

A "New" Vision of Marriage as Vocation for the Lutheran Tradition

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[1] In the Lutheran tradition, the concept of vocation has been an important one in defining and understanding marriage. Marriage is one primary place in society where persons are called to serve the neighbor. This connection between marriage and vocation has been historically both helpful and harmful to persons living in and outside of the marriage relation. On the one hand, Luther's understanding of marriage as "a holy estate" rescued marriage and the family from a demoted place in a sixteenth century Christian society that lifted up celibate monasticism as the form of life closer to God and God's will. Through Luther's theological assertions that marriage was a divine estate where everyday Christians were called to serve God and neighbor, the marital relationship gained honor and authority in both Christian doctrine and the society of the day as a good and necessary part of the divinely ordained order.

[2] On the other hand, the theological concept of vocation has often been used by Luther's interpreters to legitimate the status quo by equating the existing structure of society with God's will. Once a form of marriage (or any other relational form) has been understood to be God's will, then it is assumed that God can and does call out of that relation only. Any alternative form is viewed as outside both God's call and a pre-established created order presumably designed by God. This link is even more problematic when the created order and its legitimate relationships are defined according to an "appropriate to form" criterion so that each person is placed into a given form of a relationship such as marriage according to their form and expected to follow their call from that place, and told that if they challenge the place or challenge the given meaning of the form itself they are contradicting both God's creative will and call.^[1] In this approach, "form" becomes the ultimate criterion for defining and legitimating human relationship, including marriage, and thereby Christian vocation.

[3] Although this approach is most obvious in the contemporary use of form requirements to deny the marital relationship to gays and lesbians, it has also been used historically in prescriptions against inter-racial marriages, marriage across class, or marriage between ethnic groups. Whether denying marriage based on skin color, genital structure, class locale, or birth community, bio-social form has been used to determine persons' access to the marital relationship and therefore their marital calling(s) from God. In contemporary Lutheran theological views of society, most of these form requirements (e.g., race, class, and ethnicity) are no longer considered valid filters for defining or entering into the marital relation, at least theoretically. Biological sex and its current humanly defined meanings, however, continue to be the foundational criterion for defining marriage and have become the primary factor for deciding who is or is not allowed to enter into a marital relationship.

[4] "Form," however, is a problematic basis upon which to ground the definition and practice of marriage. Not only has the understanding of the male and female form varied throughout history,

these forms have historically been given varying levels of status in society, with the female most often placed lower in the hierarchy.^[2] Also, the meanings of these forms and how they relate are quite ambiguous, though often unacknowledged as such, and usually rest in a presumably common sense notion of genitals and reproductive organs. Finally, form has too often been used to exclude persons from aspects of society and its relationships or limit their roles and abilities to serve out their call in society.

[5] Given these problematic tendencies, I argue in this article for another more helpful criterion for defining marriage, one which maintains the honor and function of this foundational social relation yet does not exclude or limit persons from it according to their "form." This criterion emerges out of an understanding of the Lutheran concept of vocation which is grounded in a relational vision of God, humanity, and creation and leads to a newly envisioned understanding of marriage. I submit that God's call ought not to be determined according to a static, pre-existent social order presumably designed by God and defined according to human understandings of physical form. Instead, the link between the social order and vocation ought to be reversed. God's call to serve with and on behalf of our neighbor informs, influences, and finally is the final Lutheran criterion in structuring the social order and the many relationships in which humans live, including marriage.

Vocation and Marriage in the Lutheran Tradition

[6] The Lutheran understanding of vocation has emerged out of Luther's theology of creation and his understanding of the human social order. Luther divided the social order into three foundational estates: the household, the state, and the ministry. According to Luther, these estates were the basic patterns of creation in and through which God creates, preserves and sustains life in this world and shares the good news of the new creation to come. This order for Luther was hierarchical; although he highlighted an important role for each person in society, some in the society had greater power and prestige, and therefore more access to resources and choices, than others. For instance, women were given a great deal of power and prestige compared to previous generations of women, but for Luther this status could only be found in the home as mother and wife where the woman was ultimately subject to her husband. Luther believed that these estates were established by God in the original creation where God continues actively, though indirectly, to work through them as channels or masks to maintain peace and order in the world affected by sin.^[3]

[7] From these estates emerged social roles and responsibilities which Luther termed "stations" and "offices." Although Luther often used these terms interchangeably, a station (*Stände*) is best described as a person's situation in life within one or more of the estates in which he or she was placed by God through birth or life circumstance, such as wife, father, prince, minister, servant, or lord. Stations were the social locations of the outer person, who was distinct from other persons in their God-ordained space in life, and while the differences did not influence the inner person's relationship with God, they did influence a person's standing before other humans and even one's self. Offices (*Ampt*) were the responsibilities and duties each had in their station. According to Luther, these stations and offices were designed by God. As such they existed externally to the individual person and her desires and were part of a wider social order already established by God in creation. Each person was placed into these stations by God at

birth or in the experiences of life and was expected to fill these stations and offices properly. When persons fulfilled these stations, peace and order governed society; when they did not, chaos reigned.

