

## **For God is also the God of Bodies: Embodiment and Sexuality in Martin Luther's Theology**

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[1] Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, in the book *Re-forming the Body*, state that the human body, in medieval times, was marked by volatility. The struggles for survival, the threat of violence and disease, and the scarcity of goods (food, clothing, or shelter) could lead to death. Magic and superstition were aids to knowledge. Body regimes, such as asceticism and penance, encouraged people to transform their fallen, sinful flesh. Medieval Roman Catholicism attempted to structure the volatility of the human body by creating practices and disciplines associated with religion and knowledge.<sup>[1]</sup> Body regimes, however, were pursued by a minority, so much so that monks, religious ascetics, and nuns were perceived as above the common people precisely for their ability to deny fleshly desire. Fasting, sexual abstinence, vigils, prayers, and exorcisms were instituted as modes to overcome the temptation of evil, fleshly desire.

[2] Medieval theologians and priests were not the first ones to pose such negative views of human sexuality. Peter Brown, in his classic study of early Christian history, points out that Christianity always had a dubious relationship with physicality.<sup>[2]</sup> Taking control over the body was a symbol of Christ's victory over death and the corrupt human order (including sin). To control the body was to deny sexuality and the sinful desires of the flesh. Brown analyzes the practice of asceticism and the model of sexual renunciation as it was developed in the first five centuries of the Church. Continence, celibacy, and life-long virginity - at first marginal spiritual practices - became the ideal for Christian life. Jerome, for instance, when comparing virginity, widowhood, and marriage, gave virginity a numerical value of one hundred, widowhood, sixty, and marriage, thirty. Virginity filled heaven, marriage the earth.<sup>[3]</sup>

[3] From the outset, Christians were marked by an ambiguity towards human bodies. <sup>[4]</sup> On the one hand, following the ministry of Jesus, believers took care of sick, hungry, and needy bodies. Neighborly love took the concrete form of *diaconia*, assuring the well-being of other human beings, particularly those in suffering and need. On the other hand, the flesh represented a prison for the human soul and a hindrance to a devout spiritual life. Procreation perpetuated the circle of sin and death (an idea that echoed Platonic thought). Christians were constantly grappling with the question of how to transform the fallen flesh in light of the integrity that the body represents (as God's creation).

[4] The fact that ecclesiastical teachings emphasized sexual abstinence and established precise regulations regarding sexuality did not imply unanimous acquiescence to these practices. To the contrary, "far from being caught up in a human culture of ideas and objects, medieval bodies maintained a sensual relationship with the sacred."<sup>[5]</sup> These practices could range from self-flagellation to bodily states of ecstasy, from walking around with pins stuck in the flesh to bodily indulgence in medieval versions of carnival. In spite of the focus on spiritual matters and salvation, the human body was still at the center of attention, whether through a rhetoric of denial and regulation established by the church, through the constant toils and tribulations that the

quotidian life demanded, or through the sensuality of practices that escaped the control of the religious discourse.

[5] This is the context of Martin Luther's theology. He moved away from the regulations of human sexuality established by monasticism (the ideal of sexual abstinence and mortification of the flesh), but he did not condone the lascivious practices of his time either. Luther's theology offers a new threshold for embodiment, that is, one that reclaims the human body as part of God's good creation, a concrete expression of God's care and grace. The body and sexuality are no longer placed under the realm of perdition. Rather, the human body is the place of and for neighborly love, fleshing out a Christian ethics concerned with the well-being of self and others. As an intrinsic part of human embodiment, sexuality falls under the same category of God's creation and is worthy of honor and dignity.

### **Martin Luther and Sexual Ethics?**

[6] Most often, when scholars read Luther's critique of monastic life, they interpret his harsh words to pertain solely to the higher moral character the clergy claimed to have. In light of justification by faith, the critique is rendered as a rebuttal of good works performed through sacrifices (whether one's own blood and flesh, one's possessions, or one's service) and a return to the practices of the early Christian church (when priests were allowed to marry, for instance).

