

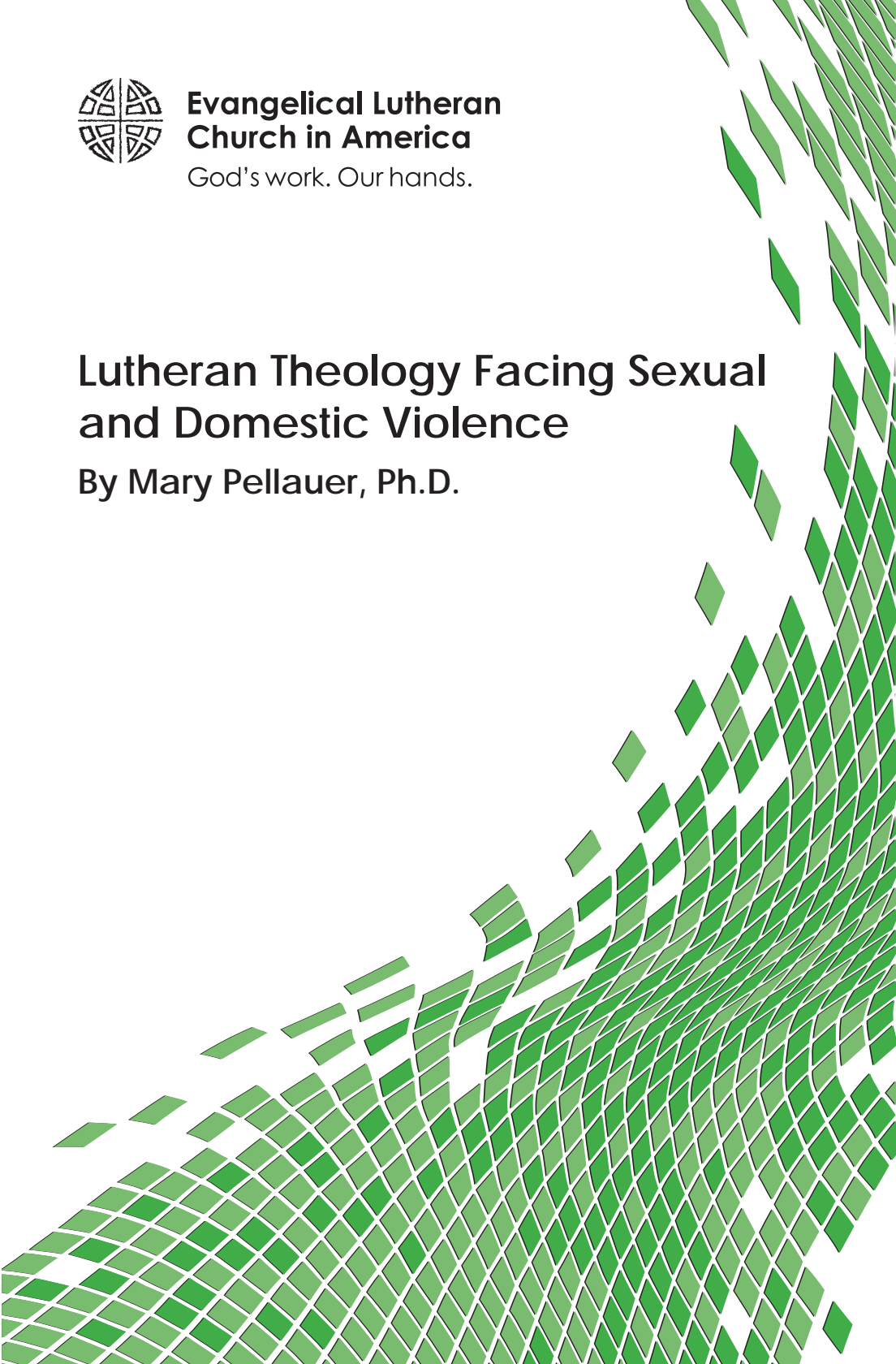


**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

Lutheran Theology Facing Sexual and Domestic Violence

By Mary Pellauer, Ph.D.



Editor's note to the second edition

Many, many people in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America work to end domestic and sexual abuse and to heal those who have been harmed in families and intimate relationships. Across congregations, social ministry organizations, synodical offices, campus ministries and chaplaincies, women and men work together to address domestic and sexual violence.

Unfortunately, a variety of social and religious forces continue to support widespread and enduring violence particularly against women and children. At the inception of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1987, the Commission for Women was appointed to address problems that women and girls face in church and society; among their enduring legacies was work across this church and with ecumenical partners to confront the tragedies of domestic and sexual violence.

One necessary step in addressing this violence, argues theologian Mary Pellauer, is to name the problems in Lutheran theology for survivors of abuse and to renew Lutheran theology in ways that not only strengthen this church's abilities to help survivors but also prepare this church to prevent domestic and sexual violence. Originally published in 1998 by the Commission for Women, Pellauer's work was addressed to seminary professors preparing candidates for ministry, yet it is important for everyone who is Lutheran to read.

Pellauer speaks both as a theologian within the Lutheran tradition and as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse in her home. The edge and expectancy of her testimony is one crucial aspect of the ideas you will read in this book. As the world has increasingly understood, listening to victims of violence is absolutely necessary for them and for societies to heal and to renew. Hearing victims of violence fully in their anger and sorrow ultimately changes everyone who listens. It is my hope as the editor of this second edition of "Lutheran Theology Facing Sexual and Domestic Violence" that everyone who reads this will think and see differently for having listened.

The title of this work could well enough be named "Lutheran *Tradition* Facing Sexual and Domestic Violence," for it is not so much the formal and familiar categories of Lutheran theology, such as the two kingdoms or law and gospel, that Pellauer addresses as it is the deeply seated legacy of Luther's thought that permeates the Lutheran tradition in its entirety. She entreats Lutherans to explore the ways that Luther's ideas on marriage, sexuality, men and women, and authority continue to run unex-

amined through social and religious discourse. As a survivor, a Lutheran survivor, Pellauer draws our attention to the importance of studying what she calls Luther's theological ambivalence so that we might better tend to victims of domestic and sexual violence and work with many partners across and outside this church to prevent it.

It is my hope as the editor of this re-edition that congregational leaders, lay and rostered, will be challenged by her writing and testimony and therefore compelled to further action.

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**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

**A mighty fortress is our God,
a bulwark never failing;
our helper he amid the flood
of mortal ills prevailing** (*Service Book and Hymnal* #150)

No other hymn is so central to a lived sense of the Lutheran tradition. Sung joyously and triumphantly, as a banner of our church, it is meant to connote the safety and security of believers under divine protection. It goes hand in hand with other familiar Lutheran slogans such as “*sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*” (“scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone”) and “*simul iustus et peccator*” (“simultaneously justified and guilty”).

Central. Basic. Foundational. Unquestionable.

Unless...unless, maybe...unless you are a battered woman or an abused child.

For, you see, the words to this grand old hymn strongly imply that the enemy is outside the fortress. What happens to the singers who, after the gates swing shut and the drawbridge is up, find that they are locked in with the enemy? That, in just the precise place everyone else thinks is safe, you are in mortal terror and danger to life and limb and sanity? That the bulwark is a nightmare?

In the last forty years or so, we have learned more about domestic and sexual violence than in the previous forty centuries. One important dimension of this time has been the new effort of the church to cope gracefully with the religious aspects of these experiences.¹ Today we know that some elements of the Christian tradition condone or encourage violence and violation, and that some elements stop, heal or prevent them. Both are present. Survivors and helpers may have faith crises as a result.

Sorting these out can be a lifelong effort, both intellectually and emotionally. As the child of a Lutheran battered woman, myself abused by her husband/

¹ Many people have helped with this project. Jean Martensen of the ELCA Commission for Women requested it and was always thoughtful in response to drafts. Since I make no claim to an encyclopedic knowledge of Luther’s writings, I am especially indebted to Kristen Kvam, who offered me directions in *Luther’s Works* many years ago. Joy Bussert has been a companion and friend in working through Lutheran themes for twenty years or so. Many Lutheran women, ordained and lay, have read drafts of this work and offered many wonderful suggestions, especially Elizabeth Bettenhausen, Gretchen Lepcke, Ingrid Christiansen, Stacy Kitahata, Sonia Solomonson, Karen Parsons, Carol Thysell, and Mary Train. Other helpful respondents include Susan Thistlethwaite, James Poling, Randy Nelson, Dan Martensen and David Pellauer. I did a similar project in “Augustine on Rape: One Chapter in the Theological Tradition” in *Violence against Women & Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Adams and Marie Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 207–241.

my father, I have more than a little stake in these issues. The confusions I felt for years in that violent home and then for years as an adult recovering in therapy, are deep and long-lasting. I do not pretend either to have resolved all my faith crises about this theological material or that mine are especially representative. During my years as a seminary teacher, a paraprofessional sexual assault counselor and ELCA churchwide staff member, I was blessed to hear many survivors' faith concerns.

In this book I'd like to stimulate discussion of such topics concerning Lutheran theology. First, I'll provide an introduction to what Luther said explicitly about sexual and domestic violence, commenting freely on the basis of what we know today about these topics. As we shall see, Luther was a man of his times as we are creatures of ours. There is a good deal of medieval thought which is to be lamented. It worries me that often when we say someone was "a man of his times," it means we are excusing him, and I have no desire to do that. I want to hold him accountable to us, which is different than blaming or making anachronistic judgments. Holding Luther and ourselves accountable depends upon something which transcends his time and place—empathy. Empathy transcends conceptual logic and formulas; it reaches beyond itself into the heart, and that is where we must go in order to face sexual and domestic violence.

In the text below I will often speak about "our" reactions to some of Luther's texts. Since many readers may not share my responses, it is important to say at the outset that I include in such "we" statements the common reactions of other survivors and activists in the movement to end domestic violence, but also those of many members of Lutheran congregations. Sometimes there is a large gap between the views of activists against sexual and domestic violence, who may not know or care overly much about religion, and those of congregation members, who may not know or care overly much about sexual and domestic violence. I personally overlap these two groups; and so do some others. "We" here points to those who straddle these camps.

Second, I will suggest some theological changes we must make in order to have a theological position that can more adequately stand against domestic violence. Some themes we must remove or renounce; others we must strengthen or extend. Incorporating the perceptions of survivors is essential to this work. Those who have not lived in family terrors often believe that their understanding is normative, or should be normative; it may be surprising to hear how different survivors' perceptions and needs are. Ultimately, it is my contention that deep theological thinking and reformation are necessary for the church to further the healing and prevention of domestic and sexual abuse. I will offer four specific theological proposals for renewal: peace,

baptism, authority, and sexuality; I will offer four ways of seeing the world that the church needs to renounce: medieval social theory, patriarchy, biblicism, and a theology of the status quo, the belief that whatever happens, no matter what, is God's will.

These are proposals. I expect people to disagree—respectfully (that is, without name-calling or defining me out of the church). I find disagreement lively and positive so long as it is not abusive. I invite others to enter into similar struggles, or to speak out loud the struggles they may have had for years in silence. We need all the help, or the solidarity, we can get to heal and stop these abuses.

