The Sacramentality of Marriage: A Protestant Perspective¹

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Abstract

From the beginning of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestants have departed from the long-held consensus in the Western church that marriage is to be seen as an ecclesial sacrament. This article examines some of the impact of this momentous move on the Christian understanding of marriage. It suggests the need for Protestants to recover, in fuller measure, the sacramentality of marriage, in other words, an affirmation that the outward and visible marriage between a man and woman carries inward and spiritual significance. The article proposes a way this might be done, utilizing John Wesley's understanding of the "means of grace." Our hope is that a more robust Protestant view of marriage will contribute more fully to the ongoing discussion on the subject among the various sectors of Christianity and result in the blessing of the church and the world, especially the church in Asia, where sacramentality is inherent in the Asian worldview.

Keywords

marriage, sacramentality, Protestant, Roman Catholic, means of grace, John Wesley

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestants have departed from the long-held consensus in the Western church that marriage is to be seen as an ecclesial sacrament.² This article

1 I would like to express my deep gratitude to Edmund Fong (Trinity Theological College, Singapore) and Robert J. Matava (Graduate School of Theology, Christendom College, USA) for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 The Eastern tradition has its own rich history and theological perspectives on

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examines some of the impact of this momentous move on the Christian understanding of marriage. While it is unrealistic to expect contemporary Protestantism to reinstate marriage as a sacrament of the church, we argue that Protestants need to recover, in fuller measure, the “sacramentality” of marriage. By “sacramentality” we refer to what liturgical scholar James F. White has defined as “the concept that the outward and visible can convey the inward and spiritual.”³

This article begins by presenting a brief historical survey of how the church in the Western tradition has conceived of marriage and, in particular, its sacramentality. This survey focuses on how two key leaders of the Magisterial Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, changed the understanding of marriage from the earlier medieval consensus. The second section examines the effects of this change, focusing on the ways it has both strengthened and weakened the institution of marriage. In the third and final section, I consider why it is important for Protestants to recover a more emphatic affirmation that the outward and visible marriage between a man and woman carries inward and spiritual significance. I propose a way this might be done, utilizing a notion found within Protestantism itself, namely, John Wesley’s understanding of “the means of grace.” My hope is that a more robust Protestant view of marriage will contribute more fully to the ongoing discussion on the subject among the various sectors of Christianity and result in the blessing of the church and the world, especially the church in Asia, where sacramentality is inherent in the Asian worldview.

THE WESTERN CHURCH’S VIEW OF THE SACRAMENTALITY OF MARRIAGE

The Biblical Witness

The Bible is consistent in portraying the earthly institution of marriage as possessing a deeper heavenly significance. In the Old Testament, the prophets constantly used marriage as a symbol of the relationship between God and his people. We find this, for example, in the message of Jeremiah

marriage that I am unable to cover in this paper.

3 James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 13.

(3:6-14, 31:31-33), Isaiah (62:4-5), Ezekiel (16:32-34), and, perhaps most memorably, Hosea, where the relationship between the prophet and his unfaithful wife Gomer was utilized as a representation of the relationship Yahweh has with Israel.

In the New Testament, there is a change in the *dramatis personae*,⁴ and marriage is portrayed as a representation of the relationship between Jesus Christ and his church. The passage that presents this in the fullest detail is Eph 5:21-33. Here, the apostle Paul instructs wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, and husbands to love their wives in like manner as Christ loves the church. Paul also utilizes marriage in this symbolic way in 2 Cor 11:2, where he describes his ministry as one that aims to betroth the church to Christ, her husband. In the Gospels, Jesus is described as the “bridegroom” in numerous passages (for example, Mt 25:1-13, Mk 2:19-20, Jn 3:29). Another prominent use of the symbolism of marriage occurs in the Book of Revelation, where the New Jerusalem is portrayed as a bride for Christ (19:6-9, 21:1-3, 22:17).

Development up to the Middle Ages

Because of the strong testimony of the heavenly symbolism of marriage in Scripture, marriage has been termed a “sacrament” from early in the church’s history. In the late fourth century, for example, Augustine of Hippo described marriage as a sacrament and named this feature as one of the threefold good of this institution (the other two being the mutual fidelity of the spouses and the bringing forth of children). Marriage, for Augustine, is a sacrament because Scripture has used this visible and earthly occurrence to represent the invisible and heavenly relationship between Christ and his church.⁵ However, he used this term in (what we would call today) a nontechnical manner. There was no fixed list of sacraments in his day, and he had the freedom to utilize the term to describe a broad

4 Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament: A Theology of Christian Marriage* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 41.

5 Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 58; John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 22; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 281-82.

range of items that serve a symbolic purpose (such as the use of ashes for penitents and the recital of creeds).⁶

Subsequently, in the Middle Ages, there was a trend toward the development of a fixed list of sacraments for the church. To qualify as a sacrament, an earthly act has to signify invisible and heavenly realities and also “effect what it signifies”—that is, confer grace on the recipients of the act, to the end that what is being signified becomes a reality in their lives. Peter Lombard, writing at the beginning of the twelfth century, was the first to propose the list of seven sacraments, which would subsequently gain widespread acceptance in the church in the West. Included in this list was marriage, although Peter Lombard (and most other theologians of the early Middle Ages) stressed only its symbolic function and did not see it actually conferring grace upon the married couple.⁷

It was mainly through the efforts of theologians in the thirteenth century that marriage became recognized as a full-orbed ecclesial sacrament. Chief among them was Albert the Great and his (greater) student, Thomas Aquinas.⁸ Thomas affirms in his *Commentary on the Sentences* that “marriage, in so far as it is contracted in faith in Christ, confers grace to do those things which are required in marriage.”⁹ Subsequently, the Council of Lyons in 1274 listed marriage among the seven sacraments. The same list was affirmed by the Council of Florence in 1439, with the specification that these seven sacraments “both contain grace and confer it on those who receive them worthily.”¹⁰

6 James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 71; James S. Candlish, *The Christian Sacraments*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1881), 15-16.