Although correct, this purely theological lens does not allow us to unveil the complex contribution Luther offers to his time and possibly to ours. When Luther refuted monasticism and became a passionate defender of married life, he was not simply criticizing church hierarchy. He was also claiming embodiment and human sexuality as intrinsic parts of God's creation. He dismantled a theology obsessed with chastity and sexual purity and, in a daring move, shifted the focus of theology to address not only souls but also human bodies in a positive manner. The private sexual lives of the laity were modeled, in ecclesiastical teachings, according to the ascetic ideals taught by the clergy. By removing the authority of the teachings, Luther allowed a reassessment of sexual ethics.[\[6\]](#)

[7] It must be said, however, that Luther also reflected his social and historical location when describing the human body and sexuality. He was clearly a child of his time, echoing medieval understandings of the human being as comprising spirit, soul and body. He often described the spirit as the highest and noblest part of the human being, and the human body as its exterior manifestation. The soul gives life to the body and works through it. Although the flesh is sporadically referred to as a "rotten old bag," the body is not negative. Luther frequently employed the distinction, established by Paul, between *sarx* (flesh) and *soma* (body), whereby the flesh is corrupt but the body clean. Still, Luther frequently admonished Christians to keep the body under control.[\[7\]](#) Luther's contribution was not only the development of a unique understanding of the human being, but rather how this human being is situated in the whole of creation. By reclaiming a theology of creation, Luther envisioned humanity as a paradox, simultaneously embodying the goodness of creation and the shortcomings of sin.

[8] An example of Luther's social and historical location is his description of embodiment and sexuality as they fall into the category of gender performances. He invoked male superiority and the existence of "natural spheres" to allocate particular responsibilities and duties to women and

men. By reifying and naturalizing gender constructs, placing them under the order of creation, Luther maintained dichotomies and hierarchies based on gendered roles. Contemporary studies affirm that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."[\[8\]](#) For Luther, however, biological sex, sexual identity, and gender roles were more or less the same. Biology, in fact, dictated a man or woman's place in the home or society.

[9] This critical note does not minimize the importance of Luther's writings, nor does it dismiss contemporary findings related to gender identity. Obviously, it would be impossible to expect a Sixteenth century scholar to operate with the complex tools of gender analysis developed almost five centuries later. However, by recognizing this historical gap and cultural divide, one also needs hermeneutical clarity to discern which aspects of Luther's sexual ethics one wishes to emphasize or draw from. A confessional reading of Luther might render his teachings frozen in time and space, and consequently irrelevant for today. A superimposition of contemporary questions on his medieval thinking (regarding women's place in society, homosexuality, or the role of family and marriage, for instance) might similarly deem Luther as outdated and archaic. If one expects Luther to offer answers to contemporary debates on sexuality by simply copying what he said, the result would be both contradictory and disastrous. It would be contradictory because Luther himself presented opposing views on the same subject and disastrous because one would not have understood the core of Luther's teachings, particularly the centrality of the gospel over the law.[\[9\]](#)

[10] It is possible to employ Luther's own hermeneutics and paradoxical reasoning to disclose his teachings not as lessons of how nature determines one's social position, but primarily as reflections on the human condition and theological constructions of human relationships (including sexuality). In addition to stating *what* he said regarding particular aspects of human sexuality, one also must ask *why* and *on what basis* he came to certain conclusions. In that sense, Luther often went beyond the teachings of his time, offering a broader framework of reference than natural law.

Any natural law morality has to be historicized, rather than assuming this reveals direct codes willed by God. The "facts of nature" represent creation as continually modified by human interactions. Ethics, as the living vocation of all human beings, involves discerning how to act within this reality in ways that foster the fullness of life for all.[\[10\]](#)

[11] Luther's relationship to natural law is complex. On the one hand, he invoked principles that rest upon a divinely ordained and implanted endowment of human nature, law, and political institutions. He could actually say that, by nature, all human beings have a certain knowledge of the law. He believed that it was written in everyone's heart (for instance, that crime and idolatry are forbidden) and he often referred to God-given institutions. In other words, natural law was God's law. On the other hand, Luther maintained a creative tension between law and gospel, particularly when dealing with Mosaic law. When natural law is interpreted and applied, there is at the same time a renewal and a constriction of God's law. Hence, for Luther, this law could no longer be binding in all its parts. As summarized by Bernhard Lohse: "Even the Decalogue is binding only as a summary of natural law, which in essence consists of the two commandments to worship God and to care for one's fellow human beings in terms of love for neighbor."[\[11\]](#)

Even if Luther employed the principles of natural law, he moved away from them when they did not comply with the teachings of the gospel, translated as love.