Discussion Questions

- *What images of fortresses and bulwarks come to mind when you hear Luther's text to the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"? What images and words come to mind of the opposite of fortresses and bulwarks? How might these oppositional images help you to hear Pellauer's witness as a survivor of abuse within a church family?*
- *What does accountability mean to you? As you read this book, you may want to keep track of the different ways you can imagine the church can be accountable to those who are abused.*

Luther's Explicit Comments and the Theological Tangle that Results

One shouldn't whip children too hard. My father once whipped me so severely that I ran away from him, and he was worried that he might not win me back again. I wouldn't like to strike my little Hans very much, lest he become shy and hate me. I know nothing that would give me greater sorrow. God acts like this [saying], "I'll chastise you, my children, but through another—through Satan or the world—but if you cry out and run to me, I'll rescue you and raise you up again." For God does not want us to hate him.²

Many people will notice the strong condemnations here. It is lovely to read that "God does not want us to hate him," and that God rescues us and raises us up again when we are cast down in pain. It is important that Luther expresses both a strong moral disapproval of battering children and a sympathetic emotional connection. Nothing would give him "greater sorrow" than what he imagined as the reactions of his son to abuse.

² "Table Talk, 1532," *Luther's Works* (LW) 54:157.

This empathy may be among the most serious resources for preventing or healing violence in the family.

Still, while I notice those elements, they are not what leap out at me. I am not sure I can convey my reactions when I first found this comment decades ago. Instead of that warm support, I felt horror. For Luther said, “God acts like this,” like the battering father. God was on both sides of the equation, the rescuing side, yes, but also on the abusive side. This sense, that God is causing the abuse, is one of the deepest terrors of victims of family violence. It is also one of the most disempowering beliefs, for it means that you are absolutely helpless.

Paradoxically, I also felt relief. Suddenly I understood better why I had the sneaking suspicion, the fear, that God was really behind the abuse. Because Luther said so, right out loud! No wonder I was confused! It was neither just my own poor theology, nor was it only the self-blame that is so common among abuse victims. It was right there, objectively, in the mouth of the founder of my denomination. Both parts were there, the haven and the reason why one needed a haven. This was precisely what I grew up with: theological ambivalence.³

Believers do not need to know that Luther said so in order to have learned such an attitude. All they need is a fairly simple combination of self-blame and the sense that whatever happens must be God’s will. Self-blame is thought by some experts in child abuse to be essential to the child’s sanity. Adults who are abused also blame themselves for many complex reasons, including an attempt to prevent further violence.⁴ The belief that whatever happens is God’s will just because it happens, I call the theology of the status quo. It is extremely common in the Christian tradition both in centuries past and in our day. The theology of the status quo comes from many places in Luther’s thought as well as many other sources in the tradition.

Furthermore, Luther says that he himself was victimized physically by his father—not just whipped, but beaten severely enough that he ran away. For a survivor/activist like me, this raises the suspicion that Luther’s work represented a theology of a victim—that is, an unhealed perspective. Was his

³ Following Elizabeth Bettenhausen (“God, Women and Men: Theology and Anthropology in Augustine, Aquinas and Luther”), I choose ambivalence as a relatively neutral term. In Gestalt psychology circles, it might be called crazy-making. Luther is not the only great theologian to evidence ambivalence; see Kari E. Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*.

⁴ Leonard Shengold, “Child Abuse and Deprivation: Soul Murder,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 27 (1979): 539.

theological ambivalence the result of that home life? Were the abusive family dynamics somehow invisibly embedded at the very center of our theological tradition?

This suspicion is almost too much to bear. Better, perhaps, to practice denial—to turn away from these topics altogether, or to look only at one side, the positive side, of Luther’s comments. But to survivors, activists and those who do not think that God ordains every moment, good and evil alike, denial is neither possible nor salutary. We cannot turn away any longer. Nor can we ignore one side in favor of the other. Both sides are there, and both need to be acknowledged in order to have an adequate sense of the struggle to come to terms with Luther’s thought and experience and their legacy within Christianity.

A further serious issue is raised by these comments. One shouldn’t whip children “too hard” or “too much,” Luther said. Apparently he had a standard for judging between appropriate physical punishment and “too much,” though he did not tell us what it was. Clearly, Luther took the physical chastisement of children totally for granted. But do these remarks indicate that assumption, or do they stress rather the limitation of violence? I cannot tell.

Whether one judges the opposition to abuse to be major or minor in Luther’s remarks probably depends on the social position and experience of each reader. But the combination of support for victims and themes inimical to victims was characteristic of much more than these chance remarks around the Luther dinner table. The ambivalence can be found in other of Luther’s treatments of children and of women.

Child-rearing and Child Abuse

Quite often Luther’s comments about child-rearing were attractive and helpful. He thought parenting was a noble work since mothers and fathers convey the gospel as “apostles, bishops and pastors” to their offspring. Often he digressed to praise the ordinary tasks of bringing up children.

The Large Catechism, for instance, features a substantial digression while discussing the Fourth Commandment: “Honor thy father and mother that thy days may be long in the land that the Lord thy God has given thee.” Luther had strong expectations of good parenting:

It would be well to preach to parents on the nature of their office, how they would treat those committed to their authority. Although the duty of superiors is not explicitly stated in the Ten Commandments, it is frequently dealt with in many other passages of Scripture. . . . *God does not want to have knaves or tyrants in this office and responsibility. . . .*

Therefore do not imagine that the parental office is a matter of your pleasure and whim. It is a strict commandment and injunction of God, who holds you accountable for it. The trouble is no one perceives or heeds this. Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement, gave us servants only to work like cows or asses, and gave us subjects to treat them as we please, as if it were no concern of ours what they learn or how they live.⁵

Please note the use of “us” in these lines—Luther assumed the point of view not of children, servants nor subjects, but those of parents, masters and rulers. Parents do “deadly harm” and “earn hell by the way they have reared their children.”⁶ This is very important. In our time, as in Luther’s, people do act as though God gave children for pleasure or amusement or some other irrelevant reason.

But Luther fudged this point. Notice that he cited no biblical texts to ground his contention that good parenting is a “strict commandment and injunction” of God. It was disingenuous merely to say that “the trouble is no one perceives or heeds this.” There were reasons for that. One was that Luther disregarded the actual practices of parenting and ruling throughout the centuries prior to his time. Connected with this point is another, more specific, evasion. Luther avoided serious consideration of the issues about children as property.

Even these implied limits on parental behavior came late in a long discussion of the deep and fundamental importance of *obedience* to parents as a “great, good and holy work here assigned to children.”⁷ Indeed, for Luther as for other theologians before the modern period, parental authority was the basis for all civil authority. “Out of the authority of parents all other authority is derived and developed. . . . Thus all who are called masters stand in the place of parents and derive from them their power and ability to govern.”⁸ Luther’s teaching highlights the tension between his exhortations of obedience and his admonition that children are not for parental folly:

Young people must therefore be taught to revere their parents as God’s representatives. . . . You are to esteem and prize them [parents] as the

⁵ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” Robert H. Fischer, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955), 31-32. Emphasis added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24. For a strong critique of the theological importance of obedience, see Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982).

⁸ “The Large Catechism,” 28. Luther was certainly not the only theologian who made such an argument; political philosophers did so as well. See for instance, David Hunt, *Parents and Children in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 149–152.

most precious treasure on earth. In your words you are to behave respectfully toward them, and not address them discourteously, critically and censoriously, but submit to them and hold your tongue, *even if they go too far*. You are also to honor them by your actions (that is, with your body and possessions), serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble or poor; all this you should do not only cheerfully but with humility and reverence, as in God's sight.⁹

These are extremely difficult comments for those of us who were abused as children, as is the Fourth Commandment itself.¹⁰ *Even if* parents "go too far" (whatever that might have meant to Luther), cheerful and reverent obedience was enjoined upon children. This qualification weighs in on the side of Luther's assuming, rather than limiting, violence against children. For those who broke this commandment, the hangman or the grim reaper were said to be the consequences.¹¹

Luther took the physical punishment of children for granted, as did virtually everyone in the western world until the nineteenth century.¹² As a case in point, in 1871 the first case of child abuse to be tried in court was brought under the laws related to cruelty to animals, the best legal precedent at the time.¹³

⁹ "The Large Catechism," 23–24. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ It is common for victimized children to understand the Fourth Commandment to mean that they are to be servile toward abusive parents; they may engage in strenuous struggles to reinterpret the text to make it compatible with seeking their own health and well-being or to cope with believing they have violated it by their normal reactions to the abuse. Marshall Scott, "Honor Thy Father and Mother," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* (Summer 1988), is a good resource for those who struggle with this material. Today some biblical scholars argue that this commandment is directed more against elder abuse than toward securing the docility of children. Thus, Brevard Childs claims, "Lying at the heart of the original prohibition was a command which protected parents from being driven out of the home or abused after they could no longer work." See *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 418–419. For a liberation theology view of the Ten Commandments (stressing that the prologue, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt," implies that the Commandments were not to be oppressive tools), see Jan Lockman, *Signposts to Freedom: The 10 Commandments and Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982).

¹¹ "The Large Catechism," 27.

¹² There were few outright condemnations of the abuse of children in the tradition. Mostly the tradition argued that physical punishment of children is the only way to teach them adequately (learning theory), or that children are the property of parents, who may do with them what they wish. One of the few exceptions was St. Anselm, who strongly objected to beating children in monastic life. See Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the 9th to the 13th Centuries," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd DeMause (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 131.

¹³ See William A. Stacey and Anson Shupe, *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 19.

Luther simultaneously highly valued the raising of children. “Bringing up their children properly is their [parents’] shortest road to heaven. . . . By the same token hell is no more easily earned than with respect to one’s own children.” He meant that spoiling children could lead to hell, but today people concerned with child abuse might read this differently. He quoted Scripture freely on this topic:

“He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” (Prov. 13:24). Again, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him” (Prov. 22:15). Or again, “If you beat him with the rod you will save his life from hell” (Prov. 23:14).¹⁴

To love children rightly “the rod and discipline are required.”¹⁵ In the notes for “The Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer,” his listing of sins against the Fourth Commandment includes “he who does not honor [parents] even though they do wrong and violence.”¹⁶ Indeed, to honor parents (and other superiors), for Luther, was “a much greater thing” than to love them. This thought may be abhorrent to our modern psychological understandings, but Luther intended it broadly. “Honor includes not only love, but also deference, humility and modesty, directed (so to speak) toward a majesty hidden within them”¹⁷ —God’s own majesty.¹⁸

Luther meant these arguments most seriously. He followed this logic to its extreme conclusions:

Therefore man-servants and maid-servants should take care not only to obey their masters and mistresses, but also to honor them as their own parents and do everything that they know is expected of them, not from compulsion and reluctantly but gladly and cheerfully; and they should do it for the reason just mentioned, that it is God’s commandment and is more pleasing to him than all other works. *They ought even to be willing to pay for the privilege of service* and be glad to acquire masters and mistresses in order to have such joyful consciences and know how to do truly golden works.¹⁹

¹⁴ “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage, 1519,” LW 44:12–13.

¹⁵ “Titus, 1527,” LW 29:55.

¹⁶ Quoted in William Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 139.

¹⁷ “The Large Catechism,” 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. Emphasis added.