[8] The social order, Luther insisted, was grounded in the law that exists above all estates: the law of love.^[4] While Luther argued that this law alone would be ineffectual in governing human social order due to the pervasiveness of sin, this law of love along with faith was to stand above all laws and social orders as the final criterion upon which all human relation stands.^[5] This love may take the form of discipline or law in a particular social circumstance, but only in an effort to restore love and justice to a world that has turned away from God. Christians are called to live this law of love in their everyday relationships and when possible in their society. In other words, according to Luther, while love is indeed ordered by the divinely created social order, it ultimately stands above that social order as its final criterion.

[9] From this vision of the social order, we can better understand Luther's understanding of vocation (*Beruf*). For Luther, the vocational calling from God was the call to serve the neighbor through one's station or office. It was not a call into a particular station, but rather it was the call to serve the neighbor *within and through that station*. Vocation was ultimately the intersection where the outer and inner person met. When the inner person (who is freed from sin and the law and is saved in Christ through faith for service to the neighbor) joins the outer person (who has been placed in a station in a divinely pre-established social order) so that together they fulfill the Christian's social responsibilities in love, justice, and service to the neighbor, then the Christian is fulfilling her calling. The Christian through faith understands that her stations and offices are the locations in creation in which God has called her to serve her neighbor.^[6]

[10] Luther's idea of vocation was thus deeply intertwined with his vision of the social order of his day. While the station was not the same as the vocation for Luther, the station did finally define what the vocational calling could and could not look like. And because some persons were excluded from certain social stations and certain social responsibilities due to their lot in life, not all callings were available to all persons. This lot in life was often seen as a "natural state" determined by God and known according to external characteristics such as sex, ethnicity, wealth, or birth.

[11] According to Luther, one of the most foundational stations in society was marriage as part of the estate of family. Therefore it housed a holy calling, for it was in the home, thought Luther, that God was most active as a temporal ruler. The marital relation was established by God in creation and revealed by God in Scripture. Children were born and raised in the family, the human race was generated, and lust was controlled. The entire social world revolved around marriage and family. In this relation, Christians were called to serve one another as well as society in the marital roles given by God, roles that controlled sin, destroyed the sinful self, trained each person in faith, compelled service to the neighbor, provided companionship, and ordered society.

[12] In order to understand Luther's view of marriage and its connection to form, we must also consider his ideas of sex and gender since these lie at the heart of his definition. If the Lutheran Church is to base its understanding of marriage on Luther's theology, we must be clear

concerning his understandings of "male and female" and should not be afraid to depart from Luther if his wisdom concerning them is found to be lacking according to contemporary reason.

With regard to the female, Luther determined that her place in the social order was divinely established according to her created ability to bear children. In fact, Luther insisted, childbirth and marriage were the fundamental purpose for which God created woman. This was known primarily according to her created form.^[7] While Luther viewed women in a much better light than most of his contemporaries, he did so with the caveat that the female had a particular purpose, holy though it was, defined by her physical form and resulting attributes as understood by sixteenth century science and reason. In Luther's mind, motherhood was a most honorable station for a woman and contained within it the greatest of vocations, but beyond bearing children and creating a home for them and her husband women had few other social or vocational options. While a man was more likely to define, interpret, justify, teach, and enforce a variety of aspects of society, including the theology of the church, women were expected to follow from within the home, fulfilling their proper and only call.

[13] Of course, Luther's view of these stations, including marriage and the social order in which they existed, was far from static. Each society had a particular context which he acknowledged by referencing the customs of different peoples. There was indeed flexibility in vocation, since it was governed by love which was free to seek new ways to care for the neighbor. As Gustav Wingren remarks concerning Luther's theology of vocation, "Every vocation has its setting in a particular place and deals with particular people at a definite time."^[8] Thus, not only could the roles and responsibilities change in service to love of the neighbor, people themselves could change stations. In fact, this is seen in Luther's own life; Luther changed vocational stations at least three times, from lawyer to monk to teacher and husband. Finally, for Luther, reform of the estates was not only possible but encouraged during times of disorder or abuse of power, particularly when it threatened the preaching and hearing of the Word. For example, Luther saw the churchly estate of his time in desperate need of reform.

[14] Despite this openness to change, however, Luther also feared it due to its often chaotic consequences. Change of station and radical reform of the social structure was therefore discouraged by Luther and was not accessible to everyone equally. For instance, while some men of means had access to a variety of stations, most women were limited to the stations and duties of wife, mother, and servant. In the end, the estates and the stations/offices within them remained quite static to those persons bearing certain forms.

[15] As can be seen from this all too brief summary, Luther's understanding of marriage as a station and as vocation was defined in strong part according to physical form and its meaning that has continued to this day, albeit with some changes in the perception of those forms. While the static language of station has been altered in modern Lutheran discussions of vocation to such phrases as "places of responsibility"^[9] or "location"^[10] in an attempt to incorporate the reality of social change into the concept, marriage as vocation continues to be based on a form-determined ontology that considers the structure of this relation to be universal, static, and natural. The roles and responsibilities within the station may have shifted (somewhat) but the structure of this relation is still ultimately dependent upon the "form" of the individuals involved and their "appropriateness." And so also, then, is a person's call into and out of marriage and her ability to follow it.