## **The Ambiguities of Sexuality**

[12] Luther was very much aware that sexuality is part of human life, one that needs to be cherished and treated with care. He regarded sexual desire as extremely powerful in both men and women.<sup>[12]</sup> Sometimes he criticized women for enticing young men into sexual relationships. Other times he concentrated on the male sexual drive and women as objects of desire. Yet, what was the role of sexual desire in the overall scheme of creation? To address this quandary Luther often referred to traditional theological teachings but also proposed novel ideas. Similar to Augustine, he linked original sin and sexual drive. Luther understood that, after the fall, God implanted in Adam and Eve (and their progeny) an irresistible sexual desire that could only be fulfilled through sexual acts. But unlike medieval Roman Catholic theologians, Luther considered "marital sex as a positive good in itself and not simply because it leads to procreation; sex increases affection between spouses and promotes harmony in domestic life."<sup>[13]</sup>

[13] In fact, during Luther's lifetime society witnessed great changes regarding sexuality. Monks could marry. Marriage ceased to be one of the sacraments. Parenthood was expected. These changes, proposed and carried out by the reformers, represented a significant disruption of the way people perceived themselves, their world, and their sexuality. When reading Luther's writings, it is possible to see how the terrain was shifting, and how he, himself, had to adjust his opinion to address the challenges at hand. His own experience led him to perceive issues differently as time went by (for instance, how he addressed marriage once he was married). Thus, it is possible to find a multiplicity of opinions regarding quotidian issues, although the core of the theology did not change. The centrality of the doctrine of justification, the role of faith and grace, the importance of Scripture, the emphasis on the education of all Christian believers, and the active participation of Christians in the life of the church and in society were constant theological tenets.

[14] Luther's paradoxical views are well known from his theological statements. A similar key can also be applied to his notions of sexuality and embodiment. The different entries presented in this section are excerpts of Luther's theological stances on issues pertaining to sexual life and intimacy. On the one hand, they offer glimpses of Luther's views on particular subjects, the practical and political reasoning that went into his considerations, and often the cultural baggage that he threw into the outcomes. On the other hand, they also exemplify how Luther introduced changes in the perceptions of sexuality, embodiment, and the role of the wider community. After all, sexuality was a matter of intimacy, but not one restricted to the privacy of the home. Each of the following sections will end by presenting questions for contemporary ethical reflection and deliberation.

### *1. The purpose of marriage*

[15] For Luther, the perpetuation of the species and the channeling of sexual drive were primary reasons for marriage. In his treatise "The Estate of Marriage," of 1522, Luther affirmed that the refusal to marry leads to wantonness and that humanity was created to reproduce and multiply.

Marriage serves the dual purpose of forestalling immorality and assuring the reproduction of the species. To abstain from sex or to engage in sex outside of marriage leads to fornication or secret sin. Based on Genesis 1:28 ("Be fruitful and multiply"), Luther concluded: "you can neither escape nor restrain yourself from being fruitful and multiplying; it is God's ordinance and takes its course."[\[14\]](#) If sexual desire is inevitable, it needs to be safely channeled into marriage. Similarly, in his "Lectures on Romans" Luther referred to Paul's admonition that all believers mortify the flesh. If Christians cannot be continent, let them at least be chaste. If they surrender to lust because of the weakness of the flesh, sex should take place in the state of marriage.[\[15\]](#) For Luther, marriage was God's institution.

