

Basic Catechesis on the Sixth Commandment
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Jesus told us to teach all nations. This teaching is to take place by means of baptism and catechesis. The two go together. To baptize without teaching the chief parts of Christian doctrine is to treat baptism as a mere ritual and not as the gracious water of life that it is. To teach without baptizing is to take the flesh and blood out of the teaching and to make it impersonal doctrine to be learned, filed away, and practically ignored. When we teach the chief parts of Christian doctrine to the baptized we are talking to God's children. We are telling them who they are, what belongs to them, and what God wants them to do.

Teaching the commandments will necessarily show people their sins. What else would you expect? By the law is the knowledge of sin. The law works wrath. But teaching the commandments to Christians is also to teach them what God has called them to be. When we are born from above in Holy Baptism we find our identity and purpose in a holy place. We are seated with Christ Jesus in the heavenly places. This is why we are not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This entails lifelong catechesis.

Here I must make a confession. I didn't know the word "catechesis" until some time during the eighties. I probably learned it from Peter Bender. When I was at the seminary we learned the word catechetics. To this day I don't know what the difference is between these two cats. At any rate, in traditional Lutheran catechesis we rely on the catechisms of Martin Luther. Anyone familiar with Luther knows that for him catechesis and polemics go together. Catechesis is teaching the baptized what belongs to them. Polemics is doing battle with the lies of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. Whenever we teach what God would have us teach we are starting a fight. This is because the teaching of God's word is always at odds with the errors, distortions, and perversions of a godless culture. The catechetical task always engages one in warfare. Therefore catechesis and polemics are wed together. This is so in 16th Century Germany and in 21st Century America.

But is it the same war today that it was four hundred and seventy seven years ago? Luther fought against forced celibacy. In our day a little more of that sounds pretty good. Luther lived a time when there was a consensus on what the differences between men and women were. Women were not ordained to be pastors. No one was arguing that the church should bless same sex unions or ordain homosexuals. The father was the head of the home, God was the Author of life, fornication and adultery were sins, and the public display of pornographic filth was not a constitutional right. How far removed we are from that time and place!

But, the more things change the more they stay the same. As the Preacher reminds us, there is nothing new under the sun. The teaching of Luther's Large Catechism speaks directly to our day. This is because Luther did not simply react to what was wrong with the world into which he was born. Instead, he engaged his own culture by means of delving into and applying God's word to his own time and place. He appealed to God's word in defense of a divine institution. In so doing, he provided the church with valuable instruction. I encourage you to read Luther's Large Catechism on the 6th Commandment. You will find that he provides a foundation upon which we can build in our day.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed and each love and honor his spouse. The commandment points to a divine institution. When God says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," He is saying that there exists something that must not be adulterated. Jesus explains: "He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So then, they are no longer two but one flesh.'" In the beginning no command against adultery was given. There was no need. No law existed except the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When Adam and Eve did what came naturally to do they did what was good. God looked on the world He had made and saw that it was very good. Marriage and marital intimacy were pure. From the pure and holy expression of marital love God would bring pure and holy children into the world. As Moses records, "God *blessed* them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" There was only Adam and Eve. There was no sin. There was no Sixth Commandment. But there was the divine command, "Be fruitful." That command could be honored in only one way. The command was a blessing, both with respect to the intimacy from which children

would be conceived and with respect to the children who would be brought into this world. It was not a demand in the sense of a law imposed. It was a command in the sense of a blessing that comes from the almighty God who speaks and makes it so.

When we look at marriage from its institution in the creation of the world we see what a wonderful invention it is. Imagine marriage in a world where there is no form of adultery, sexual immorality, or perversion. There are no miscarriages, birth defects, or stillborn children. Mothers don't get sick. They conceive and bear children free from any sickness, pain, or danger. Imagine pure love between a pure man and a pure woman that is unhindered by any kind of temptation to sin. Imagine pure love purely expressed bringing forth pure children. There is no fear of anything going wrong because nothing can go wrong. Imagine this. What we can only imagine is what God graciously established in the beginning when He made man in His image, male and female, and blessed them. This is why we should understand marriage as God established it, not as sin has distorted and perverted it.

