

Luther On Life

[WELS LUTHERANS FOR LIFE - NATIONAL CONVENTION

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Dateline: September 1, 1983; 3:26 a.m. A deadly heat-seeking missile launched from a Russian SU Flagon jet found its unsuspecting target. Korean Airlines Flight 007 plummeted 30,000 feet into the Sea of Japan. A stunned world could not believe what it was hearing—269 lives snuffed out because a commercial airliner had wandered off course into enemy air space.

At an international conference in Madrid, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko said tersely, “The borders of the Soviet Union are sacred.” Lives apparently are not sacred. Borders are, at least for Russians afflicted with paranoia. In as cynical and barbarous a statement as my ears have ever heard, Russian Chief of Staff, Nicolai Ogarkov, subsequently suggested that in the event of a similar occurrence, Russia would follow a similar course of action. And once more the world recoiled in a spasm of unbelief.

Two things puzzle me about all this. One is that Russian leaders can be so paranoid. The other is that the world at large is so horrified over murder in the skies, yet seemingly so complacent about murder in the clinic.

One estimate has it that more than 12 minutes elapsed from the time the ill-fated flight 007 was hit until it plunged its passengers into their watery grave. During that 12 minute period more lives were being aborted “legally” than the 269 lives that were snuffed out criminally, in fact four times as many according to the World Health Organization. WHO estimates that 137,000 babies are aborted every day world wide. In the USA, 175 per hour, 4200 per day. In her address last night, Jean Doyle cited the figure of 4400 per day as reported by the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Russians insist that their borders are sacred. They did what they had a legal right to do, they insist in their madness. Aborting mothers, 1 ½ million a year in this country, claim their bodies are sacred too. And for that reason, they insist, aborting their babies is merely a matter of doing what they have a right to do.

In the one case the world justly rings its hands in horror, raises a proper hue and cry and says, “We’ve got to do something.” (Some in their frustration pour Russian Vodka down the drain or refuse to unload a Russian freighter in Los Angeles’ harbor). In the other case those who raise the hue and cry and put their hands to the task of doing something are tolerated as fundamentalist fanatics. We are minded to cry out with the Psalmist David, “O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages.” (Ps 35:17)

We are here today because a gracious God has kept us, his adopted children, from being engulfed and overwhelmed by the maddening crowd. He has revealed the truth to us about life, about what is sacred and what is not, and about the Satanic madness of disposing of babies as nuisances. We are here not only because as pro-lifers we share similar convictions, but also because as Lutherans we share a common heritage. We are *Lutherans* for Life. We are that because Luther was for life. And he was for life because he was for the truth, God’s truth. You can’t be for the truth without being for life too.

By happy coincidence this convention is meeting at a time when Christendom is observing the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. We propose to add our contribution to that celebration at this convention by recalling what Luther had to say about life.

My proposal then is to let Luther speak to you today on a subject that is of particular concern to us. In letting Luther speak, we are not muzzling God as though we are more interested in what Luther says than in what God says. Readers of *Beginnings* will know that in an exposition of Psalm 139, I for one have sought to focus the light of God’s Word on the subject at hand in this convention. What’s more, what Luther says is really nothing more than a re-echoing of what God has said.

Marriage and Family

To my knowledge, Luther did not address himself directly to the specific sin of abortion. But he did speak and write about life, whole volumes in fact. He recognized and proclaimed God as the Author of all life,

and that made him pro-life, vociferously and uncompromisingly pro-life. Luther spoke and wrote at length about life's beginning, its sacredness, about a Christian's obligations with respect to life, and also about the obligations of the state to respect and protect life.

Much of what Luther had to say about life was in the context of what he had to say about marriage and the family. So before we let Luther speak for himself, let me summarize for you Luther's role as a reformer regarding marriage and family. In 1525, eight years after posting the 95 Theses marking the beginning of the Reformation, Luther married ex-nun Catharine von Bora. Their marriage was more than just another social event on the community calendar in Wittenberg. Their wedding gave marriage and the family a legitimacy they had not had in more than a thousand years of Christian history. During the Middle Ages the church developed a two-tiered view of Christian life. Life was either religious or secular. Monastic occupied the upper tier. Catholics honor St. Anthony, a third century ascetic, as the "father of monks and the founder of monastic life" (*LW 44:23*). They credit St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) with developing the rule for the monastic life. The rule of St. Francis begins with this sentence. "The rule and life of the little brothers is this: to keep the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without property, and in chastity" (*LW 44:255.268*).