7 Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 62; Schillebeeckx, *Marriage*, 330-337. Schillebeeckx explains this historical anomaly in this way, “Awareness in faith of the distinct sacramental meaning of marriage clearly preceded the theological expression of its sacramental significance. If this had not been so, the historical inclusion of marriage among the seven sacraments would be completely inexplicable” (330).

8 Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 62; Rosemary Haughton, *The Theology of Marriage* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1971), 45-46. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage*, 333-338 mentions the contribution of other medieval theologians to the view that marriage as a sacrament imparted grace, including Hugh of St. Victor, William of Auxerre, Alexander of Hales, and Bonaventure.

9 *In IV Sent*, d.26, q.2, a.3, quoted in Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 62.

10 Quoted in Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 63.

One significant consequence of the Western church's view of marriage is that, once a valid marriage between Christians has been effected, it is indissoluble.¹¹ Because the relationship between Christ and his church is permanent, the marital bond, if it is truly to serve as a symbol of this relationship, cannot be broken, regardless of the will of the married couple. So, even in cases where the church permits a physical separation of the spouses, she still views the marital bond as effectively in existence. Remarriage is therefore not permitted, whether the spouse is the innocent or offending party in the separation.¹²

It is, however, open to the couple to apply to the church for annulment of the marriage, which is a declaration that at least one of the conditions for a sacramental marriage did not exist. It is possible for an annulled marriage to be effectively dissolved, with remarriage permitted for the parties involved. Also, the medieval church did not view marriages between non-Christians and those between a Christian and non-Christian as sacramental in nature, since non-Christians, as a rule, are unable to confer or receive sacramental grace. The church therefore permits these marriages to be dissolved under certain circumstances (mainly according to the terms of what has come to be called the "Pauline" and "Petrine" privileges), with the spouses free to remarry according to church law.¹³

The Protestant Reformation

The sixteenth century saw the Protestant Reformation engulfing Western Europe. A key institution like marriage could not remain unaffected by this widespread tumult. Here I will focus on how Martin

11 Schillebeeckx, *Marriage*, 283-284 explains the subtle difference in the way the church fathers and the scholastics of the Middle Ages viewed the indissolubility of marriage: "The patristic view [is] that marriage was a moral obligation and indissoluble on a basis of the *Sacramentum*, and the scholastic view of marriage [is that it is] an objective and indissoluble bond on the basis of a certain efficacy of the sacrament." Schillebeeckx adds that both these views are complementary and lead to the same conclusion that the marital bond could not be broken.

12 Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, ed. Michael Langford (London: SCM Press, 2004), 168; Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 26-28.

13 Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament*, 92; Patrick Viscuso and Kristopher L. Willumsen, "Marriage Between Christians and Non-Christians: Orthodox and Roman Catholic Perspectives," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33, nos. 3-4 (1994): 275-277.

Luther and John Calvin understood marriage, as the views of these two key leaders can be seen as representative of mainstream Protestantism.

The Protestant Reformers arrived at the virtually unanimous decision that marriage should not be seen as a sacrament of the church.¹⁴ This was not because these Reformers failed to recognize the symbolism of marriage depicted in Scripture. Luther makes repeated references to marriage as a “symbol” or “figure” of the relationship between Christ and the church.¹⁵ Calvin mentions that marriage is a “lively image of the spiritual union between us and the Son of God” and that “the right way to subdue all wicked passions [on the part of the married couple] is to have an eye to the pledge of the spiritual union between our Lord Jesus Christ and us.”¹⁶

However, in spite of recognizing such symbolism, Luther and Calvin do not term marriage a sacrament because it does not fulfill the other requirements needed for an act to be identified as such. For Luther, sacraments are “scriptural promises to which Christ has given a visual sign.”¹⁷ Marriage does not qualify, as Luther could not find any promise in the Bible that redemptive grace would be bestowed when a couple joins in matrimony. Moreover, while baptism and the Lord’s Supper were clearly instituted by Christ for the church, marriage does not have this status, since it has existed from the beginning and is found almost universally among non-Christians. Luther was also uncomfortable with the medieval distinction between Christian and non-Christian marriages, since the marriage of unbelievers is (for him) no less real and precious. In addition, he points out the mistranslation in the Vulgate of the Greek “*mysterion*” into the Latin “*sacramentum*” (in Eph 5:32), which leads to the misconception that the Bible itself affirms marriage as a sacrament.¹⁸

14 Timothy D. Lincoln, “Sacramental Marriage: A Possibility for Protestant Theology,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 49 (1995): 207. One notable exception is the eighteenth-century Lutheran theologian Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, who argued that marriage ought to be considered a sacrament: White, *Sacraments in Protestant Practice*, 26.

