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Luther on Eve, Women, and the Church

Mickey L. Mattox

Was the Reformation “good” for women? Did the Protestant reformers somehow promote the cause of women in church or society? There have been considerable debate and discussion on such questions in recent years, and rightly so.¹ The theology and (less often) the practice of the Protestant reformers have both come in for close analysis. Do we find there the source of long-standing errors and misunderstandings that we must now abandon, or support for continuing traditional practices that exclude women from some of the churches’ public ministries?² One source in this debate is the theology of Martin Luther³ and his own life and practice, especially in

1. For general studies of the problem, see Steven E. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Helpful summaries of the state of research may be found in Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 363-66; Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 402-5; and Lyndal Roper, “Gender and the Reformation,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 92 (2001): 290-302.

2. See, for example, Jane Dempsey Douglass, “The Image of God in Women as Seen by Luther and Calvin,” in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 236-66; for more on Calvin see John Lee Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors, and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992).

3. A noteworthy example is Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther against the Contempt of

relationship with his wife Katharina von Bora.⁴ Luther has sometimes been portrayed as a champion of women's rights in the church, but his authoritative voice has also been invoked as a final bulwark against "feminist" claims.

As this essay will demonstrate, Luther developed a distinctive but nevertheless quite traditional and even restrictive theoretical understanding of the place and role of women in church, home, and society. There were aspects of his thought, however (on male-female relations, on the nature of the struggle for faith, and on the priesthood of believers), that seemed to suggest that women could or should preach. Indeed, these trajectories in Luther's thought attracted attention in the sixteenth century. As Gottfried Maron points out, the Roman Catholic polemicist Alfons de Castro (O.F.M.) accused Luther of making it possible for women to enter the church's priesthood and thus of reviving the Montanist heresy, largely

Women," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1988): 515-30. Further specialized studies include Matthieu Arnold, *Les femmes dans la correspondance de Luther* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998); Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 335-50; Kristen E. Kvam, "Luther, Eve, and Theological Anthropology: Reassessing the Reformer's Response to the *Frauenfrage* (Woman Question)" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1992); Ingetraut Ludolph, "Die Frau in der Sicht Martin Luther," in *Vierhundert-Jahre lutherische Reformation, 1517-1967*, ed. Helmar Junghans, Ingetraut Ludolph, and Kurt Meier (Göttingen, 1967); Gottfried Maron, "Vom Hindernis zur Hilfe: Die Frau in der Sicht Martin Luthers," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 39, no. 5 (1983): 272-83; Birgit Stolt, "Luther on God as Father," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1994): 383-95. Helpful for appreciating the further development of the Lutheran tradition is Scott H. Hendrix, "Christianizing Domestic Relations: Women and Marriage in Johann Freder's *Dialogus dem Ehestand zu Ehren*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992): 251-66.

4. The scholarly literature on Katharina von Bora has expanded significantly in recent years. See, among others, Roland Bainton, "Katherina von Bora," in *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971), 23-44; Helmar Junghans, "Katharina Luther in the Light and in the Shadow of the Reformation," in *Ad Fontes Lutheri: Toward the Recovery of the Real Luther; Essays in Honor of Kenneth Hagen's Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Timothy Maschke, Franz Posset, and Joan Skocir (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 86-103; Ernst Kroker, *Katharina von Bora: Martin Luthers Frau*, 16th ed. (Berlin, 1983); Jeanette C. Smith, "Katharina von Bora through Five Centuries: A Historiography," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999): 745-74; Martin Treu, ed., *Katharina von Bora. Die Lutherin. Aufsätze anlässlich ihres 500. Geburtstages* (Wittenberg, 1999); Martin Treu, "Katharina von Bora, the Woman at Luther's Side," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 157-78.

on the basis of the priestly role he was willing to grant all Christians.⁵ Yet Luther himself never drew that conclusion.

The breadth and scope of Luther's remarks on this topic — many of them eminently quotable — necessitate from the outset some narrowing of the subject field. This essay seeks only to lay out the general shape of Luther's thought on this complex topic, drawing especially on Luther's sermons and lectures on Genesis. Examination of Luther's extensive work on Genesis can help us understand how Luther viewed the created structure of human life and of woman's place in church, home, and society. As the nineteenth-century Luther scholar Julius Köstlin pointed out, the Genesis lectures in particular are an especially rich source for Luther's theology generally, as well as for his distinctive version of Christian practical wisdom.⁶ Attention to these sources, moreover, sets us down in Luther's parish or classroom, showing us not only what he may have said in one or another context, but how he attempted to shape his parishioners' and students' understanding of crucial issues related to marriage, family, and sexuality.