Following the lead of Anthony and others, the church began to advocate celibacy and virginity as the means for attaining to highest rung on the ladder of holiness. Marriage and family played no part in the thinking of those who aspired to please God with their elite holiness. Luther concurred in that thinking and took the vow of a monk himself in 1505 when he entered the Augustinian cloister at Erfurt.

But by 1521 Luther had come to see the evil inherent in this two-tiered view of life. In his treatise *On Monastic Vows* as well as in other writings, he denounced vows of celibacy and chastity as part of a system of meritorious good works which vitiated the gospel. He insisted that monks and nuns were no holier than ordinary Christian folk. Real saints in the family of God, he suggested, were those who in simple faith had learned to put up with squalling babies, shrewish wives and drunken husbands. Their work as Christian husbands, wives and parents was God's work, the work God instituted when he created Eve and gave her to Adam.

Luther's marriage to Catharine was important, not because he was the first monk to marry after the Reformation got under way. He wasn't. Their marriage was important because of who they were and the attention their marriage attracted in all of Germany. Their marriage became a model. So did their home. Every one noticed what they did and how they conducted themselves as family. Visitors from all over Europe were guests in their home and observers of their family life. Even Shakespeare's Hamlet lived in a dormitory just a short block from Luther's home while he was a student at the University in Wittenberg.

Luther asserted on several occasions that recognition of the sanctification of the married estate was one of the major achievements of the Reformation. In his view, motherhood was woman's crowning glory. God had created Eve, and his own Katie too, to be a mother as well as a wife. Prior to the Reformation, when churchmen wrote about women, they singled out women who were virgins. Virginity was more virtuous than motherhood. Luther extolled his Katie as a virtuous woman because she was a mother. That marked a noteworthy change in thinking in the world of Luther's day.

God ordained parenthood, not celibacy. What God ordains is superior to what the church prescribes. Because marriage is God's ordination, parenthood is a God-intended and God-pleasing vocation. Christians are called to be parents, according to Luther's understanding of the Word, and as parents they are responsible to God to support and care for their children. Luther saw the call to be parents in a light similar to the call to be ministers. Neither call puts one into a special class or into a higher vocation. In another context Luther insisted that the wife and mother who faithfully fulfils her household duties is rendering to God a service as noble as that of the Bishop.

Luther saw his relationship to his Katie as a partnership; not as a master-servant relationship. He did not make an errand girl out of her. His shared-enterprise view of the husband-wife relationship is apparent in part three of his sermon in 1522 on the Estate of Marriage (*LW 45:35*). He says, for example, "Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool—though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian

faith—my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures is smiling—not because the father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith” (LW 45:40). That doesn’t prove positively that Luther ever washed diapers for his six children, but it does establish the point about his view of marriage as a shared enterprise.

Luther’s view of the place and the prominence of children is also evident from his numerous pronouncements on the importance of education, for both boys and girls. That too was a revolutionary viewpoint. He encouraged civil leaders to establish schools in every village in the land. Children were vital to the future of a healthy society.

The influence of wife and children as family on Luther is evident in his writings also in other ways. He compared his and Katie’s protective love for little Hans, or their spanking of little Martin to God’s protective love and his disciplining of his children. His letter to four year old Hans, written in 1530 while Luther was staying at the Coburg, is a gem which reveals a father’s tender love as well as his understanding of child psychology. Analogies and anecdotes based upon home life abound in Luther’s writings, especially in his sermons and *Table Talks*. That was a new wrinkle too in theological literature. Theologians hadn’t been doing that, based upon their own experience, for centuries.

Luther’s attitude toward his family is evident also in the grief he and Katie experienced, first at the death of Elizabeth in 1528, their second child who lived less than a year, and again in 1542 when 13 year old Magdalena died in her father’s arms. At the time Luther wrote that he had something he knew no bishop had experienced for over a thousand years. Luther was referring to his family.