Is "form" a good foundation for defining marriage?

[16] The connection between form, the social institution of marriage, and vocation continues to be central in "traditional" Lutheran definitions of marriage. In these definitions, a seemingly unbreakable link is constructed between the physiological forms of females and males, their social location, and their callings. Physical forms of the human body are given particular meanings, often though not necessarily through the resources of human reason (e.g., biology, chemistry, philosophy), so that not only a physical but also a metaphysical meaning is attached to the form. For example, in contemporary Lutheran definitions of marriage, "man/male" and "woman/female" are often understood as opposing, complementary "others," an understanding ascribed to dichotomous reproductive organs as well as gender attributes. The understanding, and thereby practice, of marriage is known only according to these presuppositions about physiology and limited to those with the proper physical form. Any other meaning or way of relating is excluded. Often these meanings are assumed as something that "everybody knows" or is found in "common sense" wisdom and is "obvious" to all. In other words, while this is rarely stated,[\[11\]](#) it seems that a male is obviously defined first and foremost according to his penis and the meanings given him as the bearer of it, while a female is obviously defined first and foremost according to her ovaries, vagina, and uterus and the meanings given to her.

[17] Once established, the physical form and its meanings have been used as the primary criterion to place persons in their proper place in a particular society. For instance, because of their presumably "obvious" natures, the forms known as "male" and "female" are placed in the sexual relationship called heterosexual marriage, given responsibilities according to the cultural meanings ascribed to their forms, and told their forms require them to be limited to specific places of responsibility within the relation and society. Because of their forms, females are to bear and care for children within the home; because of their forms, males are to provide for their families and construct a world for them to exist in safety. Those who challenge these forms or their meanings are told that they are excluded from the marriage relation because either their forms match too closely (as in the case of same-sex relations) or too differently (as historically in the case of race, class, or ethnicity). Instead, they are told to enter relationships according to the appropriateness of their forms. In this way, physical form plays a foundational role in ordering and structuring society and its varying relations. Because these forms are considered universal and unchanging, the social relations in which they are allowed to exist are also considered universal and unchanging. The "male/female" marriage relation is then given sanction as God's created and ordained relation for these forms, justified and authorized according to Scripture and tradition, and made the permanent and only legitimate form allowed for persons with these forms. Those who do not fit into these forms are relegated to society's margins or excluded altogether.

[18] Finally, once a social location is defined and given justification according to the form-based structure of creation, then vocation or calling is attached to it. Traditionally, the primary social location from which a female has been allowed to follow her calling from God, until now, has been in marriage to a man and mother of his children. The social locations from which the male has been allowed to follow his calling have traditionally been more numerous and involved more social power both within and outside the marriage. In this way, the marriage relationship as

defined according to specific forms is given the added justification of God's call so that not only does God place persons into it according to their form, God's call to serve and love is only valid for those who live out their form in the proper way.

[19] In this approach there is a strong link between form, social location and vocation. Vocation has been attached to and limited by the existing social order that is considered God's created order but in fact has been constructed in part according to human meanings given to physical forms. These physical forms define the social order which in turn structures and limits God's call to serve the neighbor and the proper relations in which this service can take. In theory, Lutherans today believe that neither physical forms nor any given meaning of them ought to be the criterion in structuring society. No longer (at least in theory) is structuring a state, its economy, or the church according to race or ethnicity acceptable to most Lutherans. The diversity of people of different races and ethnicity is acknowledged and celebrated but is not considered a valid criterion for those persons' placement within or exclusion from society or the specific relational responsibilities persons are to hold within that society. Also, American Lutherans no longer consider class (again in theory) a natural state that ought to be used to exclude persons from the political, economic, or church responsibilities, though in reality class often does exclude them. In other words, while the "race form," the "class form," the "ethnicity form" and other forms do still matter in our actual experience for how society is structured, the general ideal that most Lutherans lift up is that these forms ought *not* matter, particularly to exclude or limit persons in their relational callings in the society.

[20] This, however, is not true for the "sex form." The physical form known as sex and the given meanings attached to it in our current culture do in fact define who can enter into which relations and who can legitimately have certain callings. In marriage, those entering into this relation are required to have the proper opposing yet complementary forms before they can legitimately relate sexually. In this thought, whatever other factors or principles are included in the definition of marriage such as faithfulness, love, and commitment, the final and ultimate criterion is (and always will be) the "sex form" of the persons involved. The "sex form" matters and it matters, it seems, ultimately.[\[12\]](#)