It would be possible, as one might suspect, to come at this topic in quite another way. Maron, for example, lists three crucial changes Luther made in the Christian perception of gender and sexuality.⁷ First, he emphasized the sheer predictability and regularity of Christian marriage over against the prior preference for the celibate life. This involved a reevaluation of human sexuality: the desire by which the married love and seek one another is itself a created good.⁸ This good was then connected to a second crucial change, namely, the elevation of the Christian household over the monastery or convent as the concrete sphere — a “holy order” — within which most would live out their faith. Here parents replaced abbots and

5. Maron, “Vom Hindernis zur Hilfe,” 280. Maron cites the work of de Castro's *Adversus omnes haereses* (Cologne, 1549).

6. Köstlin-Kawerau, *Martin Luther: Sein Leben und seine Schriften*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (Berlin, 1903), here 2:425. See also Mickey Mattox, “Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs”: *Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrations in Genesis, 1535-1545* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

7. Maron, “Vom Hindernis zur Hilfe,” 277-81.

8. On this issue, note the remark of Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 267: “For Luther, God is so vitally present in the power of attraction between man and woman that he inspires the conjugal union and Himself constitutes [*sic*] the sexual bond of marriage.”

abbesses as those responsible for the spiritual health of the community. The Christian household itself thus came to stand under the cross, so to speak, with Christian parents carrying out the good work of begetting and bearing children, and of suffering, living, and dying together in faith, hope, and love.

Thirdly, according to Maron, Luther replaced the exclusively male priesthood with the common priesthood (*das allgemeines Priestertum*) on the basis of which all Christians have the right and duty to announce to one another God's forgiveness for Christ's sake through faith. As Maron observes, Luther distinguished between the public and private spheres within which this forgiveness should be announced, namely, the gathered Christian assembly (*Gemeinde*) and the Christian home. In the former, women may speak only when it is necessary for the sake of the gospel; in the latter, however, their speech is essential and routinely necessary. Relying on Ernst Wolf, Maron concludes that Luther's acceptance of women preaching *when necessary* demonstrates that they have been excluded from the public ministry only for the sake of social order and not on the basis of a divine law. By implication, in this view, the practice of women's ordination today in no way contradicts either Luther's understanding of the Scriptures or his most central theological convictions.

Helpful as it may be to weave together Luther's thought in this fashion, it seems more appropriate to approach Luther in a more historical fashion. Accordingly, this essay begins with a brief analysis of the historical development of Luther's understanding of the story of the creation of Eve and of her role in the fall into sin. This story was foundational for Luther's perception of matters ecclesial and familial, as well as for his understanding of the civil state and its role in fallen human society. A second section reaches out somewhat further, examining Luther's understanding of the female religious life. As is widely known, Luther was no friend of Christian monasticism. However, his emphasis on the goodness of sexuality and the givenness of married life as the proper sphere of God-pleasing existence for the vast majority of human persons did not at all entail the secularizing of the Christian life. Instead, it suggested a social transformation that rendered the domestic sphere a legitimate arena within which to fight the good fight of faith.⁹ The Christian home, and with it the institution of

9. Roland Bainton's imaginative portrayal of this aspect of Luther's thought in his *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1950) is still unsurpassed.

Christian marriage, became a religious order of God's own making.¹⁰ Within this domestic sphere, moreover, women's distinctively religious duties were to be performed: bearing and raising up godly children, witnessing to God's faithfulness in their own heroic deeds of faith, and "preaching" God's Word faithfully within their own homes. This essay thus concludes with an examination of some cases where Luther explicitly identified faithful women "preaching" the gospel, including the significance of Luther's exegesis of these stories for the wider issue of women's service in the church. In the end, this research will not resolve the issue of gender relations for the present but instead will show what Luther said on this important topic and why he will remain an inspiration to gender progressives and traditionalists alike.

It may strike some as odd that one would attempt to answer the question of women and the church in Luther's theology by appeal to his exegesis of the Old Testament. Should one not instead look to his perception of the place of women in the New Testament or in the history of the church? Indeed, much could be learned by examining Luther's interest in the women of the New Testament, in the "virgin martyrs" of the early church, or by studying his personal contacts and correspondence with important women of his own day.¹¹ From Luther's perspective, however, things are today as they have always been. The saints of the Old Testament lived, as saints still do, by faith in the promise of God. Founded on the divine promise of redemption first announced in Genesis 3:15, the "church" of the Old Testament stands in fundamental continuity with that of the New. Or, as Luther bluntly put it, "from the beginning of the world, there have always been Christians."¹² Whether *ante* or *post adventum Christi*, the

10. Scott Hendrix observes that Luther makes marriage "the truly religious order [and] elevates it to the spiritual status that had been reserved for the celibate members of the priesthood and monastic orders." "Luther on Marriage," 338.

11. Something of the range of questions one might ask is suggested by the impressive variety of sources presented in the recently published *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, ed. Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

12. WA 24:99-100. Latin text: "Atque hic vides Vetus testamentum cum novo convenire et vides Adamum Christianum fuisse ut nos, in eundem enim Christum credidit in quem nos credimus. Hoc tantum discrimen est: ipse prius, ego post ipsum sum. . . . Semper ergo fuerunt Christiani ab initio mundi. Iustificati igitur iam sunt Adam et Eva per Christum."