But we cannot understand what was since we are living with what is. We are confronted with a prohibition: Thou shalt not commit adultery. God forbids. God does not forbid what is not sin and whenever God's forbids it, it becomes more and more sinful. That's because the law evokes greater sin. The sinful nature rebels against God's law precisely because it is God's law. The fact that this same law is reasonable and wise only serves to illustrate the depth of human depravity.

But is the divine prohibition against adultery reasonable? Or does adultery make sense? What is better? Lifelong monogamy or having multiple sexual partners? Faithfulness within the marriage bond or sexual promiscuity? Clearly, a prohibition of adultery makes sense from a practical point of view, whether or not God saw fit to say anything about it. There is a bond between sexual intimacy and the conception and birth of children. Children need fathers and mothers. A man cannot be a mother and a woman cannot be a father. If a man and a woman are devoted to one another in a permanent bond of mutual faithfulness and trust they will be better equipped to provide their children with a stable home. The love they show to one another will be seen by their children. Children learn to love as they witness love. All of this is clear and reasonable.

The connection between the Sixth Commandment and the Fourth Commandment is equally obvious. When the Sixth Commandment falls, the Fourth

Commandment falls with it. Fornication brings children into this world without their mothers being married to their fathers. They are often raised without fathers in the home. They cannot learn to honor a man who is not there. Respect for the law outside of the home is learned by respecting fathers at home. Without the Sixth Commandment the Fourth Commandment cannot stand. When it falls the nation falls with it. This is what has happened in America during the past couple of generations. Reason and experience tell us to oppose fornication and adultery. This is why humanly invented religions will generally prohibit adultery. It makes sense. The stability of the family is something worth protecting. Respecting the marriage bed protects the stability of the family.

But reason and experience are not enough. The law must condemn us all or it isn't divine. The law is made for sinners and as such it condemns sinners. Why does God forbid adultery? Because we are adulterers by nature! As Jesus said, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts: murders, adulteries, etc." God does not forbid what is not sin. Without sin there is no law. We see the divine institution of marriage by going to Genesis to see what God created in the beginning when He took a rib out of the man's side and made it into a woman and brought her to the man. Apart from this divine institution, the prohibition of adultery may be reasonable and wise, but not entirely necessary. The reason the prohibition of adultery is necessary is for the sake of the divine institution. What God has joined together must not be separated.

God joins sexual intimacy between a man and a woman with marriage and procreation. First comes love, then come marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage. When God joins a man and a woman together in marriage, He blesses them with the benediction first spoken to Adam and Eve in Paradise. He said, "Be fruitful and multiply." God invented sexual intimacy and pronounced it very good. God joined sexual intimacy to marriage. God also joined it to procreation. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

Perhaps a helpful way to understand God's institution as a joining together is by analogy with another divine institution. God instituted the pastoral office. When the Lord Jesus sent out the apostles to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments of Christ He joined the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments to an office. The mandate to do that which belongs to the office to do constitutes the divine institution of the office. Pastors preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Why? Because this is what God sends pastors to do. We confess in the Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, "Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless

he is regularly called.” The office and the duties of the office go together by divine arrangement. The divine institution places the verb within the noun, so to speak. The doing of what is given to the office to do belongs to those who are placed into the office. This is by divine, not human, arrangement.

Just so, God has instituted marriage as a holy estate joining a man and a woman in a lifelong union in which they are to enjoy a sexual intimacy from which God brings children into this world. No one has the right to get into the pulpit and preach unless he is entrusted with the preaching office. No one has the right to engage in sexual intimacy except within the bond of marriage. The verb must remain with the noun. Until one has been entrusted with the office of preaching he should not go around publicly preaching. Only married couples should engage in sexual intercourse and only within the marriage bond. God has assigned certain activities to certain offices or estates. To carry out the activities outside of the context in which God instituted them is to despise the institution and the God who instituted it. We live at a time when divine institutions are despised. What God has joined together is put asunder. Or it isn't even brought together in the first place.

But despising divine institutions is nothing new. Luther criticized the Roman Catholic Church of his day for despising marriage by requiring vows of celibacy for priests and others. They argued that celibacy was chastity. They claimed that the celibate state was superior to the married state. Luther disagreed. Not for nothing did he use the word “chaste” in his explanation of the Sixth Commandment to refer to married couples. “We should fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed and each love and honor his spouse.” He makes no mention of adultery. Indeed, this is the only explanation of a commandment in the second table of the law of Luther's Small Catechism that has no prohibition. Commandments four, five, seven, eight, nine, and ten all begin with the words, “We should fear and love God that we may not.” Luther's explanation to the Sixth Commandment does not touch on the negative, but only on the positive. Chastity can and does coexist with sexual activity.