15 For the references, see Johan Buitendag, “Marriage in the Theology of Martin Luther—Worldly Yet Sacred: An Option between Secularism and Clericalism,” *Hervormde teologiese studies* 63, no. 2 (June 2007): 458.

16 John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 573, 575 (Eph 5:22-26).

17 White, *Sacraments in Protestant Practice*, 18.

18 Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” trans. A.T.W. Steinhäuser,

Calvin, on his part, defines a sacrament as “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.”¹⁹ Marriage is indeed a sign, but not every sign in the Bible qualifies to be a sacrament, because otherwise there would be an uncontrolled proliferation of these sacred acts. The sign has to be instituted by Christ to serve as an assurance of his promises, and marriage does not have this characteristic.²⁰ Calvin, like Luther, also decries what he sees to be the mistaken reading of Eph 5:28-30 on the part of the medieval church, with the wrong use of the Latin *sacramentum* and a misunderstanding that it refers in the passage to earthly marriage, when in fact it denotes the relationship between Christ and his church. Calvin, moreover, argues that it is “absurd” to deny marriage to priests if it was indeed a sacrament.²¹ Overall, Calvin’s arguments against the sacramental status of marriage are quite similar to those of Luther.

Marriage as Vocation and Covenant

If the Protestant Reformers do not consider marriage an ecclesial sacrament, how do they view it? Luther’s position is premised on his teaching of the “two kingdoms.” He sees God ruling over his world in two distinct ways: through the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. John Witte has a good summary of Luther’s position:

The earthly kingdom is the realm of creation, of natural and civic life, where a person operates primarily by reason, law and passion. The heavenly kingdom is the realm of redemption, of spiritual and eternal life, where a person operates primarily by faith, hope and charity. These two kingdoms embrace parallel temporal and spiritual forms of justice and morality, truth and knowledge, order and law, but they remain separate and distinct.²²

in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 36, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 92-96.

19 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1277 (IV.xiv.1).

20 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1480-1482 (IV.xix.34).

21 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1482-1483 (IV.xix.35-36).

22 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 51.

While the non-Christian is a member of the earthly kingdom only, Christians are members of both kingdoms simultaneously.²³ They are therefore subject both to the temporal order, which seeks to restrain sin by social order, law, and punishment, and to the spiritual order, which aims to transform the Christian from within into the image of Christ.²⁴

For Luther, marriage is clearly an institution of the earthly kingdom. It is part of the “basic governing structures” set up by God to sustain this world. In ordering men and women to partner with one another, not least in the generation and bringing up of children, marriage is the bedrock of all human societies, whether Christian or not.²⁵ In God’s providential care for humanity, marriage serves an important social function in preventing immorality and promoting virtuous living.²⁶ Because of this, the regulation of marriage should be the duty of the civil authorities, not the ecclesial.²⁷

Luther encourages all Christians to find their “vocation,” which is a personal conviction that they have been called by God, through their station in life or profession, to play a certain role in God’s ordering of society.²⁸ For many, such a vocation includes marriage and child-rearing, since Luther understands the vast majority of the human race to be called to participate in married life. When Christians carry out this aspect of their vocation with the firm conviction that God has called them to it, the mean and mundane tasks that it entails take on a new light. Luther echoes the joy of a husband (and father) who realizes his vocation:

23 Michael Parsons, *Reformation Marriage: The Husband and Wife Relationship in the Theology of Luther and Calvin* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005), 124.

24 Parsons, *Reformation Marriage*, 113.

25 Sondra Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 353.

26 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 52.

27 Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” 353; Parsons, *Reformation Marriage*, 146; Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 51.

28 Parsons, *Reformation Marriage*, 213; Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” 353-354; Miroslav Volf, “Work, Spirit, and New Creation,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 41, no. 1 (January 2017): 71-72; Robert Kolb, “Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther’s Teaching on the Christian’s Vocations,” *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (2013): 133-136.

“O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I do know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in thy sight.”

Luther goes on to make his famous assertion that even though others might ridicule a father for washing diapers or performing other humiliating tasks for his family, “God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling.”²⁹ So, all the “works, conduct and [even] suffering of that estate become holy, godly and precious” because we know we are fulfilling God’s purposes for us.³⁰

This vocation of marriage and family is no less challenging or holy than the medieval monastic lifestyle. Luther, on occasions, even remarked that the monastic life could be seen as a “relief” compared to marriage, since more patience is sometimes needed for the latter calling.³¹ So, as Roland Bainton notes, the home, for Luther, has become a “functional substitute” for the monastery as the place where Christian virtues are exemplified.³² Indeed, in his attack on the medieval exaltation of the celibate state, Luther asserts that an overwhelming majority of the human race has been called to the vocation of marriage. The divine gift of celibacy is real, but (in Luther’s view) it has been bestowed upon only a few; “not one in a thousand.”³³ For the rest of the human race, an enforced celibacy, even if undergirded by oaths, would only lead to “secret sins or fornication,” as those without the gift would not be able to control their sexual desires.³⁴

29 Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 159.

30 Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 160.

31 Roland H. Bainton, *What Christianity Says About Sex, Love, and Marriage* (New York: Association Press, 1957), 82-83.

32 Bainton, *What Christianity Says*, 79.

33 Coleman, *Christian Attitudes*, 182.

34 Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 149-150; Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” 352-353; Coleman, *Christian Attitudes*, 182.

