

Pastoral Letter

“Discovering Marriage and Family as Gifts of God”

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(English translation by Rev. Charles Schaum)

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, and created them as male and female. And God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”¹

“Jesus answered and said, Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, (Genesis 2:24): ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder!”²

In Christ, dear parishioners, friends, and interested readers!

Hardly a day passes by currently in which basic questions regarding marriage, family, and sexuality are not dealt with in the public sphere of our western society. Uncertainty has now reached even the internal sphere of the Church.³ With this pastoral letter I would remind you of the foundation of Holy Scripture and the confession of the Church concerning the area of questions on marriage and family.

In light of all this uncertainty I am writing this pastoral message especially to offer encouragement to young people, that they might get married and start a family.

Holy Scripture is the criterion and basis for decision-making in the field of Christian ethics, which deals with the question, “How should I act.” The confessions of the Church are aids to interpretation. The Lutheran Church also considers that its teachings and manner of doing things are in unity with the deposit of faith in global Christianity, that is, what has been believed in the Word of God at all times and in all places.

We know that Scripture does not give answers to all questions of our time. However, for example, new medical options or other changes have to be considered and evaluated in the light of biblical foundations.

I ask the pastors and female diaconal workers [Pastoralreferentinnen] to familiarize the congregations with this pastoral letter, especially to broach the issues in confirmation classes, youth groups, and groups within the congregations.

¹ *Die Bibel Nach Der Übersetzung Martin Luthers* (1984); Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984; 2004, Genesis 1:27–28

² Matthew 19:4

³ I refer here, among other things, to an orientation aid of the Counsel of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) [Rat der Evangelische Kirche Deutschland] with the title: *Zwischen Autonomie und Angewiesenheit, Familie als Verlässliche Gemeinschaft stärken*. Gütersloh 2013. [Between Autonomy and Dependence: Strengthening Family as a Reliable Community] See also

http://www.ekd.de/download/20130617_familie_als_verlaessliche_gemeinschaft.pdf accessed June 28, 2013.

[LCMS note: Pages 54–67 of the EKD document assume that the Bible is merely historically contingent truth, a product of certain societies and gender arrangements, instead of being inspired words of the Lord. This approach owes much to rationalism, utilitarianism, and consequentialism. It allows for a malleable truth that permits homosexual marriage and nontraditional family arrangements contrary to God’s infallible Word. It defines love and family as an evolving personal and social reality and it takes a nebulous position on the concept of sin.]

1. Encouragement for Marriage

1.1 Young People Desire a Family for Themselves

Marriage and family are wonderful gifts of God that God has given and ordered out of love for people. In the first pages of Holy Scripture this is expressed in absolutely fundamental and clear terms: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, and created them as male and female. And God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”⁴

The sixth commandment that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai helps contribute to the understanding of marriage in its brevity and pithiness: “You shall not commit adultery.”⁵ This commandment presupposes that one would enter into a marriage as such: It would be created as an enduring, binding union between husband [man] and wife [woman], in which the procreation of children is possible in principle.⁶ It is public; that is, observable by relatives, a circle of friends and acquaintances, and by those in the municipal neighborhood. Only if a marriage is public can it expect and lay claim to the external protection of society and the Church.

God intended marriage from the very beginning. Thus the Church also speaks of a divine institution [*Stiftung*]. Even when human guilt and sin broke the perfection of the divine institution, there remain in it the conditions for deep fulfillment and joy.

I would like to encourage one to lay one’s trust in the divine ordinances and to live in marriage and family, against the current trends of our society and against the experience of marital breakdown. Today there need to be Christians who no longer expect an affirmation from society regarding frameworks of life that are aligned with the Bible. Based on that, they seek intentionally to live a churchly “counterculture.” The New Testament admonitions to stay clear of “fornication” make clear that the congregations of the early Church understood themselves as such a counterculture over against Hellenistic paganism.⁷ In any case, today as then there is the reliance that God’s ordinances are good and helpful. That remains in force even despite the fact that we can never be fully righteous with respect to them, as a view to the history of Christendom shows.