Luther may have been exaggerating for effect. This was hardly a realistic suggestion. Where would servants get the money to pay their employers? Even if it were merely a rhetorical flourish, however, the comment illustrates the vast differences between Luther's view of society and those of more recent centuries. To an audience today, these lines are absurd. They indicate how far we are from Luther on such topics. They are not a result of any particular theological position, but of *medieval social theory*. That is, he took it for granted that society arranged in a hierarchical form was a given and could not be changed. Equality was not possible. "For everyone must be ruled and be subject to other men."²⁰ If you were born into a certain estate of society you stayed there; the social order could not be changed. Such views have not been plausible since the Enlightenment and the massive political revolutions of France and the United States (except among Romantics, extreme conservatives, and cultural contexts with caste systems); the hierarchicalism of such attitudes has been under attack since the first democratic stirrings. Furthermore, identifying any particular social order with God's will and majesty is deeply questionable.

These attitudes were akin to Luther's reactions to the peasants' revolt. Nothing justified disorder and rebellion on the part of the peasants, even wickedness and injustice on the part of the rulers. Chaos would result: "authority, government, law and order would disappear from the world; there would be nothing but murder and bloodshed."²¹ When the peasants demanded an end of serfdom, Luther responded that such an idea "absolutely contradicts the Gospel."²² The revolting peasants were mad dogs and should be put down ruthlessly.

In one place Luther made an exception—when parents tried to make children marry someone they did not want or refused to allow children to marry at all. "This power of compulsion is not a paternal power, but an unpaternal, tyrannical, criminal power," Luther said.²³ Forced engagements made him reflect that paternal authority (like all other authority) was only for building up, not for damage or destruction.

It is quite certain therefore that parental authority is strictly limited; it does not extend to the point where it can wreak damage and destruction to the child, especially to its soul. If a father forces his child into

²⁰ Quoted in Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home*, 142.

²¹ "Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia, 1525," LW 46:27.

²² *Ibid.*, 39.

²³ "On Marriage Matters, 1530," LW 46:305.

a marriage without love. . . [h]e is taking authority into his own hands without God, indeed, against God.²⁴

In such a case, the father “ceases to be a father and becomes a tyrant.” In this case, astonishingly, Luther concluded that the child “is truly free and may act as if his parent or guardian were dead.”²⁵

Please notice how radical were such statements. Perhaps a bit too radical for Luther himself, for he continued to struggle with these thoughts. It was clear that Christ’s command to resist not evil entailed obedience. He wrote, “Where the shoe pinches is on the question whether the child should bow to this authority and injustice and obey the tyrant.”²⁶ Luther wrestled in a complicated fashion. At first, “the problem is quickly resolved”—that is, “a true Christian” would “neither refuse nor resist a forced marriage” but would behave as though fallen into the hands of the enemy in war. (That is, passively.) “But where are there such Christians?” he immediately asked, clearly expecting that this standard was too high for most. “If anyone finds himself unable to follow this advice, let him confess his weakness to God and pray for grace and help, just as the person does who dreads and shrinks from dying or suffering anything else for the sake of God (as he is obligated to do).”²⁷ Such “weak Christians” should appeal to the temporal authorities to “put a stop to such outrageous injustices.” That may have felt unpastoral, for he ended this discussion by recommending that “as a last resort the child might flee to another land and abandon both parents and government, just as in former times certain weak Christians fled from tyrants into the wilderness.”²⁸

This was rather remarkable casuistry. It resulted, I believe, from the fact that these were “adult children” involved, from Luther’s good sense of pragmatic equity (that is, case by case reasoning), and of course, from his strong defense of marriage.

In this argument, Luther noticed out loud how peculiar it was that parents thought they could force their progeny into celibacy or into specific marriages that were abhorrent to them.

It may well be that until now neither children nor parents have known that it is a sin against God and nature to force anyone into marriage, and

²⁴ “That Parents Should Neither Compel Nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children, and That Children Should Not Become Engaged without Their Parents’ Consent, 1524,” LW 45:386.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 387.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 389.

so the parents have had no scruples about compulsion and did not regard it as a sin, but found satisfaction in it as if they had done a good deed and it were completely within their power to do this with their children.²⁹

Yes, indeed. “Until now” that was *precisely* what everyone thought. And why did they think it? Because children were property—like wives. This was more than a little disingenuous on Luther’s part. As in the discussion of the Fourth Commandment, Luther omitted utterly the several thousands of years of tradition—and all the biblical examples too—that stood behind the parental behavior and practice that forced or delimited marriage for their children. Luther’s theological clarity on the role of parents as caretakers guided him away from tradition and literal biblical examples. Luther is disingenuous because he did not let the same theological clarity for care lead him to challenge the view that wives and children were property and to be ruled. The same could be said about violence in the home: accountability to a theology of care should have guided Luther beyond the tradition of corporal abuse to discussions about unequal power.

Luther did not take up child sexual abuse, only consanguinity in marriage, typical of the medieval church before him. On the basis of the principles in this section, a case might be made for incested children to flee their homes and not to consider an abusive parent truly to be a parent at all, yet the question is open: When may a wife rightfully flee an abusive husband?

Discussion Question:

- *Describe ways you see reading Luther anachronistically, that is, expecting Luther to think like someone in the current time, as different from holding him accountable?*

Marriage and Family Violence

“O what a truly noble, important and blessed condition the estate of marriage is if it is properly regarded! O what a truly pitiable, horrible and dangerous condition if it is not properly regarded!”³⁰ These two sentences, no doubt heartfelt, are often taken to imply Luther’s realism and his strongly pastoral view of the topic. Perhaps they can stand as readily for the ambivalence that marks his stand on women and on marriage.

²⁹ “On Marriage Matters, 1530,” LW 46:305.

³⁰ “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage, 1519,” LW 44:13–14.

“When Katy gets saucy, what she gets is a box on the ear.” These may be the most well-known words of any major theologian on wife beating.³¹ Just as it is ambiguous what Luther meant by his comments on beating children, it is not clear whether Luther meant: (a) Whenever Katy got out of line, Luther clipped her one upside the head, that is, he took physical violence against his wife to be a legitimate “discipline.” Or he might have meant: (b) When Katy was out of line, all she got was a slap—a relatively light use of physical violence, given the possibilities. This might advocate limits on wife beating.

That both options are possible stemmed from Luther’s strong defenses of male dominance and female submission in marriage. Luther’s patriarchalism was not, strictly speaking, misogyny, that is, woman-hating or viciously contemptuous. He defended the honorable reputation of women from the most extreme statements of misogyny. At the same time, he opposed equality between the sexes and strongly defended male headship in marriage. Noticing that some women were beaten by their husbands, he argued for more peaceable and kindly relationships. Perhaps we may think of these as arguments for a benevolent dictatorship in the family.

The exegesis of 1Timothy 2:11–15 was a perfect occasion for this combination of attitudes. “This passage makes a woman subject. It takes from her all public office and authority.”³² Indeed, Luther said, “I also want it to refer to the public ministry.” He expanded upon the text’s claim that founded this judgment in the Fall in the garden of Eden. As the author of the Epistle noted, Adam was not deceived, but Eve was. Luther added:

The subjection of women and domination of women have not been taken away, have they? No. The penalty remains. The blame passed over. The pain and tribulation of childbearing continue. These penalties will continue until judgment. So also the dominion of men and the subjection of women continue. You must endure them.³³

It is important to see that this was *not* a license to batter. The apostle’s discus-

³¹ This line is quoted repeatedly by scholars of domestic violence, from Oscar Feucht, ed. *Sex and the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 84. At the same time, it is important to notice that Luther most often spoke in affectionate and teasing terms about his wife, calling her not only “beloved Kate” but also “my lord Kate” or “my chain” (a pun on her name in German). Luther’s teasing might also have co-existed with slapping her; he often confessed his own wrath and temper. At least one biographer maintains that it was Kate who brought playfulness into Luther’s life. See H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1980), esp. 259–280. Playfulness is harder for me to reconcile with physical violence, for play assumes trust and safety.

³² “Lectures on I Timothy, 1527–28,” LW 28:276 [chapter 2].

³³ *Ibid.*, 279 [chapter 2].

sion of the qualifications of a bishop became an excursus on the domestic life, as well as the character of a church officer. A bishop was to be a “gentle person, available to all for encouragement.” His household was to be ruled well—not only with piety but with courtesy, with settled behavior, with polish and seriousness and honor. “Paul is speaking not about power but about diligence,” Luther noted. Indeed, when the text counseled against rebuking older people, Luther’s comments about dealing with conflict implied his perspective about family quarrels.

Look at Christ. His disciples often slipped. He bore it. He corrected them both gently and sweetly. Don’t you know His spirit? It was sweet in rebuke, etc., even when you struck Him.³⁴

Luther often weighed in against wrangling and quarrelling. He devoted long paragraphs to gentleness (his favored translation of the Latin for “equity,” or flexibility, finding exceptions to rules so that wrong is not done). It may be that passages like this have been taken more seriously by wives than by husbands. Sometimes Luther seemed to think so, for at least on one occasion he said, “It is more natural for a woman than for a man to be loving and kindly.”³⁵ But there is no reason on the face of it to believe Luther meant *Christ’s* example to pertain more to one sex than to the other.

Indeed, the exegesis of 1 Peter, “likewise, you wives be submissive to your husbands,” included a strong statement that the “internal treasure” of “a gentle and quiet spirit” should be the adornment of “not only a wife but also a husband.” However, Luther understood the submission of wives to husbands, even gentle and quiet ones, to be divinely ordained. That it was God’s will for women to be submissive ought to be enough to cause wives to be so.

But if she does not let herself be induced by this, she will not be helped in any other way. For you will accomplish nothing with blows, they will not make a woman pious and submissive. If you beat one devil out of her, you will beat two into her, as the saying goes. Oh, if married people knew this, how well they would fare! But no one enjoys doing what God has commanded. On the other hand, everyone hastens doing what men have invented. God insisted to such an extent on obedience to this command that He authorized husbands to annul vows made by their wives if the husbands express disapproval, as we read in Num. 30:8. The reason for this is that *God wants peace and quiet to reign in a household.*³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 333 [chapter 5].

³⁵ Quoted in Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home*, 227–28.

³⁶ “1 Peter, 1522,” LW 30:88–89. Emphasis added [1 Peter 3:7].

But then, again, sometimes peace and quiet do not reign in a household. As this paragraph showed, Luther knew this quite well.

The Epistle of 1 Peter also admonished, “Likewise, you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker vessel, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). In commenting on this line, Luther began by reminding the reader that God created woman as God’s vessel. Then he added,

Therefore St. Peter says, “You husbands, live considerately with your wives. Do not rule them recklessly.” To be sure, they should live as the husband rules. What he commands and orders, this should be done. But the husband should also see to it that he treats his wife with kindness and consideration. He should be tender, and he should honor her as God’s weakest vessel.