Calvin's early theology of marriage resembles Luther's. It was founded on the notion of the "two kingdoms" (although Calvin does not use this term), with marriage being viewed as an institution of the earthly realm. Christians therefore participate in this institution not for the purposes of redemption, but to fulfill its object of restraining sin and maintaining order in the temporal realm.³⁵ Calvin praises even marriage between unbelievers, as these help preserve respectability and check promiscuity. Without proper marriages, Calvin asserts, "no holiness can continue to exist in the world."³⁶

Subsequently, Calvin added another layer to his understanding of marriage. He placed marriage under the framework of a "covenant." This is far more sacred than an ordinary human contract, for it is God who has instituted this agreement. It is the "holiest bond that God has set among us."³⁷ God presides over its formation, joins the man and woman together by his authority, and sanctions this alliance. This is why Scripture (in Prov 2:17) calls marriage "the covenant of God." Any undue violation of this covenant is an offense against none other than God himself, as the prophet Malachi has testified (Mal 2:10-16).³⁸ And so a husband should say to himself about his wife:

Yet I am bound to her; yes, and I am not only bound to my wife but also to God, who presides over marriage, and to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is like a mirror and living image of it to us. Therefore I am bound to do my duty toward my wife, and both to love her and support her, even though there may be vices in her.³⁹

Divorce and Remarriage

Both Luther and Calvin abhorred divorce and harshly condemned frivolous reasons for ending a marriage.⁴⁰ They permitted it, however, on what they understood to be biblical grounds. Luther, in his *The Estate of*

35 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 94.

36 Parsons, *Reformation Marriage*, 224, 261.

37 Calvin, *Sermon on Ephesians*, 593 (Eph 5:28-30).

38 John Calvin, *Commentary on Zechariah, Malachi*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, nd), 558 (Mal 2:14).

39 Calvin, *Sermon on Ephesians*, 597 (Eph 5:28-30).

40 For example, John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis, Vol. 1*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, nd), 85 (Gen 2:24); Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 105.

Marriage, mentioned three: Impotence, adultery, and the refusal of a spouse to have sexual relations.⁴¹ He included the act of deserting a spouse under the category of adultery.⁴² Calvin understood the only biblical basis of divorce to be adultery, but considered various acts to be tantamount to it, including sexual perversity with one's own spouse, desertion, or voluntary separation.⁴³

The implications of a divorce are very different for the Protestant Reformers as compared to the medieval Western position. A valid divorce effectively sunders the marital bond, freeing the divorced parties to remarry.⁴⁴ Although the right to initiate a divorce rested on the "innocent" party in cases involving wrongdoing, both Luther and Calvin extended the right of remarriage to both (former) spouses, on the basis that it would be preferable to allow the offending spouse to remarry than to entice him or her into further sin due to uncontrollable sexual desires.⁴⁵

Contextual Considerations

In line with their motto of *Sola Scriptura*, the Protestant Reformers arrived at their position on marriage largely based on their understanding of what Scripture teaches. No one, however, interprets the Bible in a vacuum, and historians of the Reformation have been quick to point out the influence exerted by the context in which the Reformers found themselves. For example, the attack on the medieval tendency to exalt

41 Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 154-157.

42 Bainton, *What Christianity Says*, 85.

43 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 102-103. In a memorable case, Calvin approved the divorce of the Italian refugee Galeazzo Caracciolo, who had converted to the Reformed faith and fled to Geneva, leaving behind his Roman Catholic wife and children. The basis for this decision was desertion on the part of the "unbelieving spouse," mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor 7:15: David Engelsma, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, rev. ed. (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1998), 178. Engelsma is of the view that Calvin's interpretation turns 1 Cor 7:15 on its head, since, in this case, it was the believing husband who deserted his wife. Subsequently, Theodore Beza would advocate that a person could be considered to have deserted his or her spouse "in soul" through a refusal to follow him or her into the true Christian faith: Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 203.

44 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 66.

45 Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 154-157; Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 100-102; Engelsma, *Marriage*, 179.

celibacy above marriage was clearly driven by the abuses the Reformers noticed in both the priesthood and monasticism of their day, where the vow of celibacy was frequently broken in both clandestine and not-so-secret ways.⁴⁶

More significantly, the teaching that marriage is a civil ordinance falling under the earthly kingdom was motivated, at least in part, by the desire to remove this institution from the jurisdiction and control of the church.⁴⁷ The Reformers saw such control leading to many abuses. Luther, in his *The Estate of Marriage*, pointed out that the canon law of his time listed eighteen grounds on which marriage might be prevented or annulled. He goes on to dispute the legitimacy of many of these grounds and to expose them as a source of corruption, since exceptions to these grounds could be applied for if one has the financial means.⁴⁸ Calvin made similar attacks against the medieval marriage laws.⁴⁹

It is also in this context that the more “liberal” provisions concerning divorce and remarriage proposed by the Reformers should be understood. Although the medieval church did prohibit remarriage on the basis that a sacramental marriage could not be dissolved, she had a wide latitude in the granting of annulments, thus offering another way for a couple to be freed from the bond of their (apparently invalid) marriage. The Protestant Reformers drastically cut down on the grounds of annulment,⁵⁰ probably with the view that it was preferable to use the mechanism of a legitimate divorce to end a marriage rather than to rely on the somewhat artificial device of an annulment.