[16] Luther's views on marriage exemplify his paradoxical reasoning in relation to Paul. For the apostle, the ideal was sexual abstinence. But human flesh is not strong enough to endure the temptations of lust and pleasure, giving in to concupiscence. Luther drew on the ideal of marriage as a God-given estate, which offers the solution for the problem of sexual desire; it maintains desire under control and confined within the realm of the household. For Paul, sexual abstinence was ideal and marriage was the second best alternative, since it kept a lid on evil. For Luther, marriage was not the second best choice but the only alternative; it became the place of righteousness and sanctification.

[17] Contemporary reflections on human sexuality include a more complex description of orientations than the binary male-female attraction. An ongoing debate is precisely about the sexual attraction for people of the same sex and the nature of such desire. Although the opinions regarding homosexuality vary, there is consensus that heterosexuality is not the only form of sexual attraction. If we were to follow Luther's reasoning regarding the impossibility of humanity to control sexual drive (as something instilled by God in creation), how would it apply to homoerotic desires? Since, for many people, heterosexuality is no longer the only natural expression of human sexuality, would this mean that same-sex relations and desires should also find an outlet through marriage?

## *2. Regulating marriage*

[18] In his 1530 treatise "On Marriage Matters," Luther defined marriage as an external, worldly matter, subject to temporal authority. He recognized that neither Christ nor his apostles concerned themselves with these issues "except where they touched upon consciences."[\[16\]](#) In other words, debates on sexuality and intimacy should not obfuscate other ethical issues, unless they have ethical implications. Luther critiqued the confusion of realms when papists seized marriage, a worldly matter, as their own responsibility, thus placing the religious authority over civil authority. In distinguishing between the temporal and spiritual authorities (or realms), Luther hoped to overcome the confusion of competences; marriage belongs to the temporal sword. He did, however, offer his own advice, but only because the spiritual (papal) laws "run counter to all property, reason, and justice, and since the imperial laws are too ineffective in these matters - I will not withhold my opinion from you."[\[17\]](#)

[19] By referring marriage to the secular authority, Luther allocated the responsibilities for deciding on marriage issues to the civil society, more specifically to the state. The responsibility for deciding what constituted marriage, therefore, was no longer under the governance of the

Church and the restrictions on marriage imposed by the ecclesial powers should be removed.<sup>[18]</sup> No bride or groom should be forced into marriage and no ceremony should be secret. Weddings should be held in public spaces, in the presence of witnesses. For Luther, marriage was not a sacrament because it did not confer special grace, but it was an ideal state and everyone should marry (the earlier after puberty the better).

[20] A question for contemporary reflection is the role of church and state in establishing what constitutes marriage. Once our own understanding of marriage changes - to include also homosexual relationships, for instance - would it mean that the church abides according to the precepts of secular authority, thus blessing same-sex unions?

### *3. The nature of sex*

[21] Luther did not associate sin with sexuality in the way many of his contemporaries did. It is clear, for instance, that before the fall of Adam and Eve, there was sexual contact between them. However, Luther describes this sexuality as almost angelic: "There would not have been in him that detestable lust which is now in men, but there would have been the innocent and pure love of sex toward sex. Procreation would have taken place without any depravity, as an act of obedience. Mothers would have given birth without pain. Infants would not have been brought up in such a wretched manner and with such great toil."<sup>[19]</sup> Eden and the corruption of the flesh are due to sin. Because of sin, sex became shameful and a source for embarrassment: The lost innocence of

In Paradise woman would have been a help for a duty only [procreation]. But now she is also ... an antidote and a medicine; we can hardly speak of her without a feeling of shame, and surely we cannot make use of her without shame. The reason is sin. In Paradise that union would have taken place without any bashfulness, as an activity created and blessed by God. It would have been accompanied by a noble delight, such as there was at the time in eating and drinking. Now, alas, it is so hideous and frightful a pleasure that physicians compare it with epilepsy or falling sickness. Thus an actual disease is linked with the very activity of procreation. We are in the state of sin and of death; therefore we also undergo this punishment, that we cannot make use of woman without the horrible passion of lust and, so to speak, without epilepsy.<sup>[20]</sup>

[22] Similar to marriage, sexuality is seen paradoxically as a source of satisfaction and a burden, God's creation and a path to sin, a positive good in itself and a desire that leads to immorality. Luther did not solve the paradox, but unlike his contemporaries, had a more positive approach to human sexual desires. He placed them under God's protective care and as a sign of grace, as stated in The Small Catechism: "God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse [literally wife] and children, fields, livestock, and all property - along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life."<sup>[21]</sup> Sometimes Luther took rather pragmatic approaches to solve what he perceived to be the desires of the flesh and the need to procreate, even proposing bigamy. Yet he condemned sex outside of marriage, including prostitution.