1.2 Encouragement to Enter into Matrimony

In the society all around us, but also in congregations [*Kirchengemeinden*] in Germany, weddings are occurring ever more seldom. There are many reasons for that. Ever-longer periods of education for young people, temporary employment arrangements, and the demand for greater mobility are among such demands, as well as others.

Most of the couples, however, live together under expectations that also apply to marriage: The relationship is based on the requirement that they have unconditional love and trust. In truth, many of them also would like to get married — but later, when the basic conditions “are right.” In the process, in many cases, there are great expectations placed on a wedding. Everything has to be “perfect,” and if possible, all one’s friends and relatives must be there. Naturally, one must save up for quite some time for such a wedding. With such expectations, we often participate without much self-reflection in societal developments and trends, thereby overtaxing ourselves.

With this pastoral letter I would invite one not to hesitate to enter into the binding unity of holy matrimony. To get involved unconditionally with one another also needs the devotion in the legal bonds of marriage. Reservations like, “perhaps later,” or, “I do not know if a marriage would last” endanger the extant relationship that itself is considered binding. By its very nature, love is unconditional.

Seen from the Christian perspective, the essence of the way of life called “marriage” consists in mutual relation and reciprocal, loving submission. The unconditional self-sacrifice [*Hingabe*] of Christ on the cross for the redemption of the humanity that He loved serves as the example: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church [*Gemeinde*] and gave himself up for

⁴ Genesis 1:27–28

⁵ Exodus 20:14 [LCMS note: Historic, confessional Lutherans have always understood this commandment in light of Matthew 5:27–30 against all forms of sexual immorality; see pages 235–61 in Albrecht Peters, *Ten Commandments*, Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms vol. 1, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009).]

⁶ This definition includes also a marriage entered into in one’s elderly years and one in which, for other [specific] reasons, there is no possibility of procreation.

⁷ Ephesians 5:3: “But fornication and all manner of uncleanness or covetousness should not even be mentioned among you, as is proper for the saints.”

her.”⁸ This model includes in a marriage the aging process common to us all, taking responsibility for the other in times of illness, and sharing in suffering. More than anything, the answerability for children in common demands the unconditional bond of marriage. That is why God desires marriage and ordains it as a protected space for the love of husband and wife and as the domain of life for the next generation.

It is proper that Martin Luther in his *Marriage Booklet* designated marriage as a “civil matter,”⁹ as one hears that quoted quite frequently and often quite mistakenly. There he expresses literally that marriage can also be conducted in an exemplary manner by non-Christians and that it has no influence on the salvation of the soul in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Luther designates marriage as being desired, ordained, and protected by God: “For even though it is a civil estate, nevertheless it has God’s Word on its behalf and is neither fabricated nor instituted by people.”¹⁰ In the Large Catechism it says, “Now I am talking about such things so that one may support young people, that they might gain a desire for marriage, and that they know it is a blessed estate and is God-pleasing.”¹¹

Additionally, marriage has the promise of divine blessing: it is a gift of the Creator to people, with which He protects them against isolation, with which He primarily makes it possible for a man and a woman to have a protected union, and in this context He protects the next generation as it grows up. As such a unifying and binding manner of life — especially in light of spousal failings that never remain apart from the matter — marriage can become the sphere of experience of protection and the place of reconciliation lived out [in daily life].

Congregations can help one to find the path to solemnizing a marriage. Pastoral conversation or a marriage preparation course in the congregation can gain considerable meaning. Stronger than ever before, current needs demand this of churches. But completely external questions also belong to this context: common deliberations toward arranging an affordable wedding; the involvement of relatives and friends in planning can be helpful. Common friends, relatives, and acquaintances in a congregation offer a setting that can give durability to a marriage.¹²

1.3 The Indissolubility of Marriage and the Experience of Failure

According to the evangelical-Lutheran understanding, marriage cannot be dissolved. Jesus Christ Himself confirmed and endorsed the exclusivity and indissolubility of the marital union between a man and a woman when He said that a person ought not to separate what God Himself has brought together.¹³ The Church cannot renege on this biblical demand. The enduring union in marriage corresponds much more with the will of God to bestow a place of constant security to the love between husband and wife, one that lasts beyond the moment.