EFFECTS OF THE PROTESTANT VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Has the Protestant understanding of marriage, as exemplified in the writings of Luther and Calvin, strengthened or weakened the institution? The answer, unsurprisingly, is both. Hendrix summarizes the double-edged nature of Luther’s position in this way: “In one sense marriage was

46 Bainton, *What Christianity Says*, 77-78.

47 Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” 353; Haughton, *Theology of Marriage*, 52-53.

48 Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” 150.

49 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1483-84 (IV.xix.37).

50 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 61-65.

demoted because it ceased to be a sacrament, but in another sense its status was elevated because it was deemed equal or superior to celibacy.”⁵¹

An Elevation of the Status of Marriage

As Hendrix points out in the quote above, the Protestant position has raised the status of marriage vis-à-vis the celibate life. The prevailing mindset in medieval Western Europe sees one entering a vocation only when one is ordained to the priesthood or joins the monastery. The Protestant Reformers expanded the notion of vocation in a revolutionary way to include those in the married state.⁵² We respond in obedience to God’s call not only when we enter specifically “religious” professions, but also when we serve God and our neighbor in the concreteness of everyday life in the temporal world. Marriage and family life are as vital an aspect of our discipleship, Christian service, and witness to the gospel as any explicitly “spiritual” activities.⁵³ As Carter Lindberg puts it:

Luther moved the theology of the cross from self-chosen piety to God commanded works of love.... The old person dies in self-offering for the neighbor; in this sacrifice he is united with the death of Christ and possesses the new life hidden under the death of self in service to others in the midst of earthly life.... “Vocation is the work of faith; vocation is worship in the realm of the world.”⁵⁴

Roman Catholic scholar Rosemary Haughton offers these generous comments about the Protestant contribution:

The holiness of the married state was constantly upheld by the Reformers, and their denial of any special value to virginity put marriage at the center of Christian living. The Reformed tradition, varied as it is, has nearly always had a strongly domestic character, centering the Christian task on the family

51 Scott H. Hendrix, “Luther on Marriage,” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 170.

52 Carter Lindberg, “Martin Luther on Marriage and the Family,” *Perichoresis* (January 1, 2004): 44; Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” 352.

53 Wheeler, “Christians and Family,” 354.

54 Carter Lindberg, “Luther’s Concept of Offering,” *Dialog* 35, no. 4 (1996): 254, cited in Lindberg, “Martin Luther on Marriage and the Family,” 45.

duty to train children in their faith.... A sense of the family became much more marked and more important from the sixteenth century onwards, and the importance of the marriage-relationship was inevitably enhanced.⁵⁵

Another contribution made by the Protestant perspective was the enhancement of the status of “non-Christian” marriages. As the Protestant Reformers located marriage within the temporal realm of the “two kingdoms,” they saw both Christian and non-Christian marriages resting on a common theological foundation, with the result that non-Christian marriages ceased to be viewed as a lesser form of marriage. The medieval distinction between Christian marriages (sacramental) and non-Christian marriages (non-sacramental) does raise some questions: Many of us know of marriages between non-Christians that are models of mutual love, faithfulness, and care for the children. Is it not somewhat arbitrary to consider these marriages non-sacramental? Do they not in some way also symbolize the beauty of the union between Christ and his church (although not expressly intended by the couple)? Can we not conceive of God’s grace being bestowed upon the non-Christian couple in some form that has enabled them to live out their marriage in such exemplary ways? Why should these marriages be treated on a different footing and be seen as dissoluble in principle, when Christian marriages are not? Are they any less precious and holy than Christian marriages, especially when viewed from the perspective of the children and the wider society? Luther, in his characteristically straightforward manner, points out this inconsistency:

The marriages of the ancients were no less sacred than are ours, nor are those of unbelievers less true marriages than those of believers; and yet they are not regarded as sacraments. Besides, even among believers there are married folk who are wicked and worse than any heathen; why should marriage be called a sacrament in their case and not among the heathen?⁵⁶

The Protestant position has therefore enhanced the status of non-Christian marriages by rooting them in the same theological basis as Christian marriages and insisting on the principle that both should be treated alike.

55 Haughton, *Theology of Marriage*, 53.

56 Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 92-93.

A Depreciation of the Status of Marriage

While the Protestant position has elevated marriage in some aspects, it has also depreciated it in others. The main cause of this depreciation lies in the dichotomy drawn by the Reformers between the order of creation and the order of redemption in their “two kingdoms” framework. Rooting marriage solely in the former has the effect of reducing the significance of this institution, given the predominance Protestant theology has traditionally given to soteriology vis-à-vis the doctrine of creation. So, as we have seen, the Protestant view allocates to marriage (as an ordinance of the temporal kingdom) key “preventive” and “sustaining” functions: it restrains sin, prevents disorder, and sustains the proper functioning of human societies. Luther and Calvin do go further to assert that marriage should be seen positively as a holy vocation and covenant. But these still fall short of giving marriage a key role in the realm of redemption, which the prior medieval consensus had done.