Christian lives by faith in the Word of God, and it is the struggle to abide in this faith that interests Luther as an exegete. The stories of the saints of the Old Testament showcase this struggle and thus function as case studies in authentic Christian existence.

Eve, in the Early Luther

The modern question of women's ordination was rarely on Luther's mind. But he thought about Eve often, certainly much more frequently than the few biblical references to her would suggest, and he found in her story the biblical charter for understanding gender relations as God intended them. As I have tried to show elsewhere, however, Luther's imaginative reading of Eve and her story changed over the years, particularly after his marriage in 1525.¹³ The source for our knowledge of the younger Luther's thought on Eve is the so-called *Declamationes* on Genesis, sermons delivered in Wittenberg from 1523 to 1524 and published in Latin and German editions in 1527. Still wearing his Augustinian habit, Luther painted a remarkably traditional and socially conservative picture of Eve and her original positional relationship to her husband. In a crucial comment on the creation of Eve, Luther grounded woman's continuing subjection to man in Eve's subjection to her husband *prior to the fall*. Commenting on Genesis 2:24, Luther marveled at the mutuality that marked the first union of male and female. However, he noted one important limit: "'They,' therefore, 'will be one flesh,' that is, they will have one possession, one home, one family, field, conversation, education of sons, wealth, poverty, glory and all things in common, whatever pertains to life in the flesh, except that the husband ought to rule [*dominare debet*] in the wife."¹⁴ On the younger Luther's reading, a familial hierarchy was intended from the beginning. He also found symbolic meaning in Eve's "birth" out of her husband's side; her literal derivation from Adam's substance stood as a sign not only of their mutuality and likeness, but also of her subordination to his *rule*.¹⁵ For this reason, he claimed, the "woman" took her original name from the "man" (that is, Isha from Ish), just as German women in his own day took their

13. Mattox, "Defender," chapters 1–2.

14. WA 24:79.

15. WA 24:80. Cf. WA 9:332.

names from their husbands. Women are literally *identified* by the men to whom they are related, and this reflects the divinely intended order of human life.

Thus, it is not surprising to find that in Luther's exegesis of Genesis 3 he also faulted the first woman, "talkative and superstitious," for speaking with the serpent in the first place. 1 Timothy 2:14 suggested to the younger Luther (probably based on what he had learned from Augustine) that Eve was liable to deception in a way that her husband was not. He imagined her as a woman "simple," "weak," and "little,"¹⁶ who had no business engaging in a "disputation" that from the outset was over her head; instead, she ought to have referred the devil's questions to the man, her superior.¹⁷ Following the lead of many in the antecedent Christian exegetical tradition, he also found in Eve's "neither shall we touch it" proof positive that she was a poor student of the Word of God, adding to it when she should instead have simply relied upon it. Luther did not shrink, moreover, from drawing out the wider implications of Eve's failure when faced with temptation, noting that women in general are known for being superstitious and prideful. In short, he half universalized Eve's failings, and applied them not to humankind in general, but to females alone.¹⁸

The younger Luther also connected Eve's failing in this case to her subjection to her husband's ecclesial authority. Addressing one of the stock exegetical questions related to this passage, he asserted that Eve had not heard the "divine command" (*mandatum divinum*; that is, the command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) directly, but was instead intended to learn it from her husband, to whom it had first been spoken by God. The Word of God, to which the woman was to be subordinate, was a Word she was to hear from her husband. The duty of preaching, in other words, was assigned to Adam alone, meaning that Eve was subordinated to her husband in their "church" as well as their home. Her fall thus involved for the young Luther, as it had for generations of exegetes, an element of subversion of divinely established order. She rebelled

16. WA 24:83-84.

17. WA 9:334.

18. Robert Bast finds something similar in his analysis of Luther's "Decem Praecepta," 1516-17 (WA 1:398-521). See Bast's *Honor Your Fathers: Catechisms and the Emergence of a Patriarchal Ideology in Germany, 1400-1600* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1997), 78-92.

not only against God, but also against her husband and his divinely established authority over her.

In his examination of the internal mental and spiritual process by which Eve fell into sin, however, Luther emphasized not her differences from Adam, but their similarities. This was determined in large part by his distinctive convictions about the centrality and universality of the problem of faith and unbelief. As one might expect, the dynamic of faith and unbelief functioned throughout Luther's reforming career to inform his interpretation of the Bible.¹⁹ As he noted in the preface to the Latin edition of his writings published in Wittenberg in 1545, he "ran through the Scriptures" to confirm and buttress his insight that God justifies sinners by means of the righteousness of faith.²⁰ This insight simply had to apply to every person equally, meaning that women and men went through the same internal process when dealing with temptation or coming to faith. The *equality* of every human person (in terms of the universal experiences of sin and grace, confession and absolution, the fall into unbelief and the restoration to faith) pushed Luther's exegesis in a direction that contradicted the harsh judgment on Eve he had just pronounced. Thus, the younger Luther also found in Eve a type of every Christian, female *and* male, and he made her temptation and fall archetypal not only for women, but also for men, even going so far as to compare Eve's fall from faith to that of the apostle Peter.²¹ Adam therefore fell not, as Augustine had suggested, out of "excessive affection" for his wife, but simply because he, too, gave in to temptation and became an unbeliever. Likewise, when Eve and her husband heard the enigmatic promise of a coming redeemer who would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15), they were united in a common faith.

