image the one true marriage, the marriage of Christ and His Church (EPH. 5:32). Man was created for communion with God. Marriage was instituted as an icon of that union.

The last words spoken of the world before the Fall were, “The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (GEN. 2:25). The very next word in the Hebrew text, *nachash* (serpent), signals that it is the marriage of man and wife which is the focus of Satan’s fury. His attack on Holy Marriage continues still.

Satan is evil, but he is not ignorant. He understands that marriage is the place where the Image of God is powerfully manifested in creation. In the most intimate communion between two people, in the comprehensive union of mind, body, spirit, will and possessions the union of Christ and His Church is mysteriously indicated (EPH. 5:32).

A military general may not realize the importance of a strategic position until a superior general on the enemy side makes that position the focus of his attack. Such are we. Sin-darkened reason cannot perceive the glory either of holy marriage, or of holy singleness. Only God’s Word can enlighten us. Satan’s incessant and increasing attacks on both demand that the Church defend and protect holy marriage.

Let us not squander this intelligence. False teachers continue to insist that attacks on marriage are mere debates over morality. In the face of Satan’s attacks, and contrary to the clear teaching of Holy Scripture, they would have us believe that our resources are better deployed elsewhere. But guided by the Gospel, we will not be deceived into confessing marriage in isolation from Christ’s relationship to His Holy Bride, the Church.

Once we have come again to see the centrality of marriage to the Gospel, we can also see more clearly the myriad threats to its foundations. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (GEN. 2:24). According to this divine institution, marriage is an exclusive (“leave”), permanent (“cleave”), and complementary (“one flesh”) union. All three pillars have been under attack for more than a century.

Vows are taken before the state with the expectation that it will employ its God-given power in service of these vows. Yet, beginning in the last third of the 19th century, the state has increasingly failed to enforce the permanence of marriage vows especially through so-called “no-fault divorce laws.” In 1967 the divorce rate was three percent. Today it hovers near 50 percent

During the same period, and becoming more pronounced in the last half-century, the state has put aside its responsibility to enforce the exclusivity of marriage vows. Laws prohibiting fornication and adultery were, at first, not enforced and later, overturned. During this time, out-of-wedlock births have risen from two percent to 45 percent.

As with permanence and exclusivity, the state has likewise given up its interest in protecting that marriage be between a man and a woman (complementarity). Incrementally from *Lawrence v. Texas* to *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the federal government has prevented states from enforcing their own laws supporting complementarity. All of this has been done both shaping and following a new culture (cult) that worships a different God.

As the state gives up its God-given duty, and the popular culture turns to foreign gods, the people of God are in desperate need of a champion to support their mutual vows of exclusivity, permanence and complementarity.

The Lutheran Church, fortified by the proper distinction between the two kingdoms, has been raised up by God for this moment. The Lutheran doctrine of vocation and the Catechism’s Table of Duties can assist us to address every aspect of culture while avoiding either legalistic moralism or antinomian libertinism. Here, the Church can and ought to address what it means in our culture to “lead a sexually pure and decent life in word and deed” (Small Catechism 1, 6).



LIFE

Matrimony derives from the Latin root, *mater* (mother) and the suffix *monium* (an action, state, or condition). It creates the state of motherhood. Later, this was derived through the French and old English into *Marriage*. Marriage is directly, and inseparably, the act whereby God makes mothers. That means He creates life.

The one-flesh union of man and women is the divine means whereby every new life comes into the world. By God's design, life is conceived within Holy Marriage, and the child, this new image-bearer, is placed into that marriage. Just as "it is not good for the man to be alone," human life arises, and is protected, nurtured and grows healthily only in the nest of Holy Marriage.

Life created in the image of God shares in His own holiness and eternity. Therefore, every human life has infinite worth from God at the very moment of sperm-egg fusion. By God's design, the union that creates life is a union of love. As the union of husband and wife both expresses and generates love, so the egg-sperm union generates both life and a new family member who is loved and will love. These two distinct unions of life and love must never be separated, because they reflect the Lord of life who by nature is love (1 JOHN 4:8, 16).

God drew Eve from Adam's side. Her very existence came from him. Simultaneously, while Adam slept, God created both the object of his love (Eve), and Adam's self-giving love for her. This, too, is a sheer

gift from God. In a similar way, when Adam knew his wife, Eve, God bestowed upon them a child together who both exists through their love and depends upon their love (GEN. 4:1).

The pattern of the world's first marriage, remains the pattern of all marriage. Man still exists as woman's source, "for Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 TIM. 2:13), even as Christ is the constant source of His bride, the Church. Through the marriage union, God still creates persons who depend on their parents' ongoing love for their care.

Children not only receive love, but also return that love. Father, mother and child share a love created by the Triune God. In this way the family reflects the living God who exists in the love of the Holy Trinity.

Since persons both come into existence by love, and remain dependent upon that love, the protection and nurture of married love protects and nurtures human life. To the extent that marriage is threatened, life itself is threatened, both directly and indirectly.