What difference does it make if we situate marriage in the salvific process in addition to the creative and providential? The first difference is that the symbolism of marriage, as taught by the Bible, attains a greater prominence. Both Luther and Calvin, as we have seen, amply acknowledged the existence of such symbolism. However, in their attempt to deny the sacramental status of marriage, they also downplayed it to a significant extent. When Calvin writes, for example, that marriage serves as a symbol in like manner to that of a mustard seed, leaven, and a thief,⁵⁷ he has engaged in a reductionism that fails to appreciate that symbols can function on different levels with vastly different implications, and that the symbol of marriage holds far richer redemptive significance than the others he cited.

So, which aspects of the symbolism of marriage and its implications have been neglected by the Reformers? There seems to be insufficient emphasis on the notion that an earthly and visible marriage is able (by the miracle of God’s grace) to represent (and re-present) to a fallen world the heavenly and invisible relationship between Christ and his church. Accompanying this is the lack of mention of the married couple being bestowed with the unbelievable privilege of participating in this symbolic role, and how, in the process, they themselves would continually be

57 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1481 (IV.xix.34).

transformed so that the symbolism becomes ever more accurate and pointed. We find, moreover, little discussion of the effect the symbolism of marriage has (if well enacted) on the larger community, both within and outside the church. We refer here to the testimony borne by the married couple to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God into our world, in which our temporal human relationships are transformed to reflect God's eternal love for us, and the impact of such testimony on the sanctification of the wider Christian community and the spreading of the gospel to unbelievers. In short, the rich implications of the exaltation of marriage in Scripture, which has allowed it to serve as a foretaste of the consummation of the kingdom when the mundane things of this earth will be illuminated to reflect the glory of God, seems to have been largely neglected by Luther and Calvin, possibly because their framework has excluded marriage from any meaningful role in the redemptive realm. These implications go far deeper than the stress on a personal fulfillment of God's calling and personal sanctification found in the notion of "vocation," or faithfulness to God and one's spouse emphasized by the concept of "covenant."

Another difference that extending marriage to the realm of redemption might have made is that it would render it more impervious to the influence of secular culture. The notion that marriage is primarily a worldly ordinance, to be regulated and governed by the secular authorities, leaves quite a big opening for worldly values to creep into our perception of the institution. Sondra Wheeler has sought to trace how Luther's position could have led to the views of a modern-day Lutheran such as Ernst Troeltsch, who exalted family life to the center of Jesus' teaching, a move probably more influenced by the German culture of the early twentieth century than by the testimony of the Gospels.⁵⁸ Others have tried to show how the Protestant removal of the sacramental status of marriage has led to it being helpless to resist the modern perversion of marriage into an institution with no higher aim than the "personal fulfillment" of the spouses, and one that could be readily terminated once such fulfillment is not achieved. Roman Catholic scholar R.V. Young, for instance, has sought to draw a direct line between the view of the Protestant Reformers and the seventeenth-century English author John Milton, who was "the first important proponent of the modern notions of divorce in the Christian

58 Wheeler, "Christians and Family," 354.

world.”⁵⁹ The task of verifying these claims is perhaps best left to more competent historians. It is, however, true that once the principle is accepted that marriages are not sacramental and could therefore be effectively dissolved, the grounds for allowing such dissolution have tended to expand dramatically. For example, starting from Luther’s narrow prescriptions for divorce, Lutheran territories eventually accepted numerous other grounds, such as the difference of religious confession, abuse, defamation of character, the habit of gambling, and acts of treason and sacrilege.⁶⁰ It is difficult to argue with Adrian Thatcher’s conclusion that “there can be little doubt that the liberalization of divorce laws was made easier in Protestant countries because of the removal of the sacramental states of marriage, thereby also removing one of the grounds for assuming its indissolubility.”⁶¹

THE WAY FORWARD?

What should the way forward be for the Protestant position on marriage? How might it be strengthened so that its contributions to the institution are maintained and its weaknesses overcome? I offer a few tentative proposals in this final section. I believe these are timely because our present context might prove conducive for a revision of the Protestant perspective. Due to the widespread secularism in our world today, the institution of marriage is no longer under the control of ecclesiastical authorities, even in the West. We can therefore say that the battle that the Protestant Reformers were engaged in, to place marriage under the oversight of the civil government, has been won (perhaps to an extent unforeseen by them). Marriage, in many places, is now viewed almost exclusively through secular lenses, as a civil institution whose formation and dissolution are regulated by the law of the nation. Our present situation calls for a move of the pendulum in the opposite direction to that sought by Luther and Calvin—for a re-sacralizing of marriage according to the tenets of Christianity and a rediscovery of the unique perspective on the institution offered by the Christian faith.

59 R.V. Young, “The Reformations of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glenn W. Olsen (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 271, 291-292.

60 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 69.

61 Adrian Thatcher, “Marriage,” in *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Vol. 3 (L-R) (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 1162.