Nevertheless, the younger Luther also confirmed his reading of Eve's original subordination by appeal to the notion of "headship" found in

19. Cf. Luther's own remarks in WA 24:15: "Aber das ist war, Moses schreibt neben den gesetzen schoene Exempel des glaubens und unglaubens. . . . Das Exempel aber yhres glaubens gehet mich an, das ich Christo auch, wie sie, gleube."

20. This is Luther's self-description of the zeal with which he returned to the Scriptures following his "evangelical breakthrough." See the "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, 1545," WA 54:186; LW 34:337.

21. For this, see Luther's comments in the so-called "Scholia" on Genesis, WA 9:335: "Mox enim, ut vacillamus, ut mutamur in fide, succumbimus, cadimus quemadmodum et Petrus in mari." The reference is to Matt. 14.

1 Corinthians 11. He also connected the further subjection imposed on her in Genesis 3 — “and he shall rule over you” — to the establishment of the civil estate.²² Although in the *Declamationes* he did not explore this connection in any detail, he did make clear that this text should not be read as if Adam had not ruled over the woman from the beginning. Instead, he claimed that Adam, who had previously ruled only within his own home, was given a new responsibility for ruling over the wider human community in all matters pertaining to their common life. The civil estate therefore appeared only as a consequence of the fall into sin, and the woman was excluded *ab origine* from ruling either within the home or beyond it.

Eve, in the Later Luther, and the “Three Estates”

In the later *Enarrationes* on Genesis, classroom lectures delivered between 1535 and 1545,²³ Luther’s interpretation of Eve was structurally almost identical to that of the *Declamationes*. The divinely created structures of church, home, and (later) the civil estate still framed human existence as established by God. The fall still denoted most fundamentally a movement from faith to unbelief, and in this regard there is no difference between male and female. However, the elder Luther — a married man who had fathered six children — offered a strikingly altered and imaginative portrayal of Eve, making her a great saint, a woman whose heroic faithfulness merited attention and emulation. Rather than weak, superstitious, and talkative, she is now a “heroic woman” (*mulier heroica*) who engaged in conversation with the serpent because she recognized it instantly as one of the creatures over which she had been set, as a “partner in the rule” (*socia gubernationis*) with her husband, as ruler and keeper. She was, moreover, an excellent philosopher, “in no part, that is, neither in body nor in soul . . . inferior to her husband Adam.”²⁴

22. WA 24:102: “Tradita est his verbis homini potestas regendi non solum mulierem, sed etiam praeter eam omnia quae ad hanc vitam pertinent. Apostolus 1. Corinth. 11. virum vocat caput mulieris, item imaginem et gloriam Dei, id est praesidentem et regentem omnia humana etc. Atque hic vides ordinationem potestatis secularis a Deo esse, cui obedire vult Deus.”

23. For the integrity of the *Enarrationes* as a source for the thought of the elder Luther, see appendix 1 in Mattox, “Defender,” 259-75.

24. WA 42:138; LW 1:185. Cf. WA 42:87; LW 1:115.

Of equal importance, she was not originally subordinated to Adam's *rule* within their home; instead, her subjection resulted from their fall into sin. Indeed, for the elder Luther, the unfallen Eve was subordinated to her husband only insofar as the office of preaching had been entrusted to him alone in the giving of the *mandatum divinum*. This tree "was Adam's church, altar, and pulpit."²⁵ Eve's subordination to the preached Word seems to have followed as a consequence of the temporal order of human creation; because Adam was created first, only he heard the original divine "sermon," and, as the older Luther imagined things, only he was charged with the duty of proclaiming it to his posterity. Thus, Eve's subordination to the Word of God preached by her husband came to symbolize not her original subjection to her husband's rule, but the subordination of Adam's posterity generally (including, naturally, his male heirs) to the Word of God. Eve prefigures the church's subjection in faith to the saving Word of Christ, both symbolically and literally.

Nevertheless, the elder Luther also clearly labeled Eve as in some other way her husband's "inferior." Jane Dempsey Douglass has argued that tensions such as this in Luther's exegesis show that he was divided between progressive ideas that lead in the direction of a full theory of original equality between the sexes and more traditional notions of an original hierarchy in which males had the upper hand.²⁶ Plausible as this argument may seem, it is probably better to think of Luther as holding these tensions together in his own mind, in such a way that it is possible — and not necessarily contradictory — for him to say that Eve both was and was not her husband's inferior. The conceptual framework within which Eve's alternating equality and inferiority were set is the so-called doctrine of the "three estates." Taking stock of this doctrine makes it possible to distinguish, just as Luther himself seems to have done, between ways in which Eve could have been her husband's equal, and ways in which she was his inferior. In addition, this doctrine helps make clear the distinction Luther made between the rule over the creation exercised by humankind before the fall and the coercive rule of one human being over another as made necessary by the fall.