If God has joined sexual intimacy to marriage, and if God has given us the desire for such intimacy, it follows that those to whom God has given this desire are entitled to get married. This is how Luther argues in the Large Catechism. Marriage is necessary on account of our nature. He writes:

For where nature has its course – since it was given by God – it is not possible to remain chaste without marriage (1 Corinthians 7). For flesh and blood remain

flesh and blood. The nature desire and excitement have their course without delay or hindrance, as everybody sees and feels. In order, therefore, that it may be easier in some degree to avoid in chastity, God has commanded the estate of marriage. In this way everyone may have his proper portion and be satisfied with it. Yet God's grace is also required in order that the heart may be pure. (Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, Paragraph 212)

Chastity does not require us to deny what God created us to be. Rather, marital love – created by God – is to be distinguished from sinful lust that exists on account of the fall. Marital love provides the divine setting within which our desires may be fulfilled in a chaste way. By giving us sexual desires, God sanctions marriage. The marital estate is more than chaste. Sexual fidelity within marriage is purer than virginity outside of marriage if virginity is accompanied by unchaste thoughts and constant lust. It is better to marry than to burn. And there is no sin in enjoying God's gifts. As the hymnist put it, "Hast thou not seen how thy desires all have been granted in what he ordaineth?" What he ordains is marriage.

What God has joined together, let not man put asunder. First God joins you to your husband or wife. First God calls you to the Holy Ministry. Then you do that which is given you to do in your vocation. Doing it outside of the vocation to which it is assigned is a sin. This does not negate the doing of it. Sexual intercourse outside of marriage may result in the conception of life. Surely God is the Author of life. Similarly, one neither called nor ordained may not publicly preach the gospel, but the gospel remains the gospel and the Holy Spirit remains the Lord and giver of life.

God joins sexual intimacy to marriage. In so doing He blesses it. The preacher speaks God's approval of sexual intimacy within marriage, saying:

Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well.
Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets?
Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth.
As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
And always be enraptured with her love.
For why should you, my son, be enraptured by an immoral woman,
And be embraced in the arms of a seductress? (Proverbs 5:15-20)

Here Solomon teaches Luther's doctrine. Marriage exists in support of chastity. God wants the intimacy that a husband and wife enjoy to be enjoyed. He wants married couples to have pleasure with one another. This is why he has joined sexual intimacy to marriage.

God has also joined sexual intimacy to procreation. This is too obvious to need any demonstration. We all know where babies come from. What isn't so clear these days is who should decide if and when the expression of marital love results in the conception of a child. There is no question but that God has joined the two. There is also no denying that man has separated them. Modern technology had made it possible for a virile man and a fertile woman to enjoy sex with very little likelihood of the conception of a child resulting from it. This has wrought a fundamental change in the way people – both within and outside of the church – view the relationship between sexual intercourse and procreation. It is assumed that married couples will determine when and if they have children. Christians argue that yes, God has joined sexual intimacy to procreation, but unless one can find an explicit scriptural prohibition of birth control, it is up to the married couple to decide if a child is to be conceived.

The Roman Catholic Church has a very clear teaching on this subject. The fact that God has joined sexual intercourse to procreation leads to the conclusion that artificial methods of birth control are inherently sinful. The sex act must be open to life. This is part of their seamless pro-life doctrine. Pills, condoms, and other contraceptives that artificially prevent conception are considered to be sinful practices because God has joined sexual intercourse to the creation of life and we have no right to come between God and His creative activity. The rhythm method is deemed acceptable because there is nothing artificial about it. Well, I would dispute that. True, there is no artificial barrier to prevent the sperm from penetrating the egg, causing fertilization and conception to occur. But the rhythm method appears to be quite artificial when considered in light of the wholesome desire that God intends men and women within the married state to enjoy. For the married couple to avoid intimacy precisely when the woman is most amorous solely in order not to be blessed with a child appears to me to be less than a wholehearted affirmation of life. Doing what God gives one to do in order to receive both joy in the doing and the added blessing of children is not an arduous task to be dreaded and feared.