A man is also God’s vessel, but he is stronger than a woman. She is weaker physically and also more timid and downhearted in spirit. Therefore you should deal with her and treat her in such a way that she can bear it. You must take care of her as you take care of another tool with which you work. For example, if you want to have a good knife, you must not hack into stone with it. Now it is impossible to give a rule for this. God leaves it to everyone to treat his wife considerately according to each wife’s nature. You must not use your authority arbitrarily; for you are her husband to help, support and protect her, not to harm her.³⁷

While many women today may not appreciate being compared with a tool like a knife, it is helpful and useful to have it said explicitly that the husband is *not* to harm his wife. It is a “God-pleasing” work for a husband to “treat his wife with kindness.” This too Luther spelled out further:

It will not always be possible for things to go exactly as you would like to have them go. Therefore, see to it that you are a man and that the less thoughtful your wife is, the more thoughtful you are. At times you must be lenient, slacken the reins a bit, give in, and also accord your wife the honor that is her due.³⁸

If each partner gave the other their due honor, “peace and love would reign. Otherwise, where this understanding is lacking, there is nothing but aversion in marriage.”³⁹

³⁷ “1 Peter, 1522,” LW 30:91–92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Both spouses were “joint heirs of the grace of life,” as the Epistle said. In commenting upon this line, Luther reached for the widest understanding of equality that he could attain. Even the “weaker sex” lines so prominent in the paragraphs above as a rationale for tenderness and good treatment here disappeared:

The husband must not appraise his wife by the fact that she is weak and frail. No, he must bear in mind that she is also baptized and has exactly what he has, namely, all blessings from Christ. For inwardly we are all alike, there is no difference between a man and a woman. Externally, however, God wants the husband to rule and the wife to be submissive to him.⁴⁰

This rule was to be considerate, recall from the Petrine lines. With some distinctiveness, they included a penalty or consequence for husbands who did not behave in such ways, that prayers would be hindered. Luther continues:

If you do not act thoughtfully, but want to bluster, growl and insist on having your own way, and if she is also frail, so that neither can excuse or forgive the other, then you will not be able to pray and say, “Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive. . . .” These are the truly precious good works that we should do. If this were preached and known, then we would all abound in good works in our homes.

Yes, indeed. William Lazareth comments on Luther’s exegesis of 1 Peter, “For the first time the monastic shadowing which persisted in Luther’s early marriage ethic has been completely eradicated.”⁴¹ Lazareth considered Luther’s exegesis a “comprehensive evangelical marriage ethic,” in which the fullness of marriage as a vocation, an estate of faith and a ground for the practice of love of neighbor is realized—though marred, to be sure, by insensitivity to women.

Wife-beating came up again in the exegesis of Titus’s exhortations to women, which includes another exhortation to women’s submission.

Thus he instructs matrons to be teachers and to train younger women to love their husbands and children. I have said what it means to love one’s husband, namely, not merely to cohabit with him but to respect one’s husband, to regard him as lord, to submit to him in all things, not to be

⁴⁰ Ibid., 92–93.

⁴¹ Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home*, 222.

domineering. This is a rare quality in a woman,⁴² for the female sex inclines naturally to what is forbidden to it, to reign, to rule and to judge. *From this there come marital discord, blows and beatings.*⁴³

So, you see, when a woman got beaten by her husband, it was her own fault for not submitting.

This claim, that lack of proper submissiveness caused beating by husbands, is probably the single most frequently used legitimization of wife battering in the centuries of the tradition and still in our own time. It is important to notice that insofar as it is an empirical claim, it is false. Some studies argue, indeed, that couples who believe such claims about wifely submission are more likely to evidence wife battering than those who do not believe them. While there are large holes in our knowledge of what “causes” battering, two assumptions contribute to domestic violence: a sense of entitlement to use physical violence against wives—that is, it’s a husband’s right—and a sense that this is how it is, the world is like that, has always been and will always be.

Luther was not unsympathetic to the pains of marital discord. To the comments in Titus, Luther added, “Women are a fragile sex and under authority; therefore they can suffer miserably.” But his primary counsel was “you must endure.” It was a Christian’s duty to suffer in the circumstances in which one was placed by God. For instance, Luther wrote, “As a matter of fact, the more Christian a man is, the more evils, sufferings and deaths we must endure, as we see in Christ the first-born prince himself and in all his brethren the saints.”⁴⁴ This “office of suffering” (in a contemporary historical theologian’s phrase)⁴⁵ was continuous between the medieval church and Luther’s view.⁴⁶

⁴² Luther’s regular comments about the female character inclined to the “weaker sex” vein. He often stated that women were given to gossip and slander. Not untypical was this comment: “Weak though she may be physically, she is even weaker emotionally. Manly women are rare; women are usually weak, easily frightened, easily offended, easily angered, easily made suspicious.” He added, “Then a man should be patient. One can always find more good than bad in women.” “Titus, 1527,” LW 29:57.

⁴³ Ibid., 54–55. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” LW 31:354.

⁴⁵ Mary Potter Engel, “Historical Theology and Violence against Women: Unearthing a Popular Tradition of Just Battery,” in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Adams and Marie Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 252.

⁴⁶ For a contemporary critique of such views of suffering, see Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

Nevertheless, Luther allowed for divorce. His most well-known treatise on these topics, “On the Estate of Marriage,” provided three causes for divorce—bodily deficiency (such as impotence), adultery, and “refusing to fulfill the conjugal duty”—that is, refusing sex to the partner, whether female or male. “This is really contrary to marriage and dissolves the marriage,” Luther claimed.⁴⁷ In addition, Luther advocated that divorce (without remarriage) be allowed for mutual incompatibility—and worse:

This is the case where husband and wife cannot get along together for some reason other than the matter of the conjugal duty. . . . Solomon complains much about such wives, and says he has found a woman more bitter than death (Eccles. 7:26). One may also find a rude, brutal and unbearable husband.⁴⁸

Luther conveniently ignored the fact that divorce was the prerogative only of males in the biblical texts. Furthermore, these points were theoretical only. There was not a call for the temporal authorities to allow battered women to divorce their abusive husbands. Despite the striking statements that adult children could run away from parents who tried to force them into celibacy or loveless marriages, nowhere in these passages did Luther suggest fleeing to another place as a response to such a painful marriage. Divorce became an option for women to seek only in the nineteenth century in the United States. Before that time, and even after, courts in this country (following the Anglo-American legal tradition, not the Germanic one) legitimized wife-beating by the “rule of thumb”—that is, a husband could beat a wife with a rod, provided it was no bigger around than his thumb. Only in the last few decades has divorce for battering become a practical reality.

These violent and unhappy conditions were not what Luther had in mind when he argued that no estate is better in the sight of God than marriage. Rather, “delight, love and joy without end” in marriage was central to Luther’s view.

One element of this defense of marriage was an attack on misogynistic claims about women. “Pagan books which treat nothing but the depravity of women and the unhappiness of the state of marriage” only proved ignorance of God’s creation—indeed, “they blaspheme his work.” Luther crystallized his contention that marriage was to be joyful:

⁴⁷ This argument flew in the face of many centuries of the church’s tradition and the claims of many patristic theologians. In the ancient church, celibacy was not only advocated for clergy but also for married couples who were lay people. Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) traces the tradition of celibate marriage into the high middle ages.

⁴⁸ “The Estate of Marriage, 1522,” LW 45:34.

Hold fast first of all to this, that man and woman are the work of God. Keep a tight rein on your heart and lips, do not criticize his work, or call that evil which he himself has called good. He knows better than you yourself what is good and to your benefit, as he says in Genesis (2:18), “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” There you see that he calls the woman good, a helper. If you deem it otherwise, it is certainly your own fault, you neither understand nor believe God’s word and work.⁴⁹

It is somewhat odd that Luther thought that being critical or nasty about women was all men’s “own fault.” Yet Luther leaves untouched any possibility that “disciplining” women physically—harming them—is anything but women’s fault. Luther is ambiguous about women.

However, Luther continued to esteem marriage, despite its hardships. Mostly it was the sense that marriage was God’s ordinance, God’s will, God’s command and creation that accounted for the strong sense of goodness of marriage. Yes, there were “insignificant, distasteful and despised duties” in marriage, like changing or washing diapers. (Luther’s remarks imply that fathers did these tasks.) These were “adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels.” Divine approval was more important than any human feelings or desires.

Outward bitterness is common to both believers and unbelievers, indeed, it is characteristic of the estate of marriage. No one can have real happiness in marriage who does not recognize in firm faith that this estate together with all its works, however insignificant, is pleasing to God and precious in his sight.⁵⁰

This divine estimation of marriage was its “true nature,” not the shortcomings that one saw around everyday—“the mean, unhappy, troublesome mode of life,” or the “bitterness and anguish” that “married folk for the most part experience.”

To call marriage pleasing to God was the result of Luther’s theological perspective, his interpretation of the biblical texts. Because we focus in recent centuries on the pleasures of marriage, it may be peculiar to us today that Luther added:

I will not mention the other advantages and delights implicit in a marriage that goes well—that husband and wife cherish one another, become one, serve one another and other attendant blessings.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 37. Note that the implied reader (“you”) was male.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 42.

He would not mention these positive elements, Luther said, because:

I base my remarks on Scripture, which to me is surer than all experiences and cannot lie to me. . . . I therefore pass over the good or evil which experience offers, and confine myself to such good as Scripture and truth ascribe to marriage.⁵¹

That Scripture was “surer than all experience” often led Luther to conclusions that may be strange to us today. Thus, this same treatise pointed out that in the Old Testament, adultery was punished by stoning to death.

The temporal sword and government should therefore still put adulterers to death, for whomever commits adultery has in fact himself already departed and is considered as one dead. . . . Where the government is negligent and lax, however, and fails to inflict the death penalty, the adulterer may betake himself to a far country and there remarry if he is unable to remain continent. But it would be better to put him to death, lest a bad example be set.⁵²

It may also be important for us to see that peace generally was deeply valued by Luther, whether on the political scene or the domestic scene. Just as he said that “God wants peace and quiet to reign in a household,” he enunciated similar principles about peace more broadly, such as, “It is a great gift to live in peace and quiet,” or even more strongly, “God has His will in peace; in the opposite condition the devil has his.”⁵³ Luther even attacked certain confusions about violence: “When one person hits another person on the head for doing wrong, the world looks upon this as peace. But this never leads to peace. . . . [T]his method of attaining peace is worthless.”⁵⁴ Yet we see that Luther holds the political scene as more important than the domestic:

Domestic wrath is our Lord God’s plaything; there only a slap or a cuff applies. Political wrath, on the other hand, carries away wife and child through carnage and war. Then there is also ecclesiastical wrath, which involves the soul and heaven. If I can endure conflict with the devil, sin and a bad conscience, then I can also put up with the irritations of Katy Von Bora.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 43

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵³ “1 Timothy, 1527–28,” LW 28:257, 259.

⁵⁴ “1 Peter, 1522,” LW 30:100–101.

⁵⁵ “Table Talk, 1532,” LW 54:34–35.

We may wonder what the difference in Luther's thought might have been if the implied reader were not male. (Wars carry away husbands and sons, don't they?)

Today in the United States "domestic wrath" accounts for more deaths of women than any other social wrongdoing. We cannot trivialize sexual and domestic violence in this way any longer. Furthermore, today we know that post-traumatic stress syndrome marks the experience of those who have been abused at home or in civilian life just as surely as it does those who have been in war. Some experts in child abuse, indeed, call sexual and domestic abuse "soul murder," which would class child abuse alongside Luther's ecclesiastical wrath, surely the most important of these groupings in his mind. The hierarchy of value Luther placed on peace and conflict may not apply any more, or not in the same way Luther thought.

Furthermore, in part due to the multiplicity of liberation movements, especially feminism, we are also less likely than Luther to think that the "domestic" is not "political." In the ancient world, the domestic was political; the social order rested on families and households far more concretely than in our time. In fact, scholars have argued that the domestic content of the biblical texts (Peter, Titus and Timothy) on which Luther commented was highly political. For example, that a Christian woman could marry a non-Christian man and not convert to his gods might have been seen as a blow at the foundations of the ancient social order.⁵⁶

To what is the church called in the interconnected "domestic" and "political" realms? Certain of God's care and love for us, Luther said, "God gives and bestows great things. He wants us to pray for great things." The end of domestic violence, the end of blaming victims and of taking patriarchy for granted, surely qualify.