In the *Enarrationes* and elsewhere, Luther applied and developed the traditional notion that God had structured human life by means of a series of created "orders" (*ordines*). Since he often spoke of three orders — eccle-

25. WA 42:72.20-21; LW 1:95, emphasis mine.

26. See her essay, "The Image of God in Women," 236-66.

siastical, domestic, and civil — the German term *Dreiständelehre* (“doctrine of the three estates”) functions as the classical shorthand for this teaching. As Wilhelm Maurer explains, careful attention to the otherwise bewildering variety of terms Luther chose to express this concept goes a good distance toward explaining what he meant. Instead of the Latin *ordo*, he referred at times to “institutions” (*Stifftte*), to “hierarchies” (*Hierarchiae*), or, sometimes, to “estates” (*Stände*).²⁷ The notion of “order” or “estate” implied a created sphere of human and divine relations within which one could delineate a concrete set of benefits and/or mutual obligations. The *ordo* of the church, for example, denoted the divine-human relationship, within which humankind received — *gratis* — the blessings of life and discovered the duties of worship and obedience. Luther’s talk of “hierarchies” was not intended in the Platonic sense of an ascent toward God, but denoted instead three different sets of relationships that overlapped one another like a series of concentric circles. Not surprisingly (given Luther’s own vocation), the “ecclesiastical estate” took on a certain priority, as it encloses both the civil and the domestic estates, orienting humankind not only toward earthly relations and obligations, but also toward heavenly ones. Within the context of a fallen humanity, moreover, the notion of “hierarchies” functioned to draw attention to the three concrete arenas within which God preserves the world, inviting believers to participate in God’s ongoing battle against the devil.

In the *Enarrationes*, Luther made clear to his students that the original creation included only two of these orders: the ecclesial (*sacerdotium*, *Priesteramt*) and the domestic (*oeconomia*, *domus*, *Ehestand*).²⁸ The civil

27. For the *Dreiständelehre*, see Wilhelm Maurer’s *Luthers Lehre von den drei Hierarchien und ihr mittelalterlicher Hintergrund* (Munich: Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1970). According to Maurer (5), Luther prefers the terms *Stift* and *ordo*, but in the late 1530s turns increasingly to *hierarchien*. Although there is an element of anachronism in the term *Dreiständelehre*, Reinhard Schwarz observes that it can scarcely be avoided, even if it must be explained historically and factually. See his “Luthers Lehre von den drei Stände und die drei Dimensionen der Ethik,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 45 (1978): 15-34, here 18. For some of the problems associated with the term, see Carl Braaten, “God in Public Life: Rehabilitating the ‘Orders of Creation,’” *First Things* 8 (December 1990): 32-38; Edward Schroeder, “The Orders of Creation: Some Reflections on the History and Place of the Term in Systematic Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972): 165-78.

28. For Luther’s exegetical reflections, see the *Enarrationes in Genesis*, WA 42:79; LW 1:104. Cf. his *Enarratio capituli noni Esaiae*, WA 40III:646.17-21.

estate (*politia, civitas, weltliche Obrigkeit*) is also an order, but in the state of original innocence as the elder Luther imagined it, civil government, that is, the rule of one human being over another, was simply unnecessary.²⁹ Underscoring the ad hoc character of this third order in characteristically hyperbolic language, he could even speak of the civil estate as a “kingdom of sin” (*regnum peccati*).³⁰ Certainly, he did not intend in any way to undermine the civil estate’s divinely given authority. Instead, he meant only to say that the divine ordinance that created and established it was given with a view to humankind’s fallenness. As is clear from even a cursory reading of Luther’s explanation of the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism, moreover, the civil estate’s authority to rule (*potestas*) is distinctively paternal. Indeed, as Maurer notes, Luther grounded each of the orders in the *Vateramt*, which itself mirrors and expresses the fatherhood of God.

The paternal quality of authority in each of the estates does not necessarily mean, however, that the exercise of authority was intended to be an exclusively male prerogative. To the contrary, as *socia gubernationis*, Eve before her fall also exercised paternal authority over the creation. Indeed, the elder Luther defended the Vulgate’s translation of *Isha* with “virago,” explaining that Eve was created to be a “she-man,” that is, a “heroic woman who acts in a manly way.”³¹ The provisional quality of the civil estate thus relates closely to Luther’s understanding of Eve’s positional relation to her husband before and after the fall. Since the civil estate’s *potestas* is itself a consequence of the fall, it had no place in an unfallen world, certainly not in the relations between “manly” Eve and her husband.