[23] The paradox of sexuality is carried into modernity, of course, and made more complicated with the different gender roles, sexual plays, and erotic desires. Contemporary views on sexuality

no longer restrict sexual life to marriage, nor reduce marriage to reproduction. If Luther's view reduces marriage to the dual purpose of assuring procreation and restraining (or channeling) sexual desire, what role does the erotic play in human sexuality? In addition, in light of the current objectification of sex (pornography, prostitution, commercialization of sex through mass media) how can sexuality be invested with gracefulness - an experience of grace, as Luther defended?

#### 4. *The relationship of women and men*

[24] One of the most controversial pieces in Luther's theology is his position on women.

Notorious for his comments on women's anatomy and consequent domestic role ("Women have narrow shoulders and wide hips, therefore they ought to be domestic; their very physique is a sign from their Creator that he intended them to limit their activity to the home"[22]), Luther nonetheless challenged established Aristotelian theories that deemed women as defective males. Medieval theology, as stated in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, for instance, had a misogynist tone and enforced Aristotle's assumption that a perfect generative act would always result in a male offspring, describing females as botched males.

[25] Although Luther does not see women as equals to men, women are part of God's good creation: "Let us, therefore, obey the Word of God and recognize our wives as a building of God.

Not only is the house built through them by procreation and other services that are necessary in a household; but the husbands themselves are built through them, because wives are, as it were, a nest and a dwelling place where husbands can go to spend their time and dwell with joy." [23]

Luther is not exactly defending gender equality, but in light of the existent misogynist opinions of his day, he does take a more egalitarian approach.

[26] In terms of space, it was expected that men be active in the public arena, whereas women be homemakers. Men were allowed transit in both public and private spheres (technically the husband was also in charge of the house, but delegated these duties to the wife), whereas respectable women's environment was the home. [24] Luther stated that men need women to secure increase (management of the house), for companionship, and for protection. Women are also antidotes against sin: "And so, in the case of the woman, we must think not only of the managing of the household which she does, but also of the medicine which she is... Therefore we are compelled to make use of this sex in order to avoid sin. It is almost shameful to say this, but nevertheless it is true. For there are few who marry solely as a matter of duty." [25] It was not necessary for Luther to explain in as much detail why women would require men, since that was a matter of common sense: women did not exist without men and needed them as providers. However, men and women are alike in their sexual desires and need marriage to channel their sexual drive.

[27] With the advent of feminism, sexual revolution, and the overall deconstruction of Western notions of public and private arenas, Luther's assumptions about male and female relationships also need to be addressed. He limited women's scope of activities to the home and spoke harshly against the two available options outside marriage: the cloister and the brothel. As historians point out, there were no real alternatives for women to excel on their own and live satisfying personal lives - these are modern expectations. Luther indicated, however, that the ground for

sexual relationships is reciprocal love and mutual respect. Although he did not envision an egalitarian marriage, as we might, it is nevertheless revealing that his marriage with Katharina was based on these values. Does his notion of reciprocal love allow us to envision an egalitarian relationship between women and men?

### *5. Homosexuality*

[28] In his Lectures on Genesis and on Romans, Luther spoke about homosexuality (the term employed was sodomy). Both texts deal with an exegetical and analytical reading of the Scripture. Since the biblical texts themselves abhor same-sex relationships (given a larger argumentative scheme which cannot be expounded here), Luther did not break away from the biblical text. In his Lectures on Genesis, he stated: "The heinous conduct of the people of Sodom is extraordinary, inasmuch as they depart from the natural passion and longing of the male for the female, which was implanted into nature by God, and desired what is altogether contrary to nature. Whence comes this perversity? Undoubtedly from Satan who, after people have once turned away from the fear of God, so powerfully suppresses nature that he blots out the natural desire and stirs up a desire that is contrary to nature."[\[26\]](#) For Luther, sexual attraction for people of the same sex is considered unnatural because God implanted this desire (as natural law) to extend only to heterosexual relationships.