Discussion Questions:

- *This section both challenges and affirms Luther on marriage. In what ways do you see Luther's teachings, both positive and negative, as part of the legacy imbuing current social and theological thought and practice?*
- *As one way to look at the ways in which church and society are mutually informative and supportive on domestic violence and child abuse, think about the ways in which you see the legal code and theology as mutually supportive as mutually challenging?*

⁵⁶ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Similarly, in the much later Anglo-American tradition of law, attacking the king was "high treason" while attacking one's husband was "petty treason." Both were treason.

Sexuality and Sexual Abuses

Similar ambiguities and conflicts can be noted in Luther's discussion of sexuality and sexual abuses. Unlike many other Christian theologians before him, Luther had no ascetic or anti-sexual views. He argued "against those who say that it is pagan to love in a physical way."⁵⁷ His attacks on the celibacy of the clergy and his defenses of the state of marriage as honorable both involved him in strong defenses of sexuality as created good, even though marred by sin as we know it.

Concentrating on the goodness of sexuality, Luther writes, "God has created man and woman so that they are to come together with pleasure, willingly and gladly and with all their hearts. And bridal love, or the will to marry, is a natural thing, implanted and inspired by God."⁵⁸ This comment was thoroughly typical of Luther. He often spoke of "bridal love" in female-centered language, indicating his strong (pre-Victorian) view of female passions. "Over and above" other love was:

married love, that is, a bride's love, which glows like a fire and desires no other but the husband. She says, "It is you I want, not what is yours; I want neither your silver nor your gold, I want neither. I want only you. I want you in your entirety or not at all." . . . If Adam had not fallen, the love of bride and groom would have been the loveliest thing.⁵⁹

But of course, Adam and Eve fell. Sexuality as we know it, under the conditions of sin, was thought to be marred by "the madness of lust" or "the tyranny of the flesh." The sex drive was not only innate, but strong, in Luther's estimation; it would insist upon its exercise. A special charism of God was required for those who took vows of celibacy. And that was rare, highly rare, in Luther's mind—"not one in a thousand" had such a gift. For the ordinary believer, it was better to marry than to burn (as St. Paul said). Marriage controlled the wickedness of fornication and wild lust.

To see the ways in which these complex views of sexuality worked themselves out, I shall concentrate especially on two examples of Luther's exegesis, those of the creation stories in Genesis and the rape laws in Deuteronomy. In effect, Luther's exegesis of Genesis stipulated the secondary status of females and directed the shame of lust at females, and his exegesis of Deuteronomy defied the horrors of rape by outlining the expectation that wives are for sex and by admiring Christ's rape of the wayward soul.

⁵⁷ "Titus, 1527," LW 29:54.

⁵⁸ "On Marriage Matters, 1530," LW 46:304.

⁵⁹ "A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage, 1519," LW 44:9.

Luther's Comments on Genesis

Although Luther upheld sexuality as a God-given good, he maintained, at best, theological ambivalence about females. In commenting on Genesis 1:27–28, the first creation story's appearance of "male and female," Luther was at some pains to point out both that females and males shared equally in God's promises and that females were inferior to males.

Although Eve was a most extraordinary creature—similar to Adam so far as the image of God is concerned, that is, in justice, wisdom and happiness, she was nevertheless a woman. For as the sun is more excellent than the moon (although the moon too is a very excellent body), so the woman, although she was a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige. . . . In the first place therefore, let us note from this passage that it was written that this sex may not be excluded from any glory of the human creature, although it is inferior to the male sex.⁶⁰

Luther repeated these affirmations in relation to Genesis 2:18, the story in the Garden, picturing God's decision to provide a helpmeet.

Moses wanted to point out in a special way that the other part of humanity, the woman[,] was created by a unique counsel of God in order to show that this sex too is suited for the kind of life which Adam was expecting and that this sex was to be useful for procreation. Hence it follows that if the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects.⁶¹

Procreation thus appeared in the immediate mention of women.

"Be fruitful and multiply," states Genesis 1:28. Luther was unstinting in his praise of the goodness of reproduction even while emphasizing the effects of sin upon this good creation. It is worth quoting this text in full:

⁶⁰ "Lectures on Genesis, 1519," LW 1:115. See chapters. 1–5. Although this material has been placed at the beginning of the English volumes of Luther's works, these lectures were delivered later in Luther's life. It has been argued that the "sermons on Genesis," delivered by the young Luther, were more patriarchal than these lectures, for the earlier texts argued for "ontic inequality" between women and men—that is, before the Fall as well as after. See Elizabeth Bettenhausen, "Social Dimensions of Moral Agency in Lutheran Ethics," unpublished manuscript, 1983. Kristen Kvam argues that Luther's comments on Eve wavered between a paradigm of "continuous inequality" (woman was created inferior to man in the beginning) and "interrupted equality (woman became inferior to man in the beginning). See "Luther, Eve and Theological Anthropology: Reassessing the Reformer's Response to the 'Frauenfrage'" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 1992).

⁶¹ "Lectures on Genesis, 1519," LW 1:115.

This is a command of God added for the creature. But, good God, what has been lost for us here through sin! How blessed was that state of man in which the begetting of offspring was linked with the highest respect and wisdom, indeed with the knowledge of God! Now the flesh is so overwhelmed by the leprosy of lust that in the act of procreation the body becomes downright brutish and cannot beget in the knowledge of God.

Thus the power of procreation remained in the human race, but very much debased and even completely overwhelmed by the leprosy of lust, so that procreation is only slightly more moderate than that of brutes. Added to this are the perils of pregnancy and of birth, the difficulty of feeding the offspring, and other endless evils, all of which point out to us the enormity of original sin. Therefore, the blessing, which remains till now in nature is, as it were, a cursed and debased blessing if you compare it with that first one; nevertheless, God established it and preserves it. So let us gratefully acknowledge this “marred blessing.” And let us keep in mind that the unavoidable leprosy of the flesh, which is nothing but disobedience and loathsomeness attached to bodies and minds, is the punishment of sin. Moreover, let us wait in hope for the death of this flesh that we may be set free from these loathsome conditions and may be restored even beyond the point of that first creation of Adam.⁶²

Two problems surface in these remarks. First, in sorting out Luther’s views of sexuality, it is difficult to know which element here was more important—the created goodness or the loathsomeness and leprosy that marred and debased the blessing. Were they equipoised? Or did the sin which ruled our present existence “overwhelm” the goodness? Second, similar ambivalence attached itself to Eve the helpmeet, as Luther intertwined sexuality and reproduction in his consideration of the female of the species:

Today after our nature has become corrupted by sin, woman is needed not only to secure increase but also for companionship and for protection. The management of the household must have the ministrations of the dear ladies. In addition—and this is lamentable—woman is also necessary as an antidote against sin. And so, in the case of the woman, we must think not only of the managing of the household which she does, but also of the medicine which she is. In this respect Paul says (1 Cor. 7:2), “Because of fornication let each one have his own wife.” And the master of the Sentences declares learnedly that matrimony was established in Paradise as a duty, but after sin also as an antidote.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 71.

Therefore we are compelled to make use of this sex in order to avoid sin. It is almost shameful to say this, but nevertheless it is true. For there are very few who marry solely as a matter of duty.⁶³

He added that animals “copulate only once a year and then are satisfied with this as if by their very action they wanted to indicate that they were copulating because of duty.”

Nonetheless, in Paradise, the act of procreation “would have been a most sacred one without any passion of lust as there is now.” Speculating about sex in Eden was not uncommon among theologians. Luther handled it somewhat differently than, say, Augustine. Both stressed the bashfulness and shame that they believed humans experienced in the sexual encounter and in the nude body. To Augustine’s more rationally-centered view, Edenic sexuality would have been without any emotional turmoil or perturbation; it would have been a pure act of the will. To Luther, however, the pre-Fall sexual act “would have been accompanied by a noble delight, such as there was at the time in eating and drinking.”⁶⁴

The loss Luther believed the human race experienced in the Fall was a source of pain and sadness:

Therefore was this fall not a terrible thing? For truly in all nature there was no activity more excellent and more admirable than procreation. After the proclamation of the name of God it is the most important activity Adam and Eve in the state of innocence could carry out. . . . Although this activity, like the other wretched remnants of the first state, continues in nature until now, how horribly marred it has become! In honor husband and wife are joined in public before the congregation, but when they are alone they come together with a feeling of the utmost shame. I am not speaking now about the hideousness inherent in our flesh, namely, the bestial desire and lust. All these are clear indications of original sin.⁶⁵

Original sin was also the cause of the insults to women, “augmented” by “ungodly celibacy.”

However it is a great favor that God has preserved woman for us—against our will and wish, as it were, both for procreation and also as a medicine against sin. In Paradise woman would have been a help

⁶³ Ibid., 118.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 119. For Augustine, see *The City of God*, Book XIV.

⁶⁵ “Lectures on Genesis, 1519,” LW 1:118.

for a duty only. But now she is also, and for the greater part at that, an antidote and a medicine; we can hardly speak of her without a feeling of shame, and surely we cannot make use of her without shame. The reason is sin.⁶⁶

In these texts, exegeting Genesis 2 rather than Genesis 1, I sense that the balance had tipped. Any possibility of equipoise that might have been in Luther's exegesis of Genesis 1, quoted above, was gone. Although both these texts are about creation, well before the Fall, Luther's emphasis is on the damage done to sexuality by sin.

So, in Luther's view, sexuality and procreation as humans necessarily experienced them after the Fall was loathsome, shameful, hideous. This may be among the reasons that Luther (and the *Book of Concord* after him) so frequently used "lust" as a summary term for sin in general. Thus in rendering the punishments for sin meted out by God in the Fall story, Luther pointed to the combined threat/promise nature of the punishments "to serve as a cure for the lust of the flesh. But by 'lust' I mean not only the hideous prurience of the flesh but also that filthiness of the spirit, as Paul calls it (2 Cor. 7:1), that by nature we are inclined to idolatry, unbelief, smugness, and other horrible sins against the First and Second Table."⁶⁷ I do not doubt that Luther meant this. But he ignored the fact that such associations run in both directions. That is, although it was bad enough to call lust "the hideous prurience of the flesh," once he had identified lust with "idolatry, unbelief, smugness and other horrible sins," the badness of these very sins also attached itself back to lust or sexual desire. Small wonder, then, that few Lutherans have heard from the church about goodness in sexuality.

Luther's exegesis also connects the sin of lust with females. The fact that he spoke continually from the male viewpoint transferred some of that hideousness to women. Recall Luther's statement, "We can hardly speak of her without a feeling of shame." Indeed, woman has become, in Luther's exegesis, the "antidote" to sin and not a goodly created sexual being in her own right: "But now she is also, *and for the greater part at that*, an antidote and a medicine."⁶⁸ From an androcentric or male perspective, then, females become associated with the sin of lust and are seen as an antidote to sin.