The “inferiority” Luther ascribed to the woman he elsewhere described as “in no part” inferior therefore cannot mean that she was subor-

29. WA 42:79, “Moreover, there was no state [*politia*] before sin, for there was no need of it.” (LW 1:104.)

30. WA 42:79.

31. WA 42:103, on Gen. 2:23. “Nos Ebraicae linguae elegantiam neququam possumus imitari. *Isch* significat virum: Hevam autem dicit vocandam *Ischa*, perinde ac si dicas a Vir Vira, quod sit uxor, heroica Mulier, quae virilia gerit.” Cf. the discussion in Nicholas of Lyra, *Biblia latina, cum postillis Nicolai de Lyra et expositionibus Guillelmi Britonis in omnes prologos S. Hieronymi et additionibus Pauli Burgensis replicisque Matthiae Doering* (Nuremberg: Anton Koburger, 1487), comment *n* on Gen. 2:23, p. 32^v. See also the discussion in Jerome, *Hebraicae Quaestiones in Libro Geneseos*, *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina, vol. 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953), 5.

dinated to his rule. Thus, the “heroic” Eve must have been somehow qualitatively or quantitatively “less” than her husband. But how? Eve was a “most excellent creature” (*praestantissima creatura*), Luther told his students; “nevertheless she was a woman.” In addition, he observed, she “seems to be a somewhat different creature from the man, in that she has both *different members* and a *much weaker constitution*.”³² Eve, as the elder Luther imagined her, thus had a certain constitutional inferiority to Adam — apparently in the sense that he was physically stronger — but she was not his inferior in terms of her partnership in the rule over the creation. In short, the unfallen Eve was both her husband’s equal partner and his inferior. She was subordinated not to his “rule,” but only to the Word of God he had preached to her. She was physically inferior, but this did not preclude her full partnership in the rule over the creation.

What is the significance of Luther’s understanding of Eve for his position on the place and role of women in the church? Clearly, he did not think of Eve as a partner in her husband’s duty to proclaim the Word of God. Moreover, given the divine imposition of the civil estate, beginning with Adam’s rule over Eve, there is little room in Luther’s social ethic for the full participation of women in the rule of the civil state. The consequence would seem to be that Luther would expect from faithful Christian women only silence and submission in church, home, and society.

It comes as something of a surprise, then, to read the remainder of Luther’s exegesis of Eve’s story, particularly his exposition of her final two reported utterances, first at the birth of Cain (Gen. 4:1), and later that of Seth (Gen. 4:25). Exiled from the garden but filled with faith in the promised “Seed” who would crush the serpent’s head, Eve proclaimed, “I have gotten a man from the Lord,” fully in expectation that she had already brought forth the promised Redeemer. Brokenhearted later at Cain’s shameful fratricide, Luther explained, Eve remained “a most holy woman, full of faith and love” (*sanctissima mulier, plena fidei et charitatis*). Reading once again between the compact lines of her story with a distinctively theological imagination, Luther examined her seemingly matter-of-fact observation that “God has appointed for me another seed in place of Abel, whom Cain killed.” In this “sort of little sermon,” Eve heroically confessed her faith and proved herself a skilled theologian, joining her husband in excommunicating Cain. “Full of faith, love, and endless crosses,” she rec-

32. WA 42:51; LW 1:69.

ognized that the ways of God sometimes contradicted “the wisdom of the flesh” and she saw that the promise of redemption would proceed not through their firstborn, but through Seth.³³ The heroic faith and Spirit-given wisdom evident in Eve’s sermons mean for Luther that she should be remembered and numbered among the great biblical saints.

Women in the Household Church

In spite of his conviction that women have been excluded from preaching and from ruling in the church, home, or state, then, Luther nevertheless credited Christian women with a capacity for the active and even heroic confession of the faith.³⁴ Confined by their station in life to the estate of the home, they nevertheless witnessed to the faith within the household church of the Old Testament, both by their deeds and by their words. This conception of female Christian faithfulness also informed the elder Luther’s further exegesis of the stories of Genesis. Lecturing to classrooms filled with the young men who would soon constitute the learned Lutheran ministry, he repeatedly lifted up the example of this or that faithful woman, simultaneously schooling his students in the pastoral discernment of the workings of law and gospel in the lives of the faithful and suggesting the kind of Christian heroism they might hope for in their own lives, and from their own wives and female parishioners.

This included the expectation that women would sometimes correct or instruct their husbands or pastors. Interpreting Genesis 21, for instance, he insisted that Saint Sarah asked her husband Abraham to expel the servant Hagar and her son Ishmael from their household not because she was jealous or prideful, but because she had more carefully reflected on the divine promise of redemption. Abraham should have remembered that redemption was to come not through his firstborn, Ishmael, but from Isaac, Sarah’s boy, born according to the promise of God. The promise was the

33. WA 42:238-40; LW 1:324-26.

34. I intend “confession” here in the sense of giving living witness to the faith in the present and, therefore, not a mere recitation of the church’s faith. On this issue, see Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991). For further work on a biblical woman’s heroic confession in Luther’s Genesis exegesis, see my “*Defender*,” chapter 6.

same; it applied equally to Sarah and Abraham and, as the elder Luther's interpretation of Eve had already shown, they had an equal capacity to believe it. Abraham, however, had not considered it carefully enough, perhaps because of his affection for Hagar and Ishmael. Thus, Abraham benefited from his wife's intervention, and, as Luther reads the story, her doing so in no way violated her subjection to his rule.³⁵ The implication was that Christian men, including young Lutheran pastors, could expect to learn Christian wisdom from their wives as their equals, and sometimes their superiors, in faith.