[29] In a similar fashion, Luther echoed the words of Paul in Romans and established a parallel with 1 Corinthians 6:9 (the effeminate and homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of God). Luther affirmed that "the nobility of the body (at least in this respect) consists in chastity and continence, or at least in the proper use of the body, so its shame is in its unnatural misuse... so also our body (in this respect) is ordained either for an honorable marriage or for an even more honorable chastity..."[\[27\]](#) Since Luther did not need to argue the legitimacy of homosexuality, he congregated all unacceptable sexual behaviors under the rubric of sodomy, that is, an act both against nature, the laws of hospitality, and respectability. He condemned acts that shatter the nobility of the body, deeming it unclean, immoral, or licentious.

[30] Luther has an extensive list of practices that shame or dishonor the body: "The uncleanness, or effeminacy, is every intentional and individual pollution that can be brought about in various ways: through excessive passion from shameful thoughts, through rubbing with hands, through fondling of another's bodies, especially a woman's, through indecent movements, etc. I have called it 'intentional' in order to differentiate it from the pollution that takes place during the night and sometimes during the day and the waking hours, but which happens to many people involuntarily. Such things are not intended."[\[28\]](#) He defines as immoral sensual practices that for contemporary readers are considered natural (fondling, caressing, rubbing, etc), which opens an interesting discussion of what the scope of "natural" really is (the nurture or nature debate). Evidently, what we consider to be natural is as much informed by culture as it is by nature itself.

[31] It is to be questioned, therefore, whether homosexuality would fall under the category of sodomy if it does not shatter bodily integrity. In other words, can homosexuality be perceived as a legitimate expression of human sexuality if it affirms the nobility of the body and the persons involved in same-sex relations experience their love as an expression of God's grace? In his comments, Luther places chastity at a higher level than marriage. Is Luther contradicting his

other writings regarding marriage, or is celibacy a punishment only in the case of homosexuality?

### **Valuing Embodiment**

[32] In summarizing Protestant attempts to reform not only the church but also medieval bodies, Mellor and Schilling defend that the Reformation gave rise to the modern, individualized body.

First, by prioritizing cognitive belief, linguistic symbols, and narratives (the Word), reformers dislocated people from their natural, supernatural, and social environments. Knowledge became a central source of people's self-identity. Second, the body had to be controlled by the mind, made subordinate to the religious narrative. Finally, however, the inability to control human emotions and passions led to a degree of anxiety over the sinful aspects of the human body.

Taken together, these three factors were essential not simply for the formation of a Protestant rationalized 'spirit', as Weber has suggested, but for a more general (male-dominated) bodily form which could support contractual relations based on abstract ideas.... Reformers became separated from the 'natural world' by making nature, and the sensual experience of nature, suspect, robbing nature of its previous status as a source of religious inspiration. Protestantism was also associated with an intensified attack on magic, superstition and witchcraft. The world was divested of immanence of the sacred, so that any manifestation of the supernatural was liable to be interpreted as evil.[\[29\]](#)

[33] Although the overall historical framework described by Mellor and Shilling applies to Luther, the theological conclusions they reach do not. Luther's creation theology perceived the natural world as a manifestation of God's grace. Similar to Paul, Luther affirmed that the body, as God's creation, was intrinsically good, but could become corrupted and sinful (a reality that led Paul to distinguish between body and flesh). For Paul, the nobility of the body involved chastity and continence; for Luther the appropriate exercise of sexuality happened within the confines of marriage. Both Paul and Luther were concerned with practices that defiled not only one's own body, but also that of another. Ultimately, the ethical debate does not revolve around isolated sexual practices or conducts, but pertains to a larger framework of neighborly love and embodied care.[\[30\]](#) Human sexuality is to be lived in ways that are healthy, respectful, mutually engaging and caring.