[21] The question for the Lutheran church and for society as a whole is: should the foundational criterion for our understanding and practice of marriage relation (and the social order as a whole) be physical form of any kind, including the "sex form?" Does the "sex form" matter so much that the human social structure must be based on it? If so, why? Often the answer is that Scripture, particularly Genesis 1:28, makes the male/female form the basis of all human social order. This argument is problematic for three reasons. First, while the phrase "male and female" is named in the creation of humans, no single meaning exists for this phrase throughout Scripture, tradition, or historical social context. In fact, this phrase has had multiple meanings which in turn have resulted in different visions of the social order.[\[13\]](#) Second, the central meanings of "male and female" have up until about forty years ago have been defined, interpreted, and enforced primarily by males. This, of course, includes the interpretation of creation narrative in Genesis, Scripture as a whole, and the Lutheran doctrinal tradition regarding this text. In other words, throughout most of the Christian tradition, females have been limited in their ability to participate in the definition, interpretation, and critique of the given meanings of the sex forms and the relationships into which they can and cannot enter. Third, a form-limited view of "male

and female" ends up limiting God's call according to the human meanings that have been attached to these forms. God's call then is beholden to the "sex form" and the meanings given to it in a particular time and place while God's ultimate purpose for the call, namely the giving, sustaining, and enhancement of life, is ignored, forgotten, misunderstood, or denied.

The Relational Call

[22] I believe there is a better way. I submit that the foundational Christian criterion for defining the marriage relation and all other social relations ought not be form, whether physical or any other form, but the call itself. Rather than understanding humans according to a binary form or even a unitary form (androgyny), we ought instead to consider humans as multiply-formed embodied creatures, diverse and unique from each other yet also similar in human dignity and profoundly interrelated in their created image of God. Biological form, of course, does and should matter for how we engage in particular relationships with each other and bodies in their relational nature must be regarded as a created good of God. This move away from form or its presumed meanings as a criterion for defining marriage is not at all an attempt to return to a spirit/body dualism where bodies are denied, degraded, or ignored in favor of the mind or spirit. But neither should we reverse that dualism so that the physical body form alone becomes the final criterion governing our relationships, including and perhaps especially our sexual relationships.

[23] Instead, we ought to view humans as having been created in God's image as richly complex relational forms, where embodiment includes the holistic interrelationship of all aspects of what it means to be human, i.e., the psychological, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social as well as the physical and erotic aspects of humanity. In this holistic human all of these aspects are intricately intertwined so that no single part of the human (including the genitals) defines a person or her/his relationships, each part is equally important in defining each person as a human person with dignity, and the interconnection of these aspects in each person produces a unique image of God. As this image, humans are relational both in the varying aspects that make up their personhood and in relation to their fellow humans, the rest of creation, and God. Finally, then, I submit that this inter-relatedness both within and external to the human individual is the foundational criterion for defining humans and their relationships, including marriage, for it is this holistic relationality that images both God and God's ultimate intention for creation.

[24] Human beings are in fact essentially relational. This is confirmed through sociological and theological sources (among other sciences). According to social theorists like Peter Berger, we in fact become individual human persons as fully embodied in and through our relationships. While being formed by these social relationships, we also at the same time structure our society in and through those same relationships.^[14] This social structure is not imposed from outside; rather humans in relation with each other and their environment participate as agents in ordering their own social world. This view is echoed by Old Testament scholar Terry Fretheim, who in his interpretation of the creation accounts asserts a "relational model of creation." "The creation accounts do not present the world as a finished product," he writes. Instead, Human beings are given responsibility for intracreation development, bringing the world along to its fullest possible potential. The creation is a highly dynamic reality in which the future is open to a number of possibilities and creaturely activity is crucial for the becoming of the

creation. Creative capacities have been given to the created ones for the task of continuing creation.^[15]

Thus, humans are co-participants with God in the formation and reformation of the social order in which we live. God, in fact, has in steadfast love and faithfulness relinquished some control over creation and designed humans to be co-creators, through their relationships, of the social world in which they live, for good and for bad. The autonomous individual human who is independent of others and who chooses to be or not to be in relationship does not exist. Rather, humans are created in the image of a relational God and exist as agents, albeit sinful agents, in relationship with each other, with creation, and ultimately with God.^[16]

[25] Given this relational nature of humans, how humans structure our relations with each other and how we live out those relations in our world matters. If humans hold some responsibility for defining and constructing our social world, then we must develop a social and ethical approach that views humans as more than the sum of or fit of their body parts. As Christians, we need a better criterion than "form" for defining and structuring our social relationships, including one as foundational as marriage. Instead, the vocational call itself is a vastly better approach for defining and structuring our relations according to God's call to serve life with and for the neighbor.

[26] In the Lutheran doctrine of vocation, the central tenet of the vocation call is that it is a call to serve the neighbor in the relationships in which humans live. This is ultimately a relational vision of vocation where humans serve as the channels of God's creative love and as "Christs" through sharing life and love in their diverse and unique relationships. Thus, instead of being called out of "stations" or "places," rather we are called to serve in, through, and out of our many and various relations. In this way, vocation is a relational concept which suggests an order that is constantly in the flux of life where humans, in part, are participants in the construction of the social world in which we live. Consequently, in our vocations, we as Christians can know ourselves as relational beings and as thus called by God to serve the neighbor in and through our relations.