After these texts about the loathsome and shameful passion of lust and its connection to women, it is a bit worrisome to me to cast our eyes back into the discussions about wife-battering and divorce. Luther took the failure to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 118–19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 118–19. Emphasis added.

perform the “conjugal duty” to be legitimate cause for divorce, dissolving the marriage, in effect. There was no concept of marital rape in this time; marriage was considered to be consent in perpetuity. Did Luther’s exegesis also imply, as did the medieval views before him, that the wives of the Reformation had no right to say no to sex in marriage?⁶⁹

Luther’s Comments on Deuteronomy

Luther’s ambivalence about good and evil in the “marred blessing” of procreation was similar to his ambivalence about sexual assault. His commentaries on the rape laws of Deuteronomy 22 are a particularly useful place to note the complications of his view.⁷⁰ It will be no surprise that Luther thoroughly confused rape with sexual behavior that was not violent in nature. This was fully in keeping with other theologians before and after him, and with the biblical text itself. Deuteronomy 22 (NRSV) reads:

22 If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge evil from Israel.

23 If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her,

24 you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So shall you purge the evil from your midst.

25 But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die.

26 You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor.

27 Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her.

28 If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act,

29 the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

⁶⁹ See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) for a comprehensive account of canon law on this topic. It is helpful to note that Brundage thinks Protestants actually have changed very little in the medieval church’s view of sexuality.

⁷⁰ “Lectures on Deuteronomy, 1525,” LW 9:223–224.

A whole gamut of terms was used interchangeably: rape, violate, ravish, betray, fornicate, seduce and adultery. Luther called the man of verses 28–29 by three expressions: “he who has simply betrayed a girl,” “the seducer” and “him who raped her.” The rape victim herself (she of verses 28–29) was called “the girl who simply commits fornication” or she who was “ravished by her own will.”⁷¹ His opening comment, like that of the Bible itself, related the interpretation of rape to that of “chastity, on the basis of the sixth commandment.” In other words, Luther interpreted rape through an understanding of chastity. In his exegesis of the required tokens of virginity in a newly married bride (Deuteronomy 22:13–21), Luther noted the contrast between the punishment given to the male who defames his wife by falsely accusing her of non-virginity with the male of verses 28–29, the rapist.

Just as the biblical text commingled rape with adultery, so did Luther. And just as the text itself likened the crime of rape to that of murder, so did Luther display sensitivity to the violence experienced by the victim. Or at least, the victim depending on place, just as the text does. Indeed, it might be said that Luther was one step more compassionate than the Deuteronomist:

The city is here understood to be every place where a girl could have protected herself by shouting and did not—if, for example, she were in the woods or field and knew people to be near who would hear her. The city is mentioned here for the sake of an example, because in it there would be people available to help her. . . . [H]ere, too, the city is put for the sake of an example. It denotes any place where a lone girl is not able to call for help by screaming, as when someone seizes her when she is alone in the house or courtyard or chamber, as Amnon did his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13), or when anyone with drawn sword forces someone’s wife not to cry out in bed. This indeed is not in the field, yet she is more than alone. She would cry out, but for fear of death she does not dare; therefore, the justice of the law will give the interpretation that she did cry out, as the text reads.

This was helpful and sensitive in its clear understanding of the use of a weapon menacing a victim. People today also feel “more than alone.” Almost everything we know of rape trauma syndrome is based on the fear of death for rape victims, whether a sword is present or not. Luther sympathetically felt the pains experienced by such women, for he ended the literal reading of the text with an exclamation about “woman, that pitiable sex!”

⁷¹ The translator of these phrases is Richard R. Caemmerer, on whose German I am dependent and thus am unable to determine if these biases represent Luther’s biases accurately, underplay or exacerbate them. See *Ibid.*

The literal commentary was accompanied, as was sometimes Luther's method of exegesis of the Old Testament, by a commentary on the allegorical meaning of the text. Luther did this in order to demonstrate a good allegorical reading, rather than the bad ones he saw from earlier exegetes. Thus, the verses were scrutinized for figures standing for faith and works, or for Christ and the church. For example, earlier Deuteronomic strictures against men wearing women's clothing (and vice versa) were read as meaning that "faith should not be perverted by works." Or the rule against sowing a vineyard with mixed seed was interpreted as meaning that "faith and works are not taught simultaneously in the church."

The rape texts, read in this allegorical light, became more sinister. Inserting the soul in various states of unbelief into the figure of the victim, Luther worked out his images in a metaphorical use of rape as the work of Christ:

An adulteress always denotes a soul fornicating against Christ by deserting the Word and trusting in works. Therefore, by the Word of the Spirit, both she and her man, that is, the teacher of error, are slain. Furthermore, here others are willingly ravished, nor do they cry out when they are in the city. These are those who become tired of the Word, turn to fables, and fain teachers for themselves of their own accord while their ears itch to hear new things (2 Tim. 4:3); nor do they consult faithful ones at hand in order to be set free. Others are those who are raped against their will when they are alone in the field. These are not adulteresses, however; for they are inwardly of sound faith. But outwardly, they are forced to hear godless teachers and to live among evil people, as Lot was in Sodom and as godly people are under godless tyrants.

Luther extended the image even further:

The virgin not betrothed is the synagog [sic] or some other congregation without the Word, yet adorned and religious in its own righteousness. The virginity of this one Christ violates by His Word, and He keeps her as His wife if the father is willing, that is, if she forsakes the traditions of the fathers and is forsaken. But if she does not forsake them, He gives her a dowry; that is, temporal comforts in return for her uprightness and for having heard the Word. It is necessary to assume two kinds of virgins if this allegory is to stand up, a virgin of faith and grace, and a virgin of law and works. Each, according to her religion, is chaste and holy. The violation of the latter is pleasing to Christ; the violation of the former is adultery and a mortal sin.⁷²

⁷² "Lectures on Deuteronomy, 1525," LW 9:225–226

There is a terrible enthusiasm in this comment for speaking metaphorically of Christ as the violator/rapist.⁷³ It clearly and explicitly stated that some kinds of violation/rape were pleasing to Christ. Whether it was Luther's intention or not, this can only provoke shudders today. Furthermore, the associations with the rape of Jewish women creep around the edges of this allegory. "The virgin of law and works" suggested Jewishness as much as Roman Catholicism. To violate her was "pleasing to Christ." This came extremely close to stating that the rape of Jewish (or Roman Catholic) women was less reprehensible than that of Protestant women.⁷⁴ We may also wonder, in the light of Luther's indignant statements about forced engagements, why he was so ready to allow the implications that some forms of faith could be forced, for he said, after violating the one virgin, "Christ keeps her as his wife."

None of these comments about sexuality or about sexual assault spoke about power. Though this Reformer affirmed that women's sexuality was strong and honorable, he did not explore the relative power of women and men when they came together in a sexual meeting. Nor did Luther venture into commenting about why sexual assault occurred, nor of course, what would be required to stop it. "Who can do away with all wickedness?" as Luther asked (rhetorically) in another context.

Discussion Question:

- *What do you notice that disturbs or surprises you the most in this section? What helps you the most—as someone who may help a woman or child abused in the home?*

Why It Matters that Lutherans Should Struggle with Luther's Ideas

Theological ambivalence is the bridge that we came over on, so to speak. Abuse and rescue, equality and subordination, were twined together in one package. We have to grapple with the confusions and enigmas of this messy legacy. *Ambivalence is not good enough any more.* Can we remove or renounce portions of Luther's exegesis and thought that are damaging without changing

⁷³ Luther was not the only giant figure in the tradition to speak this way. There are significant arguments about whether the Bible itself does. Jeremiah 20:7 has been rendered variously as "O Lord, you have deceived me" and "O Lord, you have seduced me" and also "O Lord, you have ravished me." John Donne was another famous example in the tradition. One of his holy sonnets begins, "Batter my heart, three-personed God" and ends, "nor will I be chaste till thou ravish me."

⁷⁴ For a brief account of Luther's virulent anti-Semitism, see Haile, *Luther*, 281–298.

central characteristics of Lutheran theology? Can we re-think this tradition in ways that actively and solidly stand against sexual and domestic violence?

Some survivors and advocates may not care much any more what Luther said. “So what?” they ask. “We don’t have to take this seriously just because Luther did.” Some of these people have liberated themselves from the authority of the tradition; others are practicing denial. (Some do both.) I have a lot of sympathy for this “so what?” response, in part because I share some of it involuntarily. For me as a survivor, this “who cares?” perspective resonates with dissociating, a necessary defense mechanism, not to be deplored or waved aside.

When I am not numbing out, however, I do care. I do not always know why I care. Yes, I certainly care for those survivors who may be as rudderless and comfortless as I was. I want an alternative to ambivalence—indeed, many alternatives. I also care because this is my church, the one that baptized and confirmed me, pointed me to the life of faith, taught me to sing “A Mighty Fortress” and many other wonderful hymns. It taught me to meditate on the parables of Jesus, the letters of Paul, the meaning of life. I owe that church something.

Mostly I am sad. There is so little comfort and consolation in an abusive family that the sadness seems an ocean; I am in danger of having flashbacks. Sometimes I am angry, but anger is hard work for me; it resonates danger and violence lurking somewhere nearby. (The possibility that I might become violent is even more frightening than someone else’s violence.) Sometimes I bargain with the universe. Sometimes I deny. These are the stages of grieving.

And grieving is as important in this task as thinking. Our tears and anger are needed as much as our concepts. The springs of action and compassion lie deeper than thought. If we do not touch these pre-rational and non-verbal resources, we cannot touch, as well, the empathy and solidarity that are more than lip-service.

Remembering is essential to grieving. We need to remember that great theologians, like Luther, got it wrong about life-and-death experiences of many women. We may also need to remember that we too have gotten it wrong, as I have more than once (and will again). Although of course I could do a guilt trip on myself about my errors, often remembering my mistakes about sexual and domestic violence gives me hope instead: Look, grace is real, change is possible. I know it from the inside out. If I can change so much, so can you. And maybe the church can too. And our whole society. Maybe we could create a society without sexual and domestic violence. Because, you see, if we can grieve, we can envision and act in new ways.

We have not grieved, which may be holding us back. A necessary step in grieving is to identify what is wrong. A fundamental discussion of these topics is in order in our church because we have not dealt with the legacy of Luther's thinking on sexual and domestic violence. To expedite and provoke such considerations, I make several theological proposals and invite survivors, their loved ones, activists, pastors and theologians, and all believers to prayer-filled conversations. I'll start with those themes closest to Luther himself.

Themes in Luther that We Can Make More of than He Did

There are elements related to Luther's thought that we can expand upon, provided we do so in a critical way.

1) "God wants peace and quiet to reign in a household," and indeed, everywhere else. For Luther "peace and quiet" meant the absence of conflict. He certainly intended that the husband/father would get his own way, preferably politely and considerately, to be sure, but it was his job to rule. Today we need to say that by "peace and quiet," we mean a just peace, with equal rights accorded to all in a household, and non-violent methods of conflict resolution. Being mindful of our different social and ethnic contexts means that we need to interpret Luther's call for "peace and quiet" in multiple but positive ways. However, at the same time, it remains very important that we not confuse God's will with our own cultural backgrounds and preferences. Ultimately the "delight, love and joy" Luther believed was to be present in intimacy is worth many sermons and essays.

2) Baptism creates equality between women and men. It is blasphemy against God's creation and God's Word to insult or trivialize women. Baptism also creates the community of the saints where Christian love is to be preached and practiced and from this secure base, sent out into the world. Those who have become God's beloved children in baptism are not to be harmed in any way, whether by family violence or any form of sexual abuse. It may also be important for the church to stress that those who have been victimized do not lose their baptism but remain heirs to the full range of promises to the faithful.

