

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PART 13: THE BATTLE OVER CLERICAL MARRIAGE

FROM APOSTLES TO PRIESTS

The apostle Paul defined several offices and ministries within the early church. The highest office was that of apostle, followed by prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.” (Ephesians 4:11)

Paul also gave qualifications for bishops and deacons. A bishop was to be a man of proven character, capable of teaching and faithfully governing his own household:

“This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach.” (1 Timothy 3:1-2)

Paul likewise established qualifications for deacons:

“Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre.” (1 Timothy 3:8)

The New Testament does not use the title of “priest” for the leaders of the early church; instead, Jesus is presented as the great High Priest who offered the ultimate sacrifice for sin:

“But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building.” (Hebrews 9:11)

The New Testament describes believers collectively as a priesthood.

“Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood...” (1 Peter 2:5a)

“And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” (Revelation 1:5-6)



Nevertheless, the ordinary titles given to church leaders was that of bishop, elder, pastor, and deacon; priest was not among them.

Marriage among church leaders was accepted in the apostolic church. Paul stated that a bishop was to be “the husband of one wife,” and he gave the same requirement for deacons.

“Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.” (1 Timothy 3:12)

This emphasized marital faithfulness and moral integrity. It should not be understood that Roman men commonly had several legal wives at the same time. Roman law generally recognized monogamous marriage, although adultery, concubinage, divorce, remarriage, and other sexual relationships were widespread throughout Roman society.

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire during the second and third centuries, Christian terminology gradually developed. The Latin word “sacerdos,” which referred to a person who performed religious or sacrificial duties, increasingly appeared in Christian writings. At the same time, the Greek word “presbyteros,” meaning “elder,” and its Latin equivalent “presbyter” continued to be used for church leaders.

By the third century, Christian writers were increasingly applying priestly and sacrificial language to bishops and presbyters, particularly in connection with the Lord’s Supper and the worship of the church. Over time, “presbyter” also developed linguistically into the English word “priest.”

Thus, the terminology of the Roman Catholic offshoot was not identical to that found in the New Testament. The apostolic writings primarily spoke of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, bishops, elders, and deacons, while the specialized use of “priest” for ordained Christian ministers developed more gradually during the centuries that followed under the papacy.

RISE OF CLERICAL CELIBACY

During the first centuries of Christianity, marriage among bishops, elders, and other church leaders was accepted, and married clergy continued to be found throughout the second and third centuries. By the fourth century, however, particularly in the Western church, restrictions began to be imposed upon the marital relations of ordained clergy.

c. 306 - Council of Elvira, Spain: Canon 33 required bishops, presbyters, and deacons to abstain from sexual relations with their wives and from having additional children. Those who refused were to be removed from the clergy.

The Council of Elvira reveals an important stage in the transformation of the early Roman Catholic Church. By the beginning of the fourth century, church councils were increasingly imposing regulations upon the clergy that went beyond the requirements recorded in the New Testament. Among the most significant was Elvira’s requirement that married bishops, presbyters, and deacons abstain from marital relations with their wives. These developments would eventually become part of the clerical system characteristic of the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

325 - Council of Nicaea: The council did not decree that priests were forbidden to marry after ordination. Canon 3 prohibited bishops, priests, deacons, and other clergy from having unrelated women living with them, while permitting close female relatives such as a mother, sister, or aunt. Early accounts also relate that the council declined to impose a universal requirement that married clergy separate from their wives.

c. 360 - Council of Laodicea: Canon 11 prohibited the appointment of women called *presbytides* or “female presidents” in the churches. The precise role of these women is disputed. The canon demonstrates that women held recognized positions within some churches, but it does not conclusively establish that women had previously been ordained to the priesthood.

385 - Pope Siricius: In an official written ruling sent to Bishop Himerius of Tarragona, Siricius required married bishops, priests, and deacons to abstain from sexual relations with their wives after entering the higher orders of the clergy. His decree became an important step in the development of the Roman Catholic discipline of clerical celibacy.

Thus, the fourth century marked an important transition. The issue was initially not simply whether a priest could have a wife, since many priests were already married, but whether an ordained man could continue normal marital relations with her. Over the following centuries, the Western church gradually moved from requiring continence of married clergy toward requiring celibacy itself as the normal condition for entering the priesthood.

CONDEMNATION OF MARRIAGE

The question of whether priests could marry reached a major turning point in AD 1074, when Pope Gregory VII convened a synod during Lent at Rome as part of what became known as the Gregorian Reform. They renewed the Roman Catholic condemnation of buying and selling of church offices and took strong action against clergy who continued to engage in sexual relations with their spouse. Clergymen who refused to abstain were ordered to cease ministry and the congregation was instructed not to attend their services or receive their ministry.

Gregory encountered fierce resistance, especially from married priests in Germany, France, and Italy, many of whom appealed directly to Scripture in defense of their marriages.

Gregory VII did not invent clerical celibacy. Restrictions upon the marriages and sexual relations of clergy had been developing for centuries. What distinguished Gregory was his determination to enforce these restrictions throughout the Roman Catholic world.

The process continued after his death. The First Lateran Council in 1123 prohibited priests, deacons, and subdeacons from marrying, and the Second Lateran Council in 1139 strengthened the prohibition against clerical marriage. By the twelfth century, compulsory celibacy had become firmly established as the official doctrine for priests.

The reform had practical consequences as well as religious ones. A married priest had a wife, children, property interests, and family obligations. His children might expect to inherit property or even succeed him in an ecclesiastical position.