The question always comes down to separating what God has joined together. Sexual intimacy is joined to procreation is joined to marriage. It's not that the sex act exists solely for the purpose of procreation, but to disconnect it from

procreation, at least theoretically, is to distort it. But it doesn't follow from this that birth control is necessarily wrong or that the rhythm method is acceptable while condoms are not. It may be that a married couple is not capable of sexual intimacy with each other. It may be that a married couple cannot have children. It may be that having children would put the woman's health into jeopardy. We are sinners living in a fallen world that doesn't work the way God created it to work. This doesn't change the divine institution. The command and promise of God stand, and they stand together. God blessed them. It was in blessing them that He told them to be fruitful. He told them to be intimate sexually, and He promised to bless that union with the creation of life. Are children a blessing from God? Is God the author of life? These are the questions we need to ask and answer. It won't do to come up with a list of rules. Divine blessing cannot be contained within rules. Christians should be catechized on the topic of family planning by directing them to the divine joining together of sexual intimacy, marriage, and procreation as a positive blessing. It is in confessing this truth – an affirmation of the First Article of the Creed – that Christians will become well grounded in their understanding of family planning. God does the planning. “I believe that God has made me.” God is the One who plans families and this is the starting point in understanding issues of birth control and contraception. To begin with rules about which methods of preventing conception are right and which methods are wrong will distort God's word and will on this matter. If we focus on God's work instead of our own we will have the right perspective. When Rachel complained to Jacob that she had no children, he became angry and replied: “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Genesis 30:2b) God chooses to close the womb. And God opens the womb. When God gives the fruit of the womb this is always a blessing. The psalmist declares:

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. (Psalm 127:3-5a)

This is most certainly true. However, if it is reasonable to believe that a woman's health would be put at risk if she were to conceive and bear a child, it is also reasonable to take whatever preventive measures are necessary to protect her health. Love teaches this. Love does no harm to the neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Does this mean that a married couple should, in such a case, refrain from sexual relations altogether? Why on earth should they? If it is

possible to enjoy the intimacy that God has placed within marriage with no danger posed to the woman's health, there is no good reason to refrain from that intimacy. Husbands and wives are still flesh and blood. God gave them the desire and marriage remains marriage even when couples may not be blessed by children. Sexual intimacy within marriage is commanded by St. Paul because we cannot control ourselves.

God made us what we are. So say the homosexuals who desire carnal relationships with members of their own sex. They desire. Those that wish to be regarded as Christians will argue that their sexual desire for members of the same sex is God's doing. They may call it a gift from God. They argue from their own desires back to the will of God. In this way they fashion a god in their own image. This is idolatry. This is what happens when we ignore the divine institution and establish our own. God has not joined a man to a man or a woman to a woman. God made them Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. He took out only one rib. He didn't take out two ribs, one male and one female, and then bring them both to Adam so that Adam could determine for himself his sexual orientation. He brought a woman to a man. He gave them desire for one another and He blessed the expression of that desire with children. The joining of a man to a woman may bring forth life. The joining of a man to a man can only bring forth death.

Separating what God has joined together denies the divine institution. When the divine institution is gone, there is no good reason not to endorse any kind of sexual activity solely on the basis of human desires. I want what I want when I want it. But we are filled with sin and this isn't God's fault. God does not make men or women homosexual any more than He makes men and women thieves, liars, or murderers. That one man may be plagued by a particular temptation and another man beset by a different kind of temptation tells us only that sin takes on many forms and that we all walk in danger all the way. Christians who suffer from homosexual desires will never fail to find forgiveness in Christ when they come to God in humble repentance for all their sins of thought, word, and deed. There is nothing sweeter than the absolution of a sinner for Christ's sake. To lead sinners to Christ is certainly not only the task of pastors called to preach. It is the holy vocation of every single Christian. But there is no Savior for those who are not sinners. Those who in the name of Christ teach us not to judge homosexuals for their sexual perversion but to acknowledge their orientation as divinely bestowed deny Christ and God the Father who created us male and female. Surely this is nothing short of apostasy from the Christian religion!

When God brought Eve to Adam he said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Genesis 2:23) She is not man. She is woman. But she was taken out of man. She is the same, but she is not the same. Understanding how this is so would take a lifetime of learning only to discover that you will never understand. It doesn't matter. Why do you love me? That's just fishing for a compliment. Who knows? What difference does it make, just so long as we acknowledge that the differences are divinely ordained?