3) Authority is to be used for good only. Parents "earn hell" when they abuse their children. Abuse (soul-murder especially) is a crime that de-legitimizes ordinary authority, including parental authority. Abuse of power results in a "tyrannical criminal power," as Luther said in the context of coerced marriages, an authority that can be ignored, denied or run away from.

4) Sexuality was created as a sacred power, second only in holiness to the preaching of the Word. A couple is to come together “willingly and gladly and with all their hearts,” as Luther put it—without the faintest hint of coercion, deceit, hassling, manipulation or threat. Few theologians today will continue Luther’s medieval emphasis on “the hideous leprosy of lust.” We need to say, explicitly, that it is the abuse of power in sexuality that renders it prey to sin, not the experience of desire itself, and not shame. Shame about sex is a cultural variation, not a matter of creation or original sin.

Discussion Questions:

- *Share with others or write down what strikes you about these theological proposals.*
- *In what ways can you imagine living out and sharing these proposals with others?*
- *What theological proposals would you make?*

Themes in Luther We May Wish to Renounce

Any critical appropriation of Luther leads us toward a second major point. We must consider seriously *the renunciation of all themes which encourage or support sexual and domestic violence*. It is important that we say explicitly that Luther, like other theologians, was mistaken to say that God acts like the abuser (whether father or husbands), that insubordination on the part of women causes their abuse, and that any person of the Godhead considers any sexual violence to be fitting. We need to say explicitly that children are not the property of their parents and that wives are not the property of husbands.

It is my wager that much of what is unhelpful in Luther’s theology stems from the problems I named earlier: medieval social theory, patriarchy, biblicism and the theology of the status quo.

Medieval social theory is gone, at least in the forms Luther knew it, though we have hierarchicalism in our own modern forms. Today we need to notice that for better or for worse, social theory is always present in theology. Lutherans by and large have not been critical analysts of social theory. This gap in our perceptions leaves us prey to a wide range of problems. We might begin by becoming sophisticated in noticing with whom theologians identify themselves and their work. Luther’s use of “we” to mean men, rulers, masters, parents and clergy was apparent. Today we need to place women, servants, children, victims/survivors, and the marginalized, outcast, poor, subjected and oppressed in the position of speaking theologically. Furthermore, our culture in the United States interprets life in individualistic terms; it keeps us from seeing the social-

structural elements of existence together. This is dangerous to the church's integrity, for it leaves us relatively defenseless against the apostasies of structured injustices such as racism, sexism and classism.

Patriarchy is under attack from many directions, so long as there is an active women's movement; women's efforts to derail patriarchy must be joined by men's work. It is patriarchy that stands most deeply entrenched behind sexual and domestic violence. Rape and battering are the time-honored terrorist weapons of male domination. They keep women afraid, both in our own homes and on the sidewalks, in workplaces, schools and churches. Healing from them, or bearing the unhealed consequences of them, consumes enormous amounts of energy and concern. Subtler forms of patriarchy continue to evolve to fit changing circumstances. Professional women may be accepted as long as they behave exactly like their male colleagues—for men, after all, are “the” human norm from which women are thought to deviate. I invite my church to repent of all parts of our history that rationalize, collude with, trivialize or ignore male dominance and female subordination.

Biblicism is a complicated question. Remember Luther saying above that “Scripture is surer than all experience”? “*Sola Scriptura*” was a way for Luther to break from the authority of the theological speculations of centuries and ground his theology in an alternative locus. But in the cases of sexual and domestic violence, Scripture is not more sure than experience. The biblical texts were products of the ancient world, which took it for granted that women and children were property; the texts show rape as a crime of adultery, an offense by one man against another man's property. (Recall the Deuteronomy 22 text.) The voices of survivors were not heard in the texts on rape and adultery. Today we need to be as clear as we can about the social and historical context of the biblical materials and to struggle with the ways in which our forebears in the faith interpreted their experiences in the light of the tradition they had. Scripture may correct itself in this; principles of neighbor-love, for instance, have taught us that a person is not property. The recent Book of Faith Initiative in the ELCA reveals the depth of hunger and willingness of Lutherans to engage in biblical hermeneutics and exegetical study using contemporary methods. The emergence of Latina, womanist, Asian and feminist biblical scholarship is an area of great interest and excitement that is welcomed far beyond the academy.

The theology of the status quo is not a formal position. It might be summarized in the words of the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope, that “whatever is, is right.” Popularly, the theology of the status quo is very widespread. It is often a way people struggle to find meaning in the most painful events; if God did it, then perhaps there is some lesson to be learned or some guid-

ance in a right direction, even when everything in me just wants to scream in protest. Only recently, with the rise of liberation theology, has it become possible for us to say more freely that *not* accepting all that happens may be the more appropriate way of faith. Thus, a contemporary theologian suggests that protest against injustice and the resistance of evil are clues to God in history. “Resistance is the holy ground wherein divine presence is known and experienced.”⁷⁵

Renouncing or rejecting these themes is not simply to ignore them or never mention them again; it is not simply denial or forgetting. It is to engage in active struggle against them. We must not be afraid to say that certain doctrines or teachings are tools of social control rather than of liberation and gracious freedom. We must expose the misuse of power wherever it occurs.

This renunciation, however important, is only half the job. We cannot rest here. We must go on to devise theological stances that can actively empower and heal survivors and that can actively participate in preventing sexual and domestic violence. This aspect of our task calls for the faithful creativity of the whole church. To be faithful to the tradition requires us to revise it in order to pass it along not only intact but renewed. The church is continually reforming.

More than one theology can stand against sexual and domestic violence. A variety of theological themes can be brought to bear in different ways; each will have strengths and flaws. Liberation is not a lockstep operation. Many voices are to be encouraged; because the human condition is multi-vocal, it is never true or helpful to insist on only one way. Theological options are just as empowering as other kinds of options. Survivors do not all agree with each other, nor do other advocates. Indeed, right now it may be essential not to foreclose our options. We need all the creativity we can muster to reshape and redirect the tradition in actively (not just passively) gracious ways.

Discussion Questions:

- *Where will you turn in order to evoke and devise theological stances that empower survivors and prevent abuse?*
- *What do you imagine the journey of theological re-formation looks like? What it will bring?*

⁷⁵ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 127.

Grace is Central

Yes, grace is the answer. In the context of taking sexual and domestic violence seriously, the issue here is what does grace mean? Surely, the grace abundant and effective through Jesus Christ that binds us to God, which Luther stressed, is no work of humanity. Yet people whose bodies are harmed and whose souls are shattered need grace abundant in this life. The practical theological question then becomes: How can we make it operational (so to speak)—that is, specify elements that are genuinely useful? I believe that inflecting grace in terms of healing and prevention is for now the most fruitful of these paths. To ensure healing and prevention is the strongest way to demonstrate that inside the “fortress” is truly a safe place.

Grace is active in the lives of survivors. I am certain this is so, as are many other survivors and activists. Survivor-grace (so to speak) may not have the same shape or substance as in the lives of others. This thought may be unfamiliar to many Lutherans, who generally rely on the paradigm of grace as forgiveness, corresponding to the notion of sin as guilt, wrong-doing or wrong-being.

Grace is both abundant and multiform. Grace may be radically different for those who are victimized than from those who are not and also from those who are abusive.⁷⁶ It may also have different shapes and forms in the lives of victims/survivors themselves or at different stages of the healing process and the reconstruction of a life in safety.

A solitary emphasis on grace as forgiveness blinds us or distracts us from other forms of grace.⁷⁷ It makes it hard for us to see that sometimes forgiveness may be the opposite of grace in the experience of some survivors. When battered women say, “I could not leave my abuser until I had dealt with the church’s messages about forgiveness,” they are telling us that traditional understandings of this cherished theme have become bars in their prisons, instruments of social control rather than of grace for them. Sometimes our single-mindedness about grace as forgiveness may mean that forgiveness is invoked too soon, creating obstacles in healing rather than aids to it; forgiveness may also be understood as denial or as collusion with the offending

⁷⁶ See especially Mary Potter Engel’s essay on sin in the lives of abusers, “Sin, Evil and Violation of the Vulnerable” in *Lift Every Voice: Reconstructing Christian Theology from the Underside*, ed. Mary Potter-Engel and Susan Thistlethwaite (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁷⁷ See my “Grace and Healing in the Women’s Movement against Violence against Women: A Conversation with Susan Thistlethwaite,” in *Lift Every Voice*. Dorothee Soelle’s *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* also stresses multiple forms or images of grace (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

behavior. But it is important not to make a single recipe about forgiveness and grace, either. Some victims/survivors feel that they themselves need forgiveness, perhaps better expressed as exoneration than as absolution. Rituals that can address this need without engaging in victim-blaming may be very powerful.⁷⁸

An image might help. Though I grew up in Minnesota with its lakes and forests, today I live in Illinois. Driving through the flatlands in the middle of the continent impresses me intensely. It is so far to the horizon; and just over the edge of the earth's curvature, there is still more prairie, today mostly given to cornfields, of course. Driving through this area, the Great Plains, convinces me (more surely than any map) of the sheer size of this continent.

Grace is like the Great Plains, stretching broadly and widely, hundreds of miles across the middle of the continent. Forgiveness is a garden on the edge of the prairie, surrounded by a white picket fence. It is a lovely and valuable garden, intensely cultivated by the church's centuries of emphasizing and exploring it. We must not mistake it for the whole prairie, however. We need to raise our eyes beyond the picket fence, to exploring the many forms of grace that are out there, growing wild, proliferating without our efforts, wildflowers and wildlife in profusion. Some forms of grace may look strange to those who have seen only one cultivated form of grace, forgiveness.

Grace has been especially active for me in the healing process, as it has in the lives of many others. We are now well and truly equipped to understand what healing requires, for we have learned more about the healing of survivors in the last forty years than in the previous twenty centuries. At least some of that grace takes the form of listening to survivors, hearing what goes on in their lives, sharing the pain and identifying the extraordinary resources people use to survive and to thrive. This "hearing each other into speech"⁷⁹ is foundational to healing. Disclosure begins the healing process. What prompts that disclosure, that movement to break the silence, may be utterly mundane. A television program that brings uneasiness, nightmares or memories; an understanding word uttered by a friend; the growing desperation that pushes one into asking for help—these are all contemporary forms of grace in the lives of victims/survivors.

⁷⁸ Jane Keene's *A Winter's Song* features a liturgy that includes options for the survivor to choose, such as "I am ready to forgive myself for the doubts and anxieties the abuse caused in me" or "I am not yet ready to forgive myself; Holy Spirit, help me." (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991).

⁷⁹ Nelle Morton, "The Rising Woman Consciousness in a Male Language Structure," *The Andover-Newton Theological Quarterly*, March 1972; reprinted in *The Journey is Home* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1985).

Grace in the form of listening pertains both to survivors and to those who hear them. Paradoxically, those who do not listen often believe that listening would be debilitating or depressing. My experience, at least, is that this is not so. Hearing the stories is deeply touching, often very emotional. All this emotion is not pain; some of it is wondering and marveling. Indeed, the word that best expressed my experience of hearing these stories is blessing: that I am blessed as I listen. Blessed by the storyteller; yes, as I'm invited into the deepest and most real parts of a life. But also a blessing directly from God, whose presence I feel vividly between us and with us as such stories are shared. These experiences, like few others, recall Jesus' promise to be present when two or three are gathered.