[27] Perhaps a richer definition of vocation, then, might be the "call to serve life with and for the neighbor in the many and varied relationships in which humans live." This is a call *with* the neighbor in that neither the neighbor nor the person called is consumed as a unique image of God. This is a call *for* or *on behalf of* the neighbor in that the person called does not abandon the neighbor to serve only the self. This is a call to *serve life* by giving, sustaining, and enhancing in all its unique and varied physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, relational, and pro-creational abundance. This is a call with and for the *neighbor* who is both globally and intimately understood. This is a *relational* call where the person, the neighbor, and their relation with each other and the community beyond are each preserved in their unique individuality, yet are also richly interconnected with those around them. Through this call, the Christian is formed both by her own neighbor-centered service and by the vocational service offered to her in return by the neighbor. The community too, whether as church or society, is formed through this interaction and in turn forms its individual members and its relations. When the call to service in love and life remains at the center of this interactional formation process, both humans and the social order become what God intends; when this call is not at the center, then life as God has intended is rejected (sin) and thus destroyed.

[28] How do we know this call? We know the call first in our embodied createdness as God's image. At the heart of this createdness is our relational nature and so, second, God also calls us in and through the many and varied embodied relationships in which we live. Instead of linking vocation to "stations" or pre-existing locations in a divinely established social order, God's call is linked to human relationality so that the vocational call becomes about serving one another in life-giving relationship, no matter what its form or the form of the participants. These relationships and their forms are multiple, varied, and unique to the persons in them, and are not measured according to a bio-ontological form of the participants but according to how those in the relation as well as the relation itself serves life.

[29] Ultimately, for the Christian this call comes in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, who through faith resurrects, inspires and empowers humans and their relationships out of sin toward right relationship. All relationships since the beginning have been fractured by sin, which is essentially rejection, i.e., the abandonment and/or consumption of another or the self in an attempt to make the self the center of the universe or deny the self's God-given place in the universe. This rejection permeates our relationships with other humans, with creation, with our own image of God, and ultimately with God. Since all life depends on the relationship with God and since humans are trapped in their own relational rejection, God must rescue humans and their world. In Christ, God refuses to let the relationship go, no matter how loudly humans reject God. Instead, God dwells with, reconciles, renews, and empowers new life-giving relationship first with God, and through this relation, with other humans, with creation, and with one's self as created in God's image.

[30] Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit as the breath of life, constantly restores and calls us to the life that God continues to create. At the center of this restoration process lies the call to serve life with and for the neighbor. The sinner and reconciled saint meet in Christ and from this meeting emerges the on-going call. For the sinner, the command to love the neighbor protects and orders, often coercively, her life in relation to others. In faith in her reconciled relation with God, the saint knows herself to be called out of her relationships in service to life as God continues to create, sustain, and enhance it. This call to serve life with and for the neighbor is the foundational Christian criterion for defining and structuring all relationships of society, including marriage. In the end, the call to serve the neighbor is what orders the relational creation, not the form of a human or the humanly constructed meanings given to that form.

[31] In light of this call, then, we can better understand the created order God has designed. God has ordered all of life into life-giving, life-sustaining, and life-enhancing relationship, despite the human tendency to destroy their relationships and the life they create. Here we discover Luther's order above the orders, namely love. Three aspects of this relationally ordered life are foundational to human existence. First, the relationship with God through language and communication, which is the foundational criterion of human worship and the proclamation of the Word. This relation is the foundation of the churchly estate and the human's relation with God. Second, the relationship with God and neighbor through God's eternal, committed, faithful, life-giving and life-reconciling relationship with all of creation, which is the foundational criterion of the central human relationships of marriage, parenthood, and friendship as well as all

human relations. Third, the relationship with neighbor and self as God's image, which is the relationally negotiated social structure including government, economy, culture, and norms as the social context for shalom, justice, blessing and righteousness inside of which all life-giving relationships must take place.

[32] This social structure is designed by God to be constructed through human interactive negotiation where humans play an on-going co-creative role in forming these dynamic social relationships and the social context in which they are found. In this regard, humans participate in the creation of their relations, for good and for bad, while God as creator and redeemer of all relationships continually directs and empowers humanity toward the relational forms that will support and enhance life. Far from being universal or essential, these relations are always changing in relation to the persons and the community of which they are a part.

[33] Consequently, the human as a multiply-holistic embodied relational image of God is the basis for understanding the call. Rather than defining the call based on physical form, instead we can hear the call as it emerges from humanity's own created relational image of God and in turn becomes the guiding force for how human relations and community ought to be structured.

Although sin has marred that image and humans consistently reject their relationships by attempting to abandon and/or consume God, neighbor, and self (as God's image), in the new life given in Christ, humans can know and follow their call to serve life in all their relationships, including marriage. The call to serve life with and on behalf of the neighbor is finally the foundational criterion of all relationships and their resulting social structure.