How should this re-sacralizing of marriage take place for Protestants? I am not proposing that marriage be re-embraced as one of the official sacraments of the church in addition to baptism and the Lord's Supper. The time for tinkering with the long-established lists of sacraments of both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches has long passed. It is unrealistic to expect that any proposals for change to these long-hallowed lists would be seriously considered by either sector of Christianity. Moreover, if we are to remain faithful to the definitions offered by Luther and Calvin as to what a sacrament is, we should affirm with them that marriage should be excluded, since it does not fall neatly within these definitions.⁶²

We search instead for a space between something being recognized as an official sacrament and it being treated as a mere civil ordinance. We turn to the notion of "sacramentality"—what I have defined in the introduction as "the concept that the outward and visible can convey the inward and spiritual." In the specific case of marriage, we also assert that God's grace is conferred through this "sacramental" act. Our basic contention is that something can be appropriated as sacramental without it having to be an official sacrament of the church. God can use various aspects of this world he has created to communicate heavenly realities to us and bestow upon us his grace, more than the two sacraments of Protestantism or even the seven of the Roman Catholic Church.⁶³ A Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed Study Commission issued a report in 1976, which stated the areas of agreement and dissension between the Roman Catholics and Protestants in the area of marriage. It is illuminating to find this report asserting that both the Roman Catholics and Protestants agree on the "sacramental power of marriage."⁶⁴ My attempt to explicate how this

62 John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 34-35. Macquarrie has, however, made constructive proposals as to how the requirement that sacraments must be "instituted by Christ" could be interpreted so as to see it fulfilled in all the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church (35-44).

63 The argument that "sacramentality" should extend beyond the official sacraments of the church has also been made by James White in *Sacraments in Protestant Practice*, 27 and *Sacraments as God's Self Giving*, 21.

64 "Final Report of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran-Reformed Study Commission on 'The Theology of Marriage and the Problem of Mixed Marriages' 1976," in *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist Press; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), 286 (para 21).

sacramentality (or “sacramental power”) operates will utilize what John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, has to say about the “means of grace.”

Wesley defines the “means of grace” as “outward signs, words or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace.”⁶⁵ What are these ordained means of God’s grace? A few items constantly appear in Wesley’s lists: Prayer and fasting, participating in the Lord’s Supper, reading, hearing and meditation on the Scriptures, and assembling together in Christian fellowship. Although baptism does not appear in these lists, Wesley has described it as a powerful means of grace in his other writings.⁶⁶ Wesley’s conviction is that if these acts are undertaken in faith, God has promised to use them as channels to bestow his grace. Note that these acts include the two official sacraments but also go beyond them. The two sacraments are certainly the means of grace *par excellence*, but they do not exhaust the ordinary channels of God’s grace.

Wesley does not list marriage as one of the means of grace. Perhaps influenced by his personal experience, his view of marriage was a rather negative one, seeing it as largely a concession to human weakness.⁶⁷ If we take the more positive view of marriage advocated in this article, however, it is possible to argue that it qualifies as a means of grace as defined above. It is certainly a “sign,” consisting of both “words” and “actions,” and one “ordained of God.” Has it, however, been appointed by God as a channel for the conveyance of his grace? I maintain that it has, in an implicit manner. The exaltation of the human bond of matrimony to be the representation in our world of the mystical union between God and his people (in the Old Testament) and Christ and his church (in the New) places upon the married couple a humanly impossible task. Grace is desperately needed for the couple to fulfil this calling, and God surely provides this in a measure sufficient for the task. The 1976 Commission Report finds the grace conferred upon marriage to be based on a “lasting

65 John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” cited in Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), 95.

66 Borgen, *John Wesley*, 106, 121-122.

67 James Hitchcock, “The Emergence of the Modern Family,” in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glenn W. Olsen (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 308.

promise” of God.⁶⁸ The Commission also sees this promise as implicit in nature: “The promise is nothing other than Christ himself turning to look upon the spouses so that their love too should [like Christ’s relationship with the church] become a real and lasting union.”⁶⁹ And so, “[Jesus’s] fidelity to God, which was fully revealed by Christ through the crucifixion and resurrection, renders possible and supports the fidelity of the spouses to the love which they have promised and owe one another.”⁷⁰

For the Christian couple, the grace conferred upon them is certainly “sanctifying” in its function. Most couples, upon entering this institution, would realize that they have been given the gracious privilege of walking the *Via Dolorosa*, just as their Savior has done. This is the usual path for the symbolism of marriage to be realized in its fullness. Haughton puts this beautifully in her realistic portrayal of married life:

Yet if Christian marriage images the bridal feast of the risen Lord it gets there, as he did, through the cross. There is no other way. Any happily married couple, looking back over the years, will remember times of agony and bitterness, times when love seemed a bad joke, when financial trouble or sickness or clashes of temperament or overwork made the struggle to keep together seem altogether beyond their powers.... Marriage is not merely a sign of Christ’s love. It works in the same way, by work and prayer and tenderness, by listening and serving and healing, by giving life and forgiving wrong, by sorrow and pain and death. And sometimes the pain is, like Christ’s, the pain of rejection and failure, the humiliation of being misjudged, the necessity to bear in silence the unkind remarks of those who don’t understand and don’t care. All this makes up marriage, as well as the joy and peace of a learned love, the fullness of bodily consummation which is also spiritual, the fun of family life and the satisfaction of seeing children grow up loving and generous and helpful.⁷¹

The grace conferred in marriage need not be restricted to that received by the couple. As others (both within and outside the church) see this “incarnation of Christ’s love”⁷² being lived out in the life of the couple,

68 “Final Report,” 285 (para 17).

69 “Final Report,” 286. (para 19).

70 “Final Report,” 289 (para 36).