Life conceived outside of Holy Matrimony is life directly threatened. Of the 60 million American abortions since *Roe v. Wade*, averages indicate that 50.4 million occurred outside of marriage.¹ More recently, *in vitro fertilization* (IVF) has proven to be a statistically higher threat, even to the children of married couples. Two decades of British records indicate that 93.3 percent of embryos created through IVF either

¹ "In 2011, the vast majority (81%) of women who had an abortion were classified as 'single' ... separated, widowed or divorced remained fairly constant over the decade, at around 3%." *Abortion Review, Statistics Briefing*, May 2, 2012, <http://abortionreview.org/index.php/site/article/964/>; "Most women getting abortions (83%) are unmarried." *The National Abortion Federation*, (2003), https://5aa1b2xfmfh2e2mk03kk8rsx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/women_who_have_abortions.pdf; "In 2014, unmarried women accounted for 85.5% of all abortions (CDC)," http://www.abort73.com/abortion_facts/us_abortion_statistics/.





die or are indefinitely frozen.² In 2012, it was reported that five million babies had been born worldwide through IVF with approximately 350,000 added each year.³ These statistics suggest that since 1978, upwards of 94 million embryonic children have either died or been frozen in the IVF process.

In addition, ongoing experimentation with human lives are being carried out every day. Chimeras, “three-parent” embryos and clones are created outside the possibility of marriage. Since the life of any person begins at the manipulations of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART), when death is premeditated and caused, the 5th Commandment is violated. What is more, ART moves procreation out of the sanctity and intimacy of the marriage bed, raising considerable concerns about the 6th Commandment.

Indirectly, the dissolution of Holy Matrimony threatens not only the life of the unborn, but the lives of every child in the household. People who come from broken homes are nearly twice as likely to attempt suicide.⁴ For the parents, divorce increases suicide rates by a factor of three.⁵

In summary, human life is threatened by broken and disordered marriages. To be a life-affirming Church we must include an active and vigorous affirmation of God's design for families.

² “[T]he Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), the fertility industry regulator, which has recorded IVF processes over the past 21 years, and made public by Lord Howe, the Health Minister. Since August 1991 more than 3.5 million human embryos have been created, producing only 235,480 ‘gestational sacs’ or evidence of successful implantation,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/9772233/1.7-million-human-embryos-created-for-IVF-thrown-away.html>.

³ *Live Science*, “5 Million Babies Born from IVF, Other Reproductive Technologies,” (July 3, 2012), <https://www.livescience.com/21355-5-million-babies-born-ivf-technologies.html>.

⁴ Velez, C.N. and Cohen, P., “Suicidal Behavior and Ideation in a Community Sample of Children,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (1988).

⁵ “One recent study by the National Institute for Healthcare Research in Rockville, MD indicates that divorced people are three times as likely to commit suicide as people who are married,” <http://divorceinfo.com/suicide.htm>.

FAMILY

The perfect revelation of God is a revelation of Three. So also, the marriage of two does not collapse upon itself, but moves outward to others. The marriage of a husband and wife unites not only two people into a new relationship, but a whole host of relationships. Parents become in-laws, entire families, clans, tribes and even nations, are united by marriage.

In like manner, multiple children of the same parents are brought into a God-given unique bond of brotherhood and sisterhood. These relationships are given as a rich blessing for mutual support, friendship, love and mutual service. By Holy Matrimony, brother and sisters also become in-laws to enrich and help the new household that God has created.

As the bonds of Holy Matrimony are weakened, so are the bonds between brother and sister. No longer can we take for granted that brother and sister will grow up together in the same house. Add to this that the lines between stepsiblings through marriage and unrelated “siblings” through live-in arrangements are blurred. This can make the intimacy of a household both physically and emotionally dangerous.

Simultaneously, cross-generational bonds of grandparents and great-grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins lose their permanency, and with it, the

God-intended benefits of extended family, which can help compensate for parental insufficiencies. Even as parents have more and greater challenges, they have less and weaker support.

These family relationships are not incidental to human flourishing. They are not human inventions. They are, rather, specific gifts of God in their own right. The interconnections of family provide the identity which the human spirit craves, and without which we die.⁶ As gifts, these relationships are to be received in faith and thanksgiving. They should be extolled and protected for the unique ways that they uphold marriage and protect human life.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s mission priority, “To Strengthen and Support Lutheran Families,” points toward the profound theology of the human family. It touches upon every endeavor undertaken by the Church, because the nature of the family is derived from the very nature of God.

Therefore, let it be our aim that both the Office of National Mission, and the Office of International Mission, give every ministry and every Recognized Service Organization under its authority, the charge to build around this mission priority.

⁶ Mary Eberstadt, “The Primal Scream of Identity Politics,” Nov. 6, 2017, *The Weekly Standard*, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-primal-scream-of-identity-politics/article/2010234>.





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