While we may not be able to understand precisely what the differences between men and woman are, we can know what God says about how husbands and wives are to treat one another. St. Paul gives us the divine doctrine in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:22-33)

We cannot understand the Christian relationship between husbands and wives apart from the doctrine of Christ and His vicarious atonement. He gave Himself for His church. This means that He bore her sins in His own body. He did not simply offer some kind of a sacrificial love. He sacrificed Himself. This is what the text says. He gave Himself for her. This giving of Himself for His church washes her clean of all her sins so that she is perfectly holy without any blemish of any kind. Here we see two wonderful Christian mysteries joined together. First, Christ offers His innocent life on the cross, giving Himself to God as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by bearing that sin in His own body. In His death, water and blood flow from His pierced side. Then this blood,

offered once and for all on the cross to reconcile God to us sinners, cleanses us of all sins as it is applied to the church in Holy Baptism. Christ's life is given for us. His blood is shed for us. This blood is now joined to the washing of water by the word and so we wash our robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.

It's almost as if the Apostle gets sidetracked from his talk of marriage into a brief excursus on the atonement and baptism. But this is quite deliberate. The Holy Spirit knows what He's doing when St. Paul puts his pen to the parchment. The point is this. The submission of the church to Christ is the submission of faith. Christ's headship is the headship of laying down His life for His church. It is more than humility, as He takes on the role of a servant in washing His disciples' feet. It is washing away their sin. This is crucial to an understanding of the headship and submission spoken of here in Ephesians 5. Christ rules in His kingdom by His grace. He rules over us by taking off of us our burden of sin and guilt and bearing it Himself. He seeks and gains our loyalty by means of a love that justifies us by His blood. When we submit to this rule over us we do so by receiving in simple faith the forgiveness of our sins. We are holy. We are pure. We are righteous. We stand before our God without any blemish or taint of sin. There is no sin that God can see in us, since we are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

This submission of the Christian to Christ is expressed beautifully by the great hymnist, Paul Gerhardt, in his magnificent Christmas hymn:

Guilt no longer can distress me;
Son of God, Thou my load bearest to release me.
Stain in my Thou findest never;
I am clean, all my sin is removed forever.

I am pure, in Thee believing,
From thy store evermore righteous robes receiving.
In my heart I will enfold Thee,
Treasure rare, let me there, loving, ever hold thee. (TLH, 77, stanzas 13-14)

The Christian's submission to Christ is indistinguishable from faith. Now the faith is never perfect. But that which faith receives is. The Christian wife submits to her own husband as to the Lord Jesus. That is, she submits to the Lord Jesus in faith. In this faith she acknowledges her husband to be her God-given head and whatever is lacking is him as a man or as a husband is surely not lacking in Christ. And it is always Christ to whom she submits herself in simple faith.

The husband's love for his wife is likewise imperfect, but its imperfection is covered by the same blood that cleanses the whole church in Holy Baptism. It is in imitating his Lord Jesus that the husband learns how woefully inadequate his love for his wife is. And in that recognition he takes refuge in the same forgiveness that makes his bride holy and beautiful. And this is how he sees her. She is as holy and beautiful as the bride of Christ, cleansed and sanctified by the washing of water by the word.

When the man and the woman are reconciled to God they are reconciled to one another. Then the headship is self-giving and the submission is implicit trust. Each belongs to the other. The body doesn't do battle against its head. The head doesn't do battle against the body. The husband loves the wife by serving her. The wife serves the husband by loving him. Each forgives as he or she has been forgiven, and the forgiveness of sins is the only thing that can truly sanctify marriage, blessing it as God blessed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

How likely is it that Christ would divorce His holy bride? It is not possible. He gave His life for her. He will not toss her aside for another. He told Hosea to marry a whore to make a point. He then proceeded to redeem His people from harlotry. He will not and cannot divorce the church for whom he died. He will call her back to Himself. He will not reject her. And so He forbids divorce. The prophet says:

[T]he LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce. (Malachi 2:14-16)

Divorce is breaking apart what God has joined together. Jesus said:

Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate. (Matthew 19:4-6)

This is not simply a contract between a man and a woman. This is an institution of God. God has created it, established it, blessed it, and sanctified it. A divine institution is not ours to do with as we please. Pastors are thrown out of office for no biblical cause. Why is this excused and defended? Because men despise the divine institution. A man leaves his wife and marries another. A woman leaves her husband and marries another. This is also excused because men despise the divine institution. But Jesus condemns divorce in no uncertain terms. He says:

Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery. (Matthew 19:8-9)

Here we note that Matthew includes the words “except for sexual immorality” while Mark does not. Rome has an absolutist position on divorce, forbidding it under every circumstance. Rome appeals to Mark’s Gospel that does not give adultery as grounds for divorce. Is it?