71 Haughton, *Theology of Marriage*, 85-86.

72 Haughton, *Theology of Marriage*, 83.

through all their suffering and joy, they may come to a deeper appreciation of how real and profound Christ's love for his church is. By God's grace, the relationship between Christ and his church is no longer a heavenly, mystical, or theoretical concept, but one that they see manifested in everyday flesh-and-blood reality, as the kingdom of heaven continues to make inroads into the kingdoms of this world. These words penned by Colman O'Neill convey well this sacramental power of marriage, which in a sense stands underneath what the church claims to be and do:

[The] love and abiding fidelity [of Christian marriage] will be seen as one of the most striking manifestations of the life of the church as a sacrament of the Blessed Trinity. Without this, the church would not be a sacrament and the sacraments would be empty rituals. If the fidelity were an impossible task for humans, Christ's salvation would not reach into the deepest recesses of human personality. When so much is at stake, marriage, just because it is human, stands at the heart of the meaning of all the sacraments where reality itself can become a sacrament.⁷³

It is therefore also possible that "preventing, justifying and sanctifying grace" be conferred on others as a result of a marriage that lives up to its sacramental status.

What about the strengths of the Protestant position? How do we maintain these? We should continue to affirm, together with Luther and Calvin, that the married state is as holy and noble a calling as one to celibacy. Once again, however, we should recognize that our situation is very different from the one faced by the Reformers. Ours is a sex-crazed society that views the celibate person as a deprived and pitiful human being. We are also heavily influenced by popular culture to see the unmarried person as somehow incomplete and lacking personal fulfillment. Moreover, traditional ethnic values, especially in Asia, deprecate persons who do not bear children to carry on the family name. In such a context, the urgent task in our Protestant churches today might be to emphasize the validity of a call to celibacy, which both Luther and Calvin recognized. This could be done by including celibacy also as a means of grace, as there is ample

73 Colman E. O'Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Princeton: Scepter; Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1998), 192.

scriptural endorsement of this state.⁷⁴ This, however, is not the topic of our discussion.

What about the status of non-Christian marriages? One unique feature of Wesley's position is that the means of grace have value for non-Christians too. According to his definition, they are able to convey "preventing (or prevenient) and justifying grace," in addition to the grace that sanctifies. These two types of grace are meant for those who have yet to become Christians.⁷⁵ If marriage is accepted as a means of grace, we can say that God ordinarily conveys his grace through this institution, even to the non-Christian couple, so that they might live up to the high calling of marriage (one they might not fully comprehend). It is also plausible that marriage might become a point of contact between the non-Christian couple and the gospel. Through the journey of marriage, the couple might come to a deeper understanding of the love that Christ and the church have for one another, thus leading them closer to an embrace of Christianity.⁷⁶ In short, seeing marriage as a means of grace does not entail the need to place non-Christian marriages on a different basis from Christian ones. Both are able to serve the symbolic function of the institution and convey the grace the couple needs to fulfill their calling. The sanctity of non-Christian marriages is therefore fully acknowledged.

Viewing non-Christian marriages as sacramental also has the benefit, in many Asian contexts, of seeing the institution in a manner more consonant

74 Adrian Thatcher calls for a new appreciation on the part of Protestants for celibacy, based on what Scripture teaches. If Protestants read the Bible carefully, Thatcher maintains, they will discover that "the New Testament does not endorse marriage with the enthusiasm, say, of Luther" ("Marriage," 1165.)

75 Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 84.

76 "Final Report," 286 (para 23) raises the possibility that, as part of the "mystery of grace," marriage may have "beneficial effects ... on couples who are not believers." This is our attempt to explicate the nature of such "beneficial effects." I should also quote here the words of Colman O'Neill. While making a firm affirmation that non-Christian marriages lack "full sacramentality," he says, "There is, however, no reason to deny that Christ's restoration of creation is taking place in all authentic marriages, whether they are sacramental in the full sense or not.... The sacrament ... comes into being where Christ's universal mediation is explicitly recognized and celebrated. The mystery of salvation extends to all human beings and is at work in all" (*Sacramental Realism*, 191). This seems to come close to the position I am arguing for here.

with the prevailing cultural understanding. The elaborate wedding ceremonies and rituals pertaining to married life found in many “pagan” societies aim to both signify and effect a transformation in the disposition and behavior of the married couple. The traditional Chinese understanding of *li* (ritual), for example, views rites as possessing an inherent “ennobling” function, assisting in the development of the relevant virtues.⁷⁷ This, of course, is not equivalent to the Christian understanding of sacramentality, but it might provide a point of contact between Christianity and various Asian cultures.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that Protestants need to recover, in fuller measure, the sacramentality of marriage, and proposed a way this might be done. Our Protestant version of sacramentality sees marriage as a significant “means of grace”: a powerful symbol of the mystical relationship between Christ and his church, and one that confers “preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace” to those who participate in it as well as to the wider community.

I hope that such a recovery of sacramentality will profoundly enhance the view of marriage in Protestant eyes and shape how we preach and teach about marriage and care pastorally for the marriages in our congregations. In various Asian contexts, emphasizing the sacramentality of marriage might also provide a point of contact and continuity between the Christian and cultural understanding of the institution. I also hope that the Protestant position outlined here might form our unique contribution to the Christian perspective on this most remarkable institution for the strengthening and blessing of the church and the world.

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77 A.S. Cua, “Li: Rites or Propriety,” in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York: Routledge, 2003), 373. See also Chow Kai-wing, “Ritualism,” 648–649 in the same publication.

78 I owe this observation to my colleague Simon Chan.