By written and spoken word as well as by his example, Luther helped to elevate the family to the place of prominence it has occupied as the fundamental unit of society in Western civilization from the time of the Reformation to the present. Essential to that view of the family is an understanding of the sacredness of life.

Now we want to let Luther speak for himself on that subject.

New Life – God’s Miracle

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, Luther expounds at length on the 21st verse of chapter 2. “So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib.” After pointing out how “tenuous and almost useless” the philosophers’ theories about man’s origins are, Luther says, “Therefore let us learn that true wisdom is in Holy Scripture and in the Word of God. This gives information not only about the entire matter of creation, ... but also about who did the creating and for what purpose he created.... Here we are taught about the beginning of man that the first man did not come into existence by a process of *generation*, as reason has deceived Aristotle and the rest of the philosophers into imagining. The reproduction of his descendants takes place through *procreation*: but the first male was formed and created from a clod of the field, and the first female from the rib of the sleeping man.... After this beginning was made, then there follows the no less wonderful propagation through the union of male and female, whereby the entire human race is brought into being from a droplet of the human body.... If, therefore, man is brought into existence from a droplet of blood, as the experience of all men on the entire earth bears witness, surely this is no less miraculous than that the first man was created from a clod, and the female from a rib of the man” (LW 1:125.126).

Luther then goes on to lament the fact that because giving birth is “a daily phenomenon” we lose our sense of awe and our appreciation for the fact that every birth involves a miracle. He says,

“Thus it is a great miracle that a small seed is planted and that out of it grows a very tall oak. But because these are daily occurrences, they have become of little importance, like the very process of our procreation. Surely it is most worthy of wonder that a woman receives semen, that this semen becomes thick and, as Job elegantly said (Job 10:10), is congealed and then is given shape and nourished until the fetus is ready for breathing air. When the fetus has been brought into the world by birth, no new nourishment appears, but a new way and method: from the two breasts, as from a fountain, there flows milk by which the baby is nourished. All these developments afford the fullest occasion for wonderment and are wholly beyond our understanding, but

because of their continued recurrence they have come to be regarded as commonplace, and we have verily become deaf to this lovely music of nature” (LW 1:126).

No one who believes that the conception of new life in the womb is a marvel and a miracle could ever endorse arbitrarily and unilaterally undoing God’s miracle because the pregnancy happens to be an inconvenience. Later on, still commenting on this same verse, Luther says, “if we believe that God is the efficient and final cause, should we not wonder at His works, delight in them, and proclaim them always and everywhere?” (LW 1:127) That tells you something about Luther’s mind-set. People then still felt a sense of awe and reverence for God. Abortion thrives only in a climate that has lost that sense of awe and reverence for God as the Creator and Author of life. First people lose their respect for God and his Word and only then do they subscribe to abortion as a person’s right.

Luther goes further than just to ascribe new life to a miracle of God. He connects conception to the working of God’s Word. He writes: “Aristotle prates in vain that man and the sun bring man into existence.” (Evolutionary theory did not originate with Darwin.) Although the heat of the sun warms our bodies, nevertheless the cause of their coming into existence is something far different, namely, the Word of God, who gives a command to this effect and says to the husband: ‘Now your blood shall become a male; now it shall become a female.’ Reason knows nothing about this Word. Therefore it cannot get away from its childish prattle about such important matters” (LW 1:127). What Luther is speaking about is what systematic theology terms *creatio continuata*.

If life originates with God, then life is sacred. Luther’s appreciation for the sanctity of human life is reflected over and over again in his writings. For example, commenting on Genesis 3:20, (“And Adam called the name of his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living”) Luther says, “The name which Adam gives his wife is a very pleasing and delightful name. For what is more precious, better, or more delightful than life?” (LW 1:220). It is precious because it is God-given. And because it is God-given, it is sacred.

Or consider the implication of this observation in Luther’s sermon *On The Estate of Marriage*. “For this Word which God speaks, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ is not a command. It is more than a command, namely a divinely ordinance (*werck*) which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore.... Therefore, just as God does not command anyone to be a man or a woman, but creates them the way they have to be, so he does not command them to multiply, but creates so that they have to multiply.... For to produce seed and to multiply is a matter of God’s ordinance (*geschöpffe*), not your power.” Again, Luther is recognizing the role God plays in producing seed and multiplying. If life is God’s working and ordering (*geschöpffe*), then it is sacred. (LW 45:18).