Grace is also present in those creative/desperate resources survivors bring to bear on getting through the day. The ability to "keep on keeping on," as the Black churches have said out of the experiences of slavery and its aftermath, is one of the ways God's presence is alive. The Christian tradition has highly valued its martyrs, those who died for the faith. We have been less quick to value "getting away with our lives," fleeing or coping with desperately dangerous situations. Our lack of attention to surviving often makes survivors feel misunderstood and their efforts not appreciated. Survival is essential for the many other forms of grace to have a chance to appear.

Sometimes our Lutheran emphasis against works, or perhaps the notorious quietism of some forms of our piety, makes it difficult to perceive grace at work in surviving. As one Catholic battered woman put it, after many occasions on which her husband held a gun to her head with one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other, "I did what I could to survive, but I know it was the grace of God."⁸⁰ This is a wonderful survivor-clue for theological reflection. This woman did not need to choose between her own efforts and God's grace active in her life; neither do we.

Discussion Questions:

- *Explore with others your insights on grace and forgiveness, both God's and that of humanity.*
- *What are you learning about grace and forgiveness when you begin with a survivor's perspective?*

⁸⁰ Suzanne Jeansonne, "Journal," in *American Women: Our Spirituality in Our Own Words*, ed. Catherine Racette and Peg Reynolds (Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1984), 16–17.

What about God?

Frankly, the doctrine of God confuses and sometimes frightens me. Ideas about God are the easiest of all to use to oppress people, to sneak in social control at such an abstract level that no one notices. It worries me when theologians pronounce so didactically about the nature of God. Frequently I think that the tradition's "via negativa," the denial of any categorical statements about God, may be the best way to talk about God.

I am certainly convinced that God is not male; that the image of God as male serves to shore up male dominance and androcentrism; and that the image of God as male conceals from us many important things about God and justifies the ways of patriarchy to us. The plethora of war-like images that tumble out of the tradition, whether in Scripture or hymns, could never have developed in such profusion if the church had said over and over again that God is our Mother. For many survivors, Ntozake Shange's line, "I found God in myself and I loved Her fiercely,"⁸¹ may have an enormous healing power, especially if they realize that it occurs in the aftermath of domestic violence. But Shange's line may also shock, disorient, excite or even sometimes frighten survivors, especially if they have never had the self-worth to imagine that God could have so close a connection with them. It would not hurt our churches to image God as exclusively female for, say, a couple of decades or so, and then to pause to evaluate what we've learned in the course of such an experiment.

Some survivors may be offended by this option, or merely unable to follow it. (What if Mom colluded in the abuse? Or was powerless? Or was herself a direct abuser?) They may prefer non-gendered language altogether, or the refusal of all parenting terms in relationship to God, or images that have nothing to do with human activities. A contemporary feminist song says:

God is like a river flowing,
Healing like the sunshine
Flowing in soft circles
'Round the wounds that sorrow grows.

And here you stay, so gently,
Shining through the dark times.
The River walks beside us
And tells us all She knows.⁸²

⁸¹ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 61.

⁸² Words by Rev. Susan Savell, 1977.

Does God act like an abuser? Often our response is to say that God could not possibly act like that. When I said above that God is active in healing and prevention, I was exercising this option. God is only a good Parent or Spouse, indeed the supremely good Parent or Spouse, who calls into question and judgment all our lesser efforts. When we are certain God is not an abuser, we can leave behind the theology of the status quo, in which God wills everything that happens, even abuse. Luther, for one, was certain that God suffers with us through Christ.

On the other hand, Luther did believe that God acts like an abuser. It remains important for those who, like me, refuse this position today, never to deny that the tradition often said this. If we pretend it is not there, we engage in crazy-making for survivors. Since I have been healing, the idea that God acts like an abuser has been so unacceptable to me as to be abhorrent and horrifying. A recent theological work, however, has opened new and genuinely healing possibilities in this vein. David Blumenthal's *Facing the Abusing God* confronts the texts of the Hebrew Bible, the experience of the holocaust, and the experiences of survivors of child abuse in a novel and sensitive way. Yes, God is abusive, he says, and God is also comforting and healing. God may also make mistakes and repent of them. Using the Jewish tradition of an argument with God, he suggests that challenge and distrust may be legitimate ways of relating to God. He composes prayers for Jewish rituals that parallel the people's asking for God's forgiveness and *insisting in turn that God ask the people for forgiveness*:

Our Father, our King, we have sinned before You.

Our Father, our King, You have sinned before us. . . .

Our Father, our King, forgive and forbear punishment for all our purposeful sins.

Our Father, our King, ask forgiveness and forbearance for all Your purposeful sins.

Our Father, our King, wipe away and remove all our rebellious and inadvertent sins from before Your eyes.

Our Father, our King, ask erasure and removal of all Your rebellious and inadvertent sins before our eyes. . . .

Our Father, our King, cause us to do complete repentance before You.

Our Father, our King, do complete repentance before us. . . .

Our Father, our King, write us into the book of forgiveness and forbearance.

Our Father, our King, write Yourself into our book of forgiveness and forbearance.⁸³

⁸³ David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 293.

As a survivor, I found these parallel petitions to be moving. They touched some part of me that I did not know needed to be touched. It may be a healing option for those who have believed or still believe that God is behind the abuse to shake their fists at God, to remind God of justice and to demand that God change. Blumenthal is also helpful in pointing out that God's response in the tradition is to "look upon us"—to notice, to be present with us. This may constitute divine recognition or validation of our experience, the being-with that is so crucial in safety and healing. He also supports fleeing an abusive God if that is necessary for a survivor.

Discussion Questions:

- *Martin Luther clearly thought that God acts like an abuser. When paired with the idea that God is omnipotent, survivors are doubly removed from the God of grace so acutely needed for healing. What do you think? Does God act like an abuser? Is God omnipotent?*
- *How would you communicate a Lutheran doctrine of God when you care for survivors of abuse? How would you articulate a Lutheran doctrine of God that fully embraces survivors and their experiences and struggles with God?*
- *What work do you suppose needs to be done in Lutheran theology? How might a renewed Lutheran doctrine of God speak to the whole church, given the reality of sexual and domestic abuse?*

We Need to Work on Prevention

Indeed, most seriously *we need to take action*, the actions that are needed from the church and from the other institutions of our society in order to stop sexual and domestic violence. In my late twentieth-century view, I see no reason whatsoever that action needs to be confused with "works" in Luther's sense. I am not suggesting that we engage in action to accomplish our soul's salvation. But we do need to engage in action in order to save human lives from death, destruction, damage and despair. We need to interrupt the inter-generational transmission of violence in homes. We need to create the conditions in our families, our schools, our workplaces, our churches and our city streets in which people are genuinely safe.

A number of economic and social factors affect and encourage violence against women and children. There are some specific elements of sex-role socialization that encourage violence. Luther's empathy for his son, which made him reflect on not abusing him, is a lovely clue here. Empathy is one of the simple human capacities that may prevent people from hitting each other,

and also from verbally or emotionally abusing each other. Current cultural norms do not encourage men to have empathy toward women; boys refuse to read stories with female protagonists, yet girls read stories with male protagonists. Similarly, when young men are discouraged from expressing the whole range of human emotion, we set up in them conditions that allow only anger and rage to be expressed. That men may cry, in other words, is part of the package we need in order to prevent male violence. It is not only tears that are at stake here, but the whole range of expressiveness and tender nature. As one therapist has put it, “When we arrange our families so that women nurture but do not rule, and men rule but do not nurture, we create the conditions for incest.”⁸⁴

There are also ordinary material things that encourage violence against women. The lack of money to get away from a violent husband is one of the major bars in the cage of battering. Often women find themselves without simple bus fare, let alone with money to pay for a security deposit and rental fees for housing, food for the children and herself, and transportation to job interviews. The lack of free quality childcare impedes every mother from becoming self-sufficient. The lack of job opportunities and pay equity push all women closer to welfare, let alone battered women. Without public transportation that is cheap and fast, it is hard to traverse between work responsibilities and those of the home as a single mother.

Education about sexuality needs to include clear straightforward statements about the unacceptable nature of power abuse. Young people without sexuality education are left without the tools for understanding abusive sexuality directed toward them by older people or by peers. I have found in my own volunteer experience that young teen girls are especially ill-equipped to understand their own bodies and healthy boundaries for themselves and others. The church surely has opportunities for engaging children, teens and young adults in sexuality education, male and female alike. Likewise, rape prevention programs pioneered on college campuses, which stress asking permission for each phase of a sexual encounter and involve both women and men, are good candidates for the church’s support.

We need similarly to discuss clearly and in a down-to-earth fashion the pleasures and responsibilities inherent in our flesh. I do not believe that theologians in our time will repeat Luther’s comments about the hideous loathsomeness of lust. But many will pass over female sexuality or speak about it only from the “exterior”—as though women had no sexual viewpoints of our own. The delights of good sex, like the delights of mutually shared power,

⁸⁴ Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

need to be lingered over by the church. It is never enough to say only what is wrong; we need to be able to point clearly toward what is wholesome, healthy and good. And especially we need male adults to send the message to male teens that pleasure and respect for one's partner is a fine, manly, moral thing—that it is unthinkable to override someone's "no" or to make love without discussing protection against disease and contraception.⁸⁵

Discussion Questions:

- *How will you make the theological analysis and discussion you are having part of this church's work to change how the church views violence against women and children?*
- *What needs to accompany theological change in order to heal and prevent domestic and sexual violence?*
- *How will your congregation implement change?*

Speaking Up

Repeatedly, educators and activists report that when pastoral leaders publicly comment about one of these topics, survivor members of their congregations come forward. Communicating compassion, awareness, and support make the difference between despair and hope for survivors. So often caught in a "silent scream,"⁸⁶ as a Lutheran survivor of incest titled her book of poems, survivors are immensely and pitifully grateful for even the barest sense that someone in the church understands and supports them. Survivors want to hear pastors speak up, including from the pulpit. Being prepared for the response within a congregation is an important part of speaking up.

Speaking up in the wider public forums of our society is also essential. Remember Luther's saying that the child forced into an unwanted marriage should appeal to the public officials to correct injustices? We need to hear these words again; the church needs to appeal to the public officials to work on prevention. Actively lobbying with rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters for public funding and legal changes is a task that is not too difficult for the church, whether from the offices of governmental advocacy or from the congregations and synods. The church can inform legislation. Annual observances of October as National Domestic Vio-

⁸⁵ For one example of the ways in which the ELCA is and has been engaged in discernment over human sexuality, both its goodness and the abuse of it, see *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (Chicago: ELCA, 2009).

⁸⁶ Martha Janssen (pseud.), *Silent Scream* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

lence Awareness Month, for instance, provide a good setting for cooperative ventures between churches and social service agencies that work closely with these issues.

To take sexual and domestic violence seriously as theological topics means that we must evaluate the ways in which those themes that support and encourage it are intertwined with other theological themes. Were Luther's comments about sexual and domestic violence important? Do they lead us to question central themes in Luther's theological perspectives? Or were they trivial asides, easily cast off by Lutherans today? Should we say, "Oh, he was a man of his times, after all, and in those days everybody assumed sexual and domestic violence"?

To discuss such questions is the task of the whole church.

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