Luther's interpretation of this story also has strong Mariological undertones, a factor one must account for in any evaluation of the question of Luther on women and the church. Luther found in the stories of both Sarah and Hagar, for example, proleptic echoes of the story of Mary, labeling them "mothers of the church."³⁶ Moreover, the promise of redemption ultimately fulfilled through Mary's Son imparted to motherhood generally a kind of reflected glory, for the expectation of the coming "Seed of the Woman" meant that the devil stood in fear of every expectant woman. Eve and all the women of the patriarchal households greatly desired the "good of offspring," moreover, because they knew it was through this "work" that the devil would ultimately be overthrown. The Mariological, ecclesiological, and christological aspects of Luther's interpretation of these women imparted no small element of heroism to their stories. He recognized, moreover, that in literally going to the point of death in order to bring forth life, women somehow imaged and pointed to the coming Savior. To be sure, in itself this was little more than a reaffirmation of the Pauline assertion that women shall be saved through childbearing (1 Tim. 2:15), a text that had long been understood Mariologically. Moreover, there was a difference between the times. Not everything said of the patriarchs' wives and their place in the church could be said of Christian women generally in Luther's day. Obviously, they could not hope to bring forth the Savior. Nevertheless, they could identify both with the heroic and at times outspoken matriarchs and also with Christ himself in their own motherly work.

The example of Luther's reading of Sarah's story also reminds us of the kinds of changes the Reformation would effect in the lives of women: not a movement into the leadership of church and society, but one di-

35. WA 43:149-52; LW 4:20-24.

36. For this, see Mattox, "Defender," chapters 3-4.

rected toward the further development of the Christian home. Women who might otherwise have been nuns or clerical concubines or even prostitutes became instead honorable Protestant housewives, supporting and sharing in their husbands' vocations, establishing what historians have labeled the Protestant "household workshop." The Protestant parsonage, the pastor's own household community of faith as Luther idealized it in the classroom and lived it with Katharina, would provide the model for the Protestant Christian home more generally. For the parsonage itself, Luther found fit examples aplenty in the stories of the Old Testament patriarchs and their wives.

Historians have frequently observed that in moving from convent and even from the public brothel to the Protestant household, women lost a measure of the freedom they had previously enjoyed. Both the convent and the brothel were to a certain extent arenas of female independence from male domination.³⁷ Some abbesses, for example, exercised considerable authority within and even outside their communities. From a modern perspective, the question whether the Reformation was "good" for women depends on whether one sees the domestication of women within the Protestant household as an improvement over their arguably more independent status beforehand. From Luther's perspective, however, prostitution was a social evil that should be prohibited, and the convent offered a false way of salvation through "self-chosen works." There could therefore be no real question about whether women's movement into the Protestant household was good or bad. Instead, it was a movement back toward what God had commanded and established, a reintegration into the concrete and divinely appointed sphere within which Christian men and women were called to live faithfully.

Women's "Preaching": Public or Private?

There were further instances of female speech in Genesis that impressed Luther enough for him to call attention to a woman's "preaching." Lowly Hagar, once a runaway and later an exile, is probably the most impressive example from the *Enarrationes*. As Luther told her story, she was trans-

37. For these issues, see the studies cited above, particularly Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*.

formed by an unexpected confrontation (which Luther reads as an instance of confession and absolution) with the “angel of the Lord” by a spring in the wilderness. Afterward, she obediently returns to Abraham’s household (Gen. 16), where “she acknowledges the mercy of God, preaches and calls upon God by a new name, in order to make known the benefit through which He had declared himself to her.”³⁸ Indeed, Luther reads Hagar as a “mother of the church,” the matriarch of a great Christian nation (the Hagarites), and he surmises that Ishmael, too, became a faithful preacher of the gospel. Clearly, however, Luther did not imagine Hagar or any other woman preaching and presiding over the sacraments in a Christian congregation at worship. Nor did he expect Christian women in his own day to follow Hagar’s example by giving public witness to their faith. Or did he? Did he not imagine Hagar preaching the gospel to the gathered assembly of Abraham’s household (who would presumably have confronted her on her return), including the patriarch himself?

Elsewhere, Luther had clearly acknowledged the legitimacy of a woman’s preaching in some form of public assembly, particularly within female communities like that of the Christian convent where men were not allowed.³⁹ He also recognized that the question of women’s preaching could be raised on the basis of his doctrine of the common priesthood, and even admitted its necessity when no suitable man could be found for the task.⁴⁰ “If the Lord were to raise up a woman for us to listen to,” he once said, “we would allow her to rule like Huldah.”⁴¹ Remarks like these reflect Luther’s conviction that no merely human reality, even the total lack

38. WA 42:598: “Nec id solum, sed agnoscit Dei misericordiam, praedicat et invocat Deum novo nomine ad celebrandum beneficium eius, quo se erga ipsam declaraverat.” Cf. LW 3:69, which translates *praedicat* with “she praises.”