[34] Even when Luther critiqued and sometimes attempted to regulate bodily conduct, he insisted that those who live chaste lives are no purer than others. "In this world we are bound by the needs of our bodily life, but we are not righteous because of them."[\[31\]](#) Luther's notion of a Christian being saint and sinner, *simul iustus et peccator*, is paramount: nobody is better or worse than anybody else. Luther critiqued the ascetic, monastic ideal precisely because it claimed to be above mundane reality, placing the practitioners of bodily regimes on a higher moral ground: "Is it not true that money, property, body, spouse, child, friends, and the like are good things created and given by God Himself?"[\[32\]](#) In the everyday, bodily realities of life, believers testify to their faith not by judging each other, but by caring for one another.

[35] The whole of creation - including our bodies and sexuality-provides opportunities for encountering God in gratitude. They are gifts of God "put into practice not only in the spirit but

also outside and toward people; *for God is also the God of bodies*. Therefore he provides us with bodily gifts, and he wants us to enjoy these gifts with gladness."[\[33\]](#) This theology does not deny the sacredness of human bodies. To the contrary, Luther's theology allows us to see the whole creation as a manifestation of divine grace, which we are invited to partake of and to share with one another. Our bodies and our sexuality are gifts of delight, to be enjoyed:

These gifts seem secular and profane. A Stoic or a Pharisee would ask whether they are lawful. People of this kind are exceedingly disgusting. They allow the body no delight and joy at all. It is their religion which Paul describes in Col. 2:23, namely, not to spare the body but to torture and kill it until it is reduced to nothing. Thus it is said of Bernard that in order to overcome his lust he tormented his body to such an extent that eventually the brothers could not associate with him because of his stinking breath. God created body and soul, and He wants recreation allowed to both, but in a definite amount and manner.[\[34\]](#)

[36] To state that God is the God of bodies is to recognize that sexuality is an intrinsic part of our embodiment. It also places the multiplicity of sexual identities under the diversity of God's creation. Yet, social constructs regulate how sexuality is played out, and it is a human responsibility to decide what are acceptable sexual conducts or behaviors. For Luther, the ground for deliberation was not simply that of natural law, but the values he perceived as central to the Gospel, namely, the love of God and neighbor. In our times, this language of neighborly love can be replaced by a concern for the well-being of self and others, translated as embodied care. When referring to sexual ethics, this embodied care assures that safety, mutual respect, mature consent, emotional affirmation, erotic fulfillment, and physical satisfaction are constitutive elements of our own deliberation. As a gracious expression of divine love, human sexuality is a gift to be pleurably and responsibly enjoyed.

#### *Endnotes*

[\[1\]](#)

Phillip A. Mellor, and Chris Shilling, *Re-Forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity*. (London: Sage, 1997) 35-63.

[\[2\]](#)

Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. (New York: Columbia University Press) 1988.

[\[3\]](#)

Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 153.

[\[4\]](#)

Wanda Deifelt, "A Lutheran Ethics of Embodied Care," in Karen L. Bloomquist, ed., *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World*. (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2005) 52-53.

[\[5\]](#)

Mellor and Shilling, 37.

[6]

A good example of Roman teachings regarding sexuality is found in a catechism from 1494. According to the catechism, the laity sin in marriage by "(1) unnatural acts and positions, contraception, and masturbation; (2) desiring sex with another while performing it with one's spouse; (3) desiring sex with another while not performing it with one's spouse; (4) refusing the marital duty without an honest reason, thereby forcing a spouse to enter an illicit relationship to satisfy unfulfilled sexual need; (5) having sex in forbidden seasons (periods of penance, particularly Lent, during menstruation and the final weeks of pregnancy, and when a mother is lactating); (6) continuing to have sex with a known adulterous spouse; and (7) having sex for the sheer joy of it (*von wollust wegen*) rather than for the reasons God has commanded, namely, to escape the sin of concupiscence and to populate the earth." Ozment, 152-153.