Admittedly in the meantime there exists in just about every circle of friends and in every congregation the experience of the failure of marriages. This, however, ought to deter no one from taking confident steps of faith and trust. The fundamental stance of faith is a great, joyful “nevertheless.”

For that purpose there exist presently marriage preparations and marriage counseling that are capable of accomplishing quite a lot, if one makes consultation with them early on. Therein, for example, one practices communication strategies, the handling of conflict situations. Experiences about varying sexuality are shared among the couples. Moreover, it is beyond dispute that in children, divorce provokes many severe spiritual conflicts and tensions. Therefore one should not consider lightly the possibility of divorce.

When a marriage can no longer be healed, then certainly it may be the lesser of two evils to opt for divorce in place of a permanent conflict situation. In doing so, however, it is important to specify that this divorce is a sin in the presence of God and to implore God’s forgiveness. Confession of sin and Absolution also always facilitate insight and awareness for future relationships. In consideration of the children, one must strive to find the greatest possible

⁸ Ephesians 5:25

⁹ In his *Marriage Booklet* Luther calls marriage a “civil matter.” [*weltlich Geschäft; res civiles*. Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche (Göttingen: V&R, 1998), 528. Hereinafter BSLK.] A footnote at this point comments quite relevantly that this “civil matter” presupposes the divine ordering of nature.

¹⁰ BSLK 529

¹¹ BSLK 615

¹² Statistical findings of Ruhruniversität Bochum appear to affirm that marriages surrounded by a large, common circle of friends more often gain a so-called “frame,” according to statistical standpoints.

¹³ Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9, as cited above. See also the guide, “Mit Christus leben,” 39.

common rules for speaking about the separation of father and mother and to assure the children of their parents' continuing love.

2. Encouragement to Have Children

“Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, and the fruit of the womb is a gift.”¹⁴ Thus the one who prayed this psalm reminds us. Every child's laugh and every child's tear that seeks comfort bespeak an alternative plan to a world wherein striving for gain and materialism have wide-reaching dominance.

With this pastoral letter I would like to strengthen young people regarding their trust in God, to the end that they accept children as God's gift and put considerations about career and financial security in a subsidiary position. With the procreation of children God permits us to participate in His work as Creator.

With that, the family is a protected sphere for the reciprocal love and solidarity that spans generations, thus, the basis for a society. It conforms to the biblical example and has a high human plausibility that children grow up best in a family where biological father and biological mother are both present. For just such reasons, single parents need the care of [church] members and friends. Also the Church is required in a special manner to stand helpfully in allegiance with them. The Church provides for that simultaneously in the duty to support families and to take the initiative that the risk of poverty for children and their families also is reduced.

Congregations can become a place where older people help younger families with their child-rearing tasks. “Loaner-grandparents” and opportunities for babysitting are important diaconal tasks that promote a family-friendly society. Here Christians can demonstrate that their communal life is led by other values than the surrounding society.

3. The New Testament Knows of No Other Life-Models than Marriage and Celibacy

The words of Jesus cited above and the explanations [*Ausführungen*] of the Apostle Paul allow no doubt that the New Testament recognizes no other models for life than marriage and family on the one hand and celibacy, which is a special spiritual gift, on the other.

The polygamy [plural marriage] of the Old Testament stories of the patriarchs was done away with already at the beginning of the unfolding history of Israel. Jesus — with Him the New Testament and in His followers global Christianity — holds to marriage between one man and one woman with the basic probability of the procreation of children as the plan for life that is desired by God. Along with that there stands celibacy as the other legitimate option.

Homosexuality is identified with great clarity by Holy Scripture¹⁵ as not being wanted by God and as being a sin. Therefore the Church may not bless any same-sex couples. It is a fruit and consequence of the winsome love of Christ that applies to all people that the Church can encounter those people with same-sex inclinations with respect and love, and additionally oppose discrimination against them.

In Closing

I was not able to address many individual questions in this pastoral letter. I therefore ask that one seek individual pastoral care in order to address personal questions.

May God let the knowledge of Him grow among us and among all people whom He loves, and to that end may He also convey His blessing with this letter.

Hannover, on the Feast of the Visitation of Mary, 2 July 2013

Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt

¹⁴ Psalm 127:3

¹⁵ See, for example, Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26–27.