Medieval reformers were attempting to separate church property and offices from hereditary family control and to strengthen the authority of bishops and the papacy over the clergy. Removing clerical family ties therefore helped create a clergy whose property, office, and institutional loyalty were increasingly centered upon Rome and the pope rather than upon a household or hereditary family network.

Monastic life took many different forms. Some religious orders owned substantial tracts of land and operated monasteries, farms, schools, hospitals, and other institutions. Later orders emphasized poverty and depended heavily upon alms, but begging was not characteristic of every monastery or convent.

Compulsory celibacy also went beyond anything required of ministers in the New Testament. The priests of the Old Testament married and raised families. Jesus never commanded the apostles to establish a celibate clergy.

Paul recognized voluntary singleness as a legitimate means of devoting oneself more completely to the service of God, but he did not make it a requirement for Christian leadership. Instead, he described a bishop as “the husband of one wife” and required him to govern his household well:

“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife.” (1 Timothy 3:2)

Paul gave a similar qualification for deacons:

“Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.” (1 Timothy 3:12)

The Roman Catholic Church nevertheless continued to require celibacy of its priests. Over time, serious sexual immorality developed within portions of the clergy and religious orders, including popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, and nuns, exposing a recurring contradiction between Rome’s official doctrine and the conduct of some of its leaders.

Approximately 451 years after Gregory VII’s council, the curse of celibacy would receive one of its most visible challenges from a former monk and priest. On June 13, 1525, Martin Luther married Katharina von Bora, a former Cistercian nun. Their marriage was not the first marriage of a Reformation clergyman, but it became one of the most influential. Their household provided a public demonstration that a minister could preach, teach, serve a congregation, marry, raise children, and maintain a Christian home.

For the Protestant Reformation, the marriage of Luther and Katharina became a powerful rejection of compulsory clerical celibacy and a return to the principle that marriage and Christian ministry were not incompatible. Katharina von Bora therefore became much more than the wife of Martin Luther. Through their marriage and family life, she helped establish the Protestant pastoral household that would become common throughout Lutheran and many other Protestant churches.

After centuries in which the Western priesthood had increasingly been separated from marriage and family life, the home of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora stood as a visible declaration of a different principle:

***A man did not have to surrender marriage in order
to serve God.***

KATHARINA VON BORA

Katharina von Bora was born in 1499 to a minor noble family in Saxony. As a young girl, she was placed in a convent and eventually became a Cistercian nun. After Luther's writings against compulsory monastic vows spread, Katharina and several other nuns became convinced they should leave convent life.

In 1523, Luther helped arrange their escape from the convent at Nimbschen. A merchant named Leonhard Köppe reportedly smuggled Katharina and the other nuns out among empty herring barrels. They were brought to Wittenberg, where Luther and his friends worked to find them husbands, homes, or honorable means of support. That is how Luther came to know Katharina.

Luther had no intention of marrying her. He tried to arrange her marriage with someone else, but Katharina refused and reportedly said she would marry either Luther or Nikolaus von Amsdorf (a friend of Luther), but not the man being proposed to her.

They were married on June 13, 1525. The news of their nuptials was shocking because Luther was a former monk and Katharina was a former nun. Their union became a powerful symbol of the Reformation's rejection of mandatory celibacy and the idea that monastic life was somehow spiritually superior to marriage.

Luther affectionately called her "my lord Katie" because she was strong-willed, capable, and ran the household firmly. He also called her his "rib," echoing Genesis. They had six children together: Hans, Elizabeth, Magdalena, Martin, Paul, and Margarethe.

The Black Cloister in Wittenberg was originally an Augustinian monastery. John the Steadfast, Frederick the Wise's brother and successor as Elector of Saxony, formally gave the Black Cloister to Martin Luther in 1532.

Katharina was not merely Luther's wife as she managed the household with remarkable skill. Their home became a busy center of hospitality, theological conversation, students, guests, children, and reform activity.

Katharina von Bora became Martin Luther's wife, household manager, mother, hostess, and practical partner in the Reformation. Her marriage to Luther helped redefine Protestant views of marriage, family, vocation, and the dignity of ordinary domestic life. Luther may have been the public reformer, but Katharina kept the household functioning.

MARRIAGE IS GIFT FROM GOD

The Bible presents finding a wife as a blessing from God.

"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD."

(Proverbs 18:22)

Luther had spent much of his adult life as a monk under the Roman Catholic system of mandatory clerical celibacy. His marriage to Katharina von Bora represented a complete reversal from that way of life. The former monk now accepted marriage as an honorable institution established by God. From the beginning, Jesus declared that man was not designed to live alone.

“And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

Katharina became exactly that kind of companion to Luther. She managed their household, raised their children, handled financial and practical affairs, cared for guests and students, and provided the stability that allowed Luther to continue his work. A prudent wife is ultimately a gift from God.

“House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the LORD.” (Proverbs 19:14)

Katharina proved herself to be capable, industrious, and dependable. Luther may not originally have intended to marry her, but she became one of the greatest earthly blessings of his later life.

Marriage, however, is not simply about a man receiving a good wife. The Bible places a serious obligation upon the husband concerning how he treats the woman God has given him.

“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” (Ephesians 5:25)

The biblical standard therefore goes beyond finding the right woman. A man must also become the kind of husband who will love, protect, provide for, and faithfully care for his wife.

In Katharina von Bora, Luther found a wife who stood beside him through the remaining years of his life. Whatever failures marked Luther's response to the German Peasants' War, his marriage demonstrated that it was not spiritually inferior to monastic life. It was an institution created by God from the beginning.

“Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.” (Proverbs 18:22)