The Relational Call to Serve Life

[34] What, then, does this call to serve life look like? The call to service of life is grounded in (at least) three interconnected relational principles: righteousness, *shalom*, and justice. First, vocation is a call to serve life through righteousness, or better "right relationship," with God and neighbor. Relationship is right when life is nurtured, sustained, and enhanced in and through love and persons are neither abandoned nor consumed. Essentially, it is life without sin. This relation is balanced between regard for the neighbor, the self as God's image, the community in which the relation takes place, and God as the life-force behind and within all relations. At the heart of all right relationship is one's individual, relational, and social relationship with God. A person is first righteous when she exists in a life-nurturing, enhancing, and sustaining relationship with God. Due to human sin, such right relationship with God can only be given and received as grace from God, never earned or accomplished. But once given in Christ and known through faith, the right relation with God in turn becomes the source of all other relationships and empowers right relation with the neighbor, whom or whatever that neighbor might be.

Therefore, the driving purpose of the call to serve life is righteousness, right relation with God which is transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit, into right relation with neighbor. Right relation is finally what humans are called to seek.

[35] Second, vocation is a call to serve life through *shalom*, often translated peace but in fact including such characteristics as wholeness, well-being, joy, and harmony both within the relation and its participants. *Shalom* includes blessing which is God's sharing of God's personal *shalom* with that which God has created through God's ongoing creation of life into right

relation. *Shalom* is relational life at its most vital, where all creatures live "in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature."[\[17\]](#) At the heart of this *shalomic* existence is trust (faith) and steadfast love, both of which imply faithfulness and commitment to abundant life in relationship, first with God and through this relation with others. Thus the call necessarily involves a call to life in harmony and holistic interaction. Although in sin this peace passes all human understanding and we are able to image this *shalom* only through a "glass darkly," we are ultimately called to whole (holy) lives of harmony and peace that are filled with trust and love. This call to *shalom* finally anticipates who humans are called to be.

[36] Third, vocation is the call to serve life through justice (*mishpat*). Justice is the actual living out of right relation with our neighbors and is thus an ongoing search for a living order in relationship that serves the individual, the community and its many relations. Justice involves order because it has a base rhythm and structure to it that excludes that which is destructive to life in right relationship; it is living because as a necessary part of ever-transforming life justice must be constantly in motion whether at its macro or micro levels in order to take into account the needs of all changing relations. As order, justice includes the law and institutions which protect and sustain the community, its relations and individual participants; yet at the same time, as living order, it renews, reforms, and retires these laws and institutions in fulfillment of its duty to protect and support life-centered relations. This call to do justice is finally about life with the neighbor and is never about serving the order for the order's sake. If the order no longer serves the neighbor, then the order must change according to the call; the call must not change according to the order. Justice then forms the context in which right relations exist and all of creation lives fully in God's *shalom*. The call to justice is finally what humans are called to do.

[37] These three principles (among others) are central criteria for defining the relationships out of which we are called. Essentially, we are called to be God's image, to put on Christ and serve the life of the neighbor in love as embodied Christs to God's relational world.[\[18\]](#) While all humans are called as created images of God to strive for life in life-centered relation, whether they know it or not, the Christian knows through faith that this life is continually called forth by God, indirectly through creation itself and directly in Christ. This call to relational service of life is the criterion for structuring our earthly relationships. Any form of relation that supports, nurtures and enhances life in right relation according to justice and *shalom* is a blessed part of God's living order.

The Relational Call to Serve Life in Marriage

[38] This call to serve life with and for the neighbor takes place in a wide variety of relationships. These relationships in which humans (and all of creation) live are the dynamic contexts from which the call emerges. They are also the products of the call. In this world, these relations are also thwarted, perverted, and destroyed by human sin and its consequences. Yet God's life-giving call remains in and through these relations, underlying sin in our created image and standing against sin in Christ, constantly being renewed and empowered by God through the Holy Spirit. All relationships have within them this call toward life of service with and for the neighbor. However, each relationship embodies this call differently depending upon the participants involved and the characteristics of the relation.

[39] The marriage relation is one such relation. But what is marriage? Much debate in recent years has centered on the form of the persons involved. However, as articulated above, form is an unhelpful and often destructive basis upon which to ground a definition of any relation, including marriage. Rather, the definition of marriage ought to be grounded first in the call as it is lived out in a specific type of relation with certain qualities and characteristics.

[40] What are some of those contextual characteristics? First, marriage is a unique type of interpersonal relationship. No other relationship has quite the same qualities, character, or function in community. It is a relation that is governed in a unique way by time, space, depth and breadth of relation as well as by the unique persons in the marriage and the unique situational context in which the relation is found. The marriage relation has the potential to span a long period of time that may include much of the participants' lives while at the same time delineating the everyday moments of ordinary life at their most exciting or most plodding. The marriage relation takes place in a particular space, though that space may change with varying amounts of frequency and thus requires a constant negotiation of the use and feel of that space. The marriage relation involves the embodied wholeness of human beings in a manner unlike any other relation. It can anticipate deeper, stronger levels of intimacy, vulnerability, and mutuality in all the aspects of what it means to be an embodied human -- the physical, erotic, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social natures and the relation between each. As such, however, it also has the ability to hurt and destroy like no other relation. The marriage relation requires the mutual consent of its participants and expects a level of trust, commitment, faithfulness, forgiveness, and love that most other relations do not expect. The marriage relation, to a degree more profound than any other relation, involves the deliberate "making and sharing a life together" with another person, a life that includes hills and valleys but most often the ordinary mundane-ness of life across time and in shared space.