The sacredness of life is inherently connected also with a biblical view of the purpose of life. Luther offers this clear and concise observation about life’s purpose. “What advantage is there,” he asks, “in knowing how beautiful a creature man is if you are unaware of his purpose, namely that he was created to worship God and to live eternally with God?” (LW 1:131). Surely to deprive a person, even before birth, of realizing the God-intended purpose of life has got to rank with the most devilish of crimes.

A Christian who understands and appreciates the truth about the sanctity of life will exhibit an attitude consistent with that right understanding. In his sermon *On The Estate of Marriage*, Luther offers a graphic description of a distinctly Christian attitude. He begins with an earthy account of an unsanctified view of married life. He says, “That clever harlot, our natural reason takes a look at married life, turns up her nose and says:

‘Alas, must I rock the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and sores, and on top of that care for my wife, provide for her, labor at my trade, take care of this and take care of that, do this and do that, endure this and endure that, and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves? What, should I make such a prisoner of myself? O you poor, wretched fellow, have you taken a wife? Fie, fie upon such wretchedness and bitterness! It is better to remain free and lead a peaceful, carefree life; I will become a priest or a nun and compel my children to do likewise.’

What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, ‘O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also 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.’

A wife too should regard her duties in the same light, as she suckles the child, rocks and bathes it, and cares for it in other ways; and as she busies herself with other duties and renders help and obedience to her husband. These are truly golden and noble works. This is also how to comfort and encourage a woman in the pangs of childbirth, not by repeating St. Margaret legends and other silly old wives’ tales but by speaking thus, ‘Dear Grete, remember that you are a woman, and that this work of God in you is pleasing to him. Trust joyfully in his will, and let him have his way with you. Work with all your might to bring forth the child. Should it mean your death, then depart happily, for you will die in a noble deed and in subservience to God. If you were not a woman you should now wish to be one for the sake of this very work alone, that you might thus gloriously suffer and even die in the performance of God’s work and will. For here you have the word of God, who so created you and implanted within you this extremity.’ Tell me, is not this indeed [as Solomon says (Pr 18:22)] ‘to obtain favor from the Lord,’ even in the midst of such extremity?” (LW 45:39.40)

How beautifully descriptive those words are. Yet how foreign they are to prevailing attitudes today. But negative attitudes toward life are really not new, are they? Luther observed them in his day too, and denounced them in no uncertain terms. In his comments on the birth of Joseph to Jacob and Rachel, he notes, “For most married people do not desire offspring. Indeed they turn away from it and consider it better to live without offspring.” Luther adds this scathing indictment of such an attitude. “Those who have no love for children are swine, stocks and logs unworthy of being called men or women; for they despise the blessing of God, the Creator and Author of marriage” (LW 1:363)

Luther expressed himself in a similar way in his comments on God’s directive to be “fruitful and multiply.”

“Today you find many people who do not want to have children. Moreover, this callousness and inhuman attitude, which is worse than barbarous, is met with chiefly among the nobility and princes, who often refrain from marriage for this one single reason, that they might have no offspring. It is even more disgraceful that you find princes who allow themselves to be forced not to marry, for fear that the members of their house would increase beyond a definite limit. Surely such men deserve that their memory be blotted out from the land of the living. Who is there who would not detest these swinish monsters? But these facts, too, serve to emphasize original sin. Otherwise we would marvel at procreation as the greatest work of God, and as a most outstanding gift we would honor it with the praises it deserves.” (LW 1:118)

But, you say, Luther’s concern in those quotes is about birth control. Our concern is about abortion. Did Luther have anything to say about that? Not expressly or directly, he didn’t, because abortion was not an infectious rot on the society of his day. But indirectly he did. How’s this for an unequivocal statement. “For those who pay no attention to pregnant women and do not spare the tender fetus become murderers and parricides.” (LW 1:382) In this same connection he said, “Therefore there should be no joking (actually, trifling would be a better translation) with pregnant women, but they should receive careful attention because of the fetus” (LW 1:381).