39. *Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und ausgelegt* (1523), WA 12:308: “Darumb sind sie alle zu mal priester, muegen Gottis wort verkundigen, on das weyber nicht ynn der gemeyn reden sollen, sondern die menner predigen lassen, umb des gepotts willen, das sie yhren mennern sollen unterthan seyn, wie S. Paulus leret 1. Cor:14. Solch ordnung lesset Gott bleyben, macht aber nicht unterscheyd des gewallts. Wo aber nicht menner da weren, sondern eyttel weyber, als ynn nonnen kloestern, da moecht man auch eyn weyb unter yhn auff werffen, das da predigte.” Cf. WA 8:498: “Wenn aber keyn man predigest, so werß von nöten, das die weyber predigten.”

40. Cf. WA 7:166. For further examples, see Maron, “Vom Hindernis zur Hilfe,” 280-81.

41. WA 26:48-49; LW 28:280. Cf. WA 8:251; LW 39:234.

of faithful male Christians to proclaim the Word, can finally stand in the way of the gospel. However, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14 he also made it clear that women should be silent in church itself. In any case, he thought it clear that women were naturally unsuited for public speaking, typically arguing that the voice of a man was more appropriately fitted for the task.⁴² In his comments on 1 Timothy (1527-28), he could even go so far as to say, in contrast to what he later taught in the classroom, that Adam was wiser than Eve and therefore intellectually better fitted for the task of preaching.⁴³ In sum, Luther's explicit answers to the question of women's preaching were grounded in his perception of women's natural fittedness for the task, as well as a reading of 1 Corinthians 14 as a divine positive law that simply forbade the practice without necessarily explaining why.

Nevertheless, when speaking of the duties of Christian parents in the context of a rather exuberant early explanation of his doctrine of the common priesthood, he insisted: "Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel."⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, then, in the *Enarrationes* on Genesis he pictured Saint Eve faithfully instructing her children in law and gospel based on her participation in the common priesthood.⁴⁵ This example is no less problematic, however, than that of Hagar. Did Luther think of Eve as teaching her children only on weekdays and not on the Sabbath? Only at "home" and not in their "church"? If the entire human family consisted of Adam and Eve and their few offspring, what difference could there be between the church as gathered community and the church as an extended family gathered at home?

Conclusion

Lingering questions such as these show why Luther will continue to inspire both those who oppose and those who support the full participation of

42. See, for example, WA 8:497.

43. WA 26:48-49; LW 28:280. Compare Douglass, "The Image of God," 249.

44. WA 10II:301: "Denn gewißlich ist vater und mutter der kinder Apostel, Bisschoff, pfarrer, ynn dem sie das Euangelion yhn kundt machen."

45. On this particular episode, see Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535-1545)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 323.

women in the ministries of the church. The issue of women's roles continues to divide the church. For example, the churches united in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) are also internally divided over this issue of "church order," such that Federation statements that address the questions have to be crafted with considerable care in order to avoid causing offense.⁴⁶ There is little sign, moreover, that this issue will be resolved soon, in spite of the determination of the LWF itself to support the ordination of women. It is fair to say, then, that this remains an unresolved problem, one with which Lutherans on all sides of the issue ought to be concerned.

Luther himself did not support the ordination of women to the public ministry, and this is one of those stubborn historical facts one must simply accept. Despite Maron and Wolf, Luther did think the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry was a contradiction of divine law, namely, that given in 1 Corinthians 14. The divine origins of each of the three estates, moreover, left little room for a Christian movement for the emancipation of women, even if the elder Luther came to think of Eve's subjection to her husband's rule as a divinely imposed consequence of the fall and not as a reflection of what God had intended.

However, in terms of the systematic development of a version of Christian thought that could reasonably be construed as faithfully Lutheran, he clearly left the door open. He found in women heroic examples of faith and faithfulness, and discerned in their stories christological and Mariological resonances that rendered their deeds and words worthy of careful reflection. Moreover, he modeled just this kind of reflection in his own biblical exegesis, attending carefully to women's "sermons" and encouraging his followers to do likewise. He pictured them giving authentic witness to the faith in what were arguably public assemblies of the faithful (the church), and he seems equally to have imagined their menfolk giving heed to their word. From a modern perspective, of course, Luther's readings of the women of Genesis will strike many as fanciful, even excessively Christianized.⁴⁷ The significance of these readings today, however, does

46. Note, for instance, the cautious wording in "The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church" (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2003), par. 16-17 (pp. 13-14).

47. This has long been the case. Note, for example, the critical remarks of Otto Zöckler on Luther's interpretation of Hagar in his *Luther als Ausleger des Alten Testaments* (Greifswald, 1884), 60.

not depend on how one judges Luther's exegetical method or practice, but on his exemplary willingness to give ear to the voices of faithful women in recognition of their important roles in the church and in salvation history as a whole.