[7]

"A living sacrifice is a body which is afflicted for the Lord, and it is called living sacrifice because it lives in virtues and is dead to vices; it is a sacrifice because it is already dead to this world and its depraved works; living because all the things it continues are good." Martin Luther, "Lectures on Romans," 436.

[8]

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in Carole R. McCann, and Seung-Kyung Kim, *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, (New York: Routledge, 2003) 415.

[9]

To exemplify contradiction, see Martin Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church," in John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his works* (New York: Anchor, 1962) 335-340. "A woman is married to an impotent man, but cannot, or perhaps will not, prove in court her husband's impotence... Still she wishes to have a child, and is unable to remain continent. In addition, suppose I had advised her to seek a divorce in order to marry another, as she was content, in her conscience, to do...; if, then, her husband would not agree to her proposal I myself would give the further advice, that, with her husband's consent (although now really he is not her husband, but only a man who lives in the same house) she should have coition with another man, say her husband's brother, but keeping this 'marriage' secret, and ascribing the children the putative father, as they call such a one." (p. 337)

[10]

Karen L. Bloomquist, "Embodiment Contextualizes Sexual Ethics," in Bloomquist, ed., *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2005) 81.

[11]

Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's theology: Its historical and systematic development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 274.

[12]

Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2003.

[13] *Ibid*  
, 137.

[14]  
Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," *Luther's Works* v. 45, 45.

[15]  
Martin Luther, "Lectures on Romans," *Luther's Works* v.25, 320.

[16]  
Martin Luther, "On Marriage Matters," *Luther Work'sv.46*, 265.

[17]  
Luther, "On Marriage Matters," 266-267.

[18]  
Ozment, 155: "Luther accused church law of encouraging immature and unhappy marriages by its recognition of so-called 'secret' marriages. These were private unions entered into by youths of canonical age (at least twelve for girls and fourteen for boys) without the knowledge and consent of their parents and apart from any public witnesses. The medieval church sanctioned such unions grudgingly in an attempt to control premarital sex and to bring marriage, at its inception, under the moral authority of the church."

[19]  
Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5," *Luther's Works* v. 1, 104. Some scholars question the reliability of the lectures on Genesis, given the fact that Luther did publish them (they were edited by his followers). As pointed out by Jaroslav Pelikan, editor of *Luther's Works* in the English language, skepticism toward the lectures is justifiable when theological themes sound more like Melancton than Luther (arguments for the existence of God and rationalistic arguments for natural immortality of the human soul, for instance). Nevertheless, Pelikan concludes: "The hands are sometimes the hands of the editors, but the voice is nevertheless the voice of Luther." p. xii.

[20]  
Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5," 118-119.

[21]  
Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism" (The Creed, First article), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 354.

[22]

Quoted by Ozment, 152.

[\[23\]](#)

Martin Luther "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5," 134.

[\[24\]](#)

"Wives and husbands shared the burden of work, their proper spheres complementing each other. The Reformer was adamant concerning men's proper activities in the public arena and women's adherence to the home. The husband went out to engage in whatever activities enabled him to earn his and his dependents' livelihood, and the wife frugally disposed of whatever he brought in. Technically, the husband was as much in charge of the household as he was of the workshop or market-stall, yet he could delegate the domestic administration to his wife. Marriage was connected not just to two individuals but to the place where they dwelled and to their personal economy." Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, 88.

[\[25\]](#)

Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5," 116.

[\[26\]](#)

Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15-20." *Luther's Works*, v. 3, 255.

[\[27\]](#)

Martin Luther, "Lectures on Romans," *Luther's Works*, v. 25, 166.

[\[28\]](#) *Ibid*

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[\[29\]](#)

Mellor and Shilling, 42.

[\[30\]](#)

Deifelt, 58.

[\[31\]](#)

Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in Dillenberger, 81.

[\[32\]](#)

Martin Luther, "The Magnificat," *Luther's Works*, v. 21, 334.

[\[33\]](#)

Martin Luther, "Lectures in Genesis, Chapters 16-20 " p. 273.

[\[34\]](#) *Ibid*

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