Note that carefully. Luther was as concerned about the fetus as he was about the woman carrying the fetus. But did Luther really regard the fetus as a human being? You judge for yourself on the basis of this comment from the commentary on Genesis. Again, Luther is expounding the words “be fruitful and multiply.” “Procreation is now hindered by a thousand diseases, and it happens that *unborn children* do not survive the period of gestation, or that at times marriages are altogether barren. These are flaws and punishments resulting from Adam’s awful fall and from original sin” (*LW* 1:133). Though they are unborn, yet they are children in Luther’s mind. He did not learn that from fellow professors in the School of Medicine at the University of Wittenberg. He learned it from the Scriptures. Born or unborn, children are God’s creation, every one a miracle no less. And God gives no one the right to undo his doing.

What do you suppose Luther would have to say if he could address you here today on the theme of this convention? What would he say about our national disgrace? What would he say about our undoing of God’s doing a million and a half times a year?

Knowing Luther’s penchant for strong language, it wouldn’t be sweet talk. I can tell you that for sure. And knowing how Luther loved to quote the fathers, he might begin by invoking St. Chrysostom who once said, “Whoever is not angry when there is cause for anger sins.” And, American Christians, Luther would say, you’ve got just cause to be angry.

Luther would probably say to us, “WELS Lutherans, if you’ve been reading my *Large Catechism* regularly like I encouraged you to do, then you’ll remember that in my exposition of the 5th Commandment I said, “If you see anyone hunger and do not feed him, you have let him starve. Likewise, if you see any one condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him, although you know ways and means to do so, you have killed him. It will do you no good to plead that you did not contribute to his death by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from him and robbed him of the service by which his life might have been saved.” Now, I don’t know how he could have made it any clearer than that.

I think Luther might also repeat what he said in his classic *Treatise on Good Works*. “Likewise, it is not right for the government to take a holiday and let sin rule and for us to say nothing about it.... We must defend God’s honor and commandment, as well as prevent injury or injustice to our neighbor” (*LW* 44:103).

Did you notice that Luther is advocating two things here? For one thing, he is urging you to *speak* up. Let the world know what you think about its flaunting of God’s honor. Let your representatives in government hear about your concern for our national disregard of God’s commandment to protect life. But more than that. Luther is also encouraging us to *do* something about the callous disregard for human life so prevalent today. “We must prevent injury or injustice to our neighbor,” he says. Abortion is both an injury and an injustice. Pregnancy Counseling Centers *are* doing something about that injury and injustice. Luther would be delighted to endorse what you are doing here in his name for God’s honor.

One thing Luther would probably find incomprehensible is the compromising stance of many Protestant denominations today on the question of open abortion. Particularly upsetting to him would be the reluctance even of Lutheran churches to stand where he stood on life. It wouldn’t just upset him, it would infuriate him. He’d have more kindly things to say about the Catholic Church for the position it has taken than he would about many church bodies that bear his name.

But if he had read an article in a recent issue of *Christian Century*, written by a local theologian at Marquette University, he might wonder who is left in the world to speak up for God’s truth on the subject of life. The article in the September 14 issue of the *Century* is entitled, “Abortion: A Question of Catholic Honesty” by Daniel C. Macquire. Dr. Macquire notes that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has reversed itself in a recent pastoral letter opposing nuclear armaments, but the same bishops refuse to give consideration to an alternative to the church’s anti-abortion stance. Macquire then makes a plea to his church to reconsider its position on abortion. His argument is based upon the assumption that his church’s current stand is not moral. “As a Catholic theologian,” he writes, “I find this situation abhorrent and unworthy of the richness of the Roman Catholic traditions that have nourished me.” (*Christian Century*, Sept. 14-21, 1983, pp. 803-807)

If Luther were still wielding his polemical pen today, can you imagine the kind of letter to the editor of the *Century* that article would provoke? He would probably suggest what he would consider to be a more appropriate name for that publication.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that if Luther were able to be here with you today, he would be. He would gladly endorse what you are endeavoring to do. He would support you in every way he could. He would do it out of the fear and love of God and out of respect for the life only God can create. I think he might even tie his support of your work to the Scriptures by paraphrasing the words of Jesus. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. I was about to be aborted, and you came to my rescue."

And now if I were to say on your behalf, "Luther, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts," he'd say, "Don't thank me. Thank God, - for Lutherans for Life."