[41] Second, given its time, space, and relational depth and intensity, the marriage relation plays a crucial role in structuring society. Marriage is never merely about persons making a private promise to each other; their relation and how they live it contributes to (for good and for bad) and is supported by (for good and for bad) the community in which the relation exists. Persons in the marital relation serve the lives of each other and are served by each other, but they as individuals and as a relation also serve the community through the relation they form. Marital relations that practice such qualities as trust, faithfulness, hope, steadfast love, forgiveness, and commitment over time and in the same space will share those qualities with the community through the other relationships in which the marriage partners take part. Marital relations that do not practice these things end up destroying not only their own relation, but will harm the community as well.

[42] A third characteristic of marriage involves the erotic. Rather than being grounded simply in physiology, marriage like all other relations is grounded in the call to serve life with and for the neighbor. This does not exclude sex or the body from the definition of marriage but rather contextualizes sexuality and the body in a particular relation where persons are called to be, do, and seek the fullness of life as embodied creatures. The individual's incarnate body with its desires, pleasures, needs, and fears plays a central role in the marriage relation, for humans are indeed embodied creatures and live out all relations as bodies. However, this embodiment also includes the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects - the body, heart, mind and soul - as

they are inter-related in the human creature. The erotic, which is holistic embodied relational life often at its most incarnate, has of course best been exemplified by the sexual experience, although it can and does take other forms. The erotic flows through the marital (and other) relation and is experienced in a particular way in our sexual being and doing, yet is never limited to the sex act. Thus, given the time, space, and intimacy aspects of marriage, the erotic can play a vital role in marriage as it reminds us that we are incarnate creatures, related to one another often beyond words, and empowers us in our relations.

[43] These characteristics of the marital relation - interpersonal contextual relationality, socio-communal relationality, and erotic relationality - show the relational context within which the marital call is heard and followed. As such, marriage has the potential to be a community of learning, a blessing, and a parable for both its participants and the community in which it exists. As a community of learning, marriage provides a place in space and across time where persons can learn and practice right relation, shalom, and justice at their most intimate and embodied. This includes such practices as: the practice over time and in a shared space of trust and trustworthiness; faithfulness and commitment to a promise; love, care, and compassion for another during the good, the bad, and the mundane; compromise, negotiation, and harmony of life's dynamics; intimacy, vulnerability, mutuality and respect of human dignity in the physical and sexual as well as emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects of one's partner; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, forgiveness and *metanoia* (repentance) when each person fails at these practices again and again (as they inevitably will). In other words, marriage is a relation where persons can (potentially) practice living out their call to serve life with and for the neighbor at its most intimate over time and in the same space. As persons in the marriage relation continue to learn and practice this call, they will in turn be better able to carry out their calls to serve others within the community.

[44] Second, the marital relation is, or at least has the potential to be, a blessing. In this relation, when it works, God gives, protects, nurtures, and enhances life. Those in the marriage relation can receive personal, economic, political, and social support that includes care, love, and companionship as well as intimacy and acceptance, whether it be physical/erotic, emotional, intellectual and/or spiritual. Marriage becomes a relation where persons can handle life's consequences together. In essence, persons in the marriage relation have the opportunity to make and share a life together with someone in the same space and over a long period of time. Here a person serves the neighbor and is served and enhanced by the neighbor in the relative safety of a public commitment that is (or ought to be) also supported, blessed, and integrated by the community.

[45] Finally, the marital relation can be a parable of God's relation to humanity, for it is the primary human relation that can portray, even in its distinctly embodied and sin-perverted form, the intensity, universality, and steadfastness of God's love, commitment, and enduring faithfulness to creation. While other relations may portray some aspects of God's commitment and faithfulness, marriage embodies the elements of time, space, interaction, and depth of this relation in a way few others can. In the marriage relation, the call to serve life as God gives it is molded, intensified, and directed by the specific characteristics of this relation to image God's consensual, committed, loving service to life for us and in turn provides a unique channel for God's loving and life-giving work in creation. As a parable and channel for God's love, then,

marriage is one human relation that can (potentially) image God's relation with us deeply and passionately, albeit skewed by sin.

[46] From these qualities and characteristics, I propose a (working) theo-ethical definition of marriage for the Lutheran church. This definition is based on God's call to serve life with and for the neighbor. Marriage, I submit, is service with and for the neighbor in a relationship between two persons that is 1) a deliberate and ongoing public commitment of 2) faithfulness, trust, and love 3) shared by mutual consent 4) in a long-term working toward life-long relation in which the covenanted partners 5) make and share a life together through its good times, bad times, and especially its mundane ordinariness which is 6) lived out in an agapic and erotic relationship formed around such qualities of *shalom* and justice as forgiveness, trust, vulnerability, intimacy, equity, negotiation, compassion and interactive growth 7) for the purpose of sustaining and enhancing the living relational wholeness of the persons in the marriage relation, any family that is intertwined with that relation, and the community, society, and world in which that relation exists.