I recall the first time I, as a pastor, had to deal with this topic. A lady in my congregation came to me to tell me that she was going to divorce her husband. I didn’t know at the time that this would be a rare occurrence. Folks usually don’t tell the pastor about such things. It might upset him. Better to let him find out through the grape vine when it’s too late for him to do anything about it. I listened to the woman tell me all the reasons why she wanted to leave her husband. By the time she was done I really felt sorry for her. The way she described things, her marriage was a terrible burden. This guy was a real loser. I noticed, though, that she said nothing at all about his being unfaithful to her. So I told her that God forbade divorce except on the grounds of adultery. She replied, “Oh, he’s done that, too.” Clearly, she didn’t regard adultery as sufficient reason for a divorce, but she was perfectly willing to appeal to it if necessary.

Jesus does grant a husband or a wife the right to divorce on the grounds of adultery. This by no means requires divorce. I have talked to Christian couples in which one of them fell into this sin and even embraced it for a long period of time until confronted by it. Confession was followed by absolution. Absolution was followed by healing. Broken trust is painful. Betrayed love hurts as deeply as any kind of hurt. But the gospel of the forgiveness of sins has almighty power. Rome lays an unbiblical and legalistic burden on consciences when it denies the right of the victim of adultery to divorce his wife or her husband. She then turns around and hypocritically endorses divorce as long as the price is right, calling it

annulment. Our teaching and practice, however, should not be fashioned in reaction against Rome on the one hand or liberal Protestantism on the other. Marriage is a divine institution. What God has joined together should be honored by all, especially by those who speak on behalf of the church. When adultery destroys what God has joined together, then divorce becomes nothing more than the tragic admission that this has occurred.

The Lutheran Church has also listed malicious desertion as grounds for divorce. St. Paul writes, "But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace." (1 Corinthians 7:15) A Christian is not bound to a marriage that has been dissolved by the other. But here is what happens. The biblical text is replaced by a concept, namely, malicious desertion. Then malicious desertion is defined in all sorts of creative ways, parting significantly from the text itself.

There is certainly nothing wrong with compassion for couples suffering in marriages that are plagued by chronic troubles that seem to be insurmountable. Compassion for Christians caught within the pains of being sinners in a sinful world should be expressed in accordance with God's word. Surely God knows what He is doing when He joins a man and a woman together in a lifelong union. To learn how to forgive, to bear with one another's burdens, and patiently to endure the faults of another is to become conformed to Christ's image. Marriage, designed by God to be a blessing in paradise, may well become a cross in this fallen world. Bearing a cross is nothing to be welcomed. But when God lays the cross upon you, His child, He does so as a loving Father who has removed your sin from you by placing it on another cross, in the body of His dear Son. There are times when a husband and wife cannot live together. God's commandments ought not to be pitted against each other, and the law of Christian love does no harm to the neighbor. Marriage is not designed by God to be a place of danger where life and health are threatened by violence and abuse. Neither is marriage a human institution that can be dismantled according to our own desires and notions.

But this is what we sinners insist on doing. We separate what God has joined together. We see what a mess we've made of it all and how helpless we are to put it all back together again. When we see this the law has done its proper work. He has humbled us under the mighty hand of God, giving us no choice but to cry out for mercy. God hears. For Christ's sake He always hears. Not only does He hear, but He graciously forgives us all our sins. Though they are as scarlet, they shall become as wool, as white as snow. When Christ gave up His life for His

bride, He provided her with a washing that would cleanse her no matter how often she would soil herself by her sin. So we return to our baptism, where we were washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, and there we find our true purity, our true beauty, our true chastity, our true lives and eternal love.

Amen

Rolf D. Preus