[47] This definition emerges out of creation, namely God's creational and relational commitment and steadfast love out of which all life is created, sustained, and enhanced. It does not, however, emerge out of bodily forms or human understandings of those forms. Instead, the foundational criterion defining marriage and all other relations is the call to serve life with and for the neighbor. If a relation serves life, no matter the form of the participants involved, then it is part of God's good will for a living creation and ought to be supported and celebrated as such.

Conclusion

[48] During this time of discernment for the Lutheran church as it attempts to define and understand the various social and sexual relationships from which Christians follow their vocational call, Lutherans need to consider alternatives to form-based definitions of marriage and sexuality. Instead, a better criterion is the call itself - the call to serve life with and for the neighbor - as the fundamental criterion for defining marriage. Definitions and understandings of marriage that use "appropriate to form" as the primary criterion in defining marriage not only exclude certain relationships from being a legitimate support to society for little reason other than physical form and its humanly constructed meanings, but they also construct a social order that is often hierarchical, exclusionary, and oppressive to those who do not fit certain forms.

[49] Understanding and structuring the social order and its many relationships according to the call puts service with and for life of others at the heart of what humans in our relationships and as individuals within those relationships are to seek, be, and do in God's creation and as God's image. In this way, life and our service to it becomes the standard for defining and living out all relationships. This call is not only the defining factor but also the critical factor for evaluating and changing our existing relations, whether sexual, economic, political, ecclesiastical or interpersonal. In other words, it is time to move beyond form-based definitions of marriage and understand, construct, and limit this relation (and all other relations) according to God's call to serve life.

[50] As Christians, we trust that God has called us to service of life in and on behalf of the world. This service is accomplished both with and for the neighbor, whoever that neighbor is. The Christian calling is first and foremost to live and serve in life-giving, life-supporting, life-enhancing relationships with the neighbor. When this is done through the life-breathing power of the Holy Spirit, then those who are called and the relations out of which they are called are shaped to fit into God's relational order through which God gives and nurtures life. This is especially true for the unique relation of marriage. The time, the space, and the intensity of the marital relation itself require something more than form as the ultimate criterion for defining and legitimating this relation. The definition of marriage, then, is finally found in the call to serve with and on behalf of the neighbor, both personal and communal, in and through this unique relation. In this view, marriage is understood as one relationship wherein the call to love and serve the neighbor is lived out in a unique and special way, a way defined and practiced according to God's call into to life-sustaining service with and for the neighbor.

Endnotes

[1]

Cf. Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 153-154. "Form" here seems to include human physiology and the scientific meanings, attributes, and expectations that have been attached to that physiology, all of which is believed to have a "proper" form in the created order designed by God.

[2]

In fact, the meanings of "male and female" have changed throughout history and have not always had the opposite yet complementary meanings attached to them today. Cf. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990) for an excellent discussion of how various western cultures have understood the male and female and their relation to each other. See also Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) for a helpful critical analysis of how the male and female is (mis)understood by the biological sciences today.

[3]

Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 111:6," *LW* 13: 369.

[4]

Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," *LW* 30: 266. See also "On Temporal Authority" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 701-702.

[5]

Luther, "Preface to the Old Testament" in Lull, 123-124.

[6]

Luther's readers must be careful here not to equate "station" with "vocation" in his theology. Vocation for Luther is God's call to serve the neighbor in and through a pre-existing station in a given social order. This is different than the later Calvinist approach which equates vocation and

station so that a person is called into a particular station in life. For Luther, the call is not to the station itself but out of the station as the place in society from which each person serves the neighbor in love. This is a subtle difference, but one that opens the door for a new vision of vocation and marriage.

[7]

Luther, *Letter of Luther to Three Nuns*, 1524, WA BR II, no 766, 326-328 as translated in *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, ed. Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003) 141. "God created her body to be with a man, bear children and raise them as Scripture makes clear in Genesis 1. Her bodily members, ordained by God for this, also demonstrate this."

[8]

Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Evansville, IN: Balast Press, 1999) 147, 155.

[9]

Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 63ff.

[10]

James Nestingen, "The Lutheran Reformation and Homosexual Practice" in *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* ed. James M. Childs Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 47.

[11]

Robert Gagnon is an exception who is explicit in basing his understandings of male and female on their genitals and how they fit together. Cf. Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002) 41.

[12]

E.g., Wolfhart Pannenberg, "You Shall not Lie with a Male: Standards for Churchly Decision-Making on Homosexuality" in *Lutheran Forum 30:1* (February 1996) 29. Pannenberg declares in this succinct article that a church is no longer evangelical, Lutheran, or presumably Christian if it does not subscribe to the proper "traditional" understanding of physical forms and the relations into which these forms are allowed to fit. There is no more ultimate claim than this.

[13]

Cf. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 19-21.

[14]

Cf. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

[15]

Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006) 276-277.

[\[16\]](#)

Cf. Fretheim, 13ff.

[\[17\]](#)

Walter Brueggemann, as quoted in Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 83.

[\[18\]](#)

Luther, "Freedom of Christian" in Lull, 619-620.

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