

Pre-Q&A Session
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By this point you've probably noticed I'm going about things a little backwards. Most folks would start with marriage and parenting, offer lots of things you can do to improve your relationships and shine with God's love.

But, you know what? We are children of God. We are part of an extensive network within the Brotherhood of the Church. We are not all married. We are not all parents.

I hope that going through the topics in this way allows to realize all we have in common with everyone else, even as it applies more specifically to individuals and families, too. A lot of what I have to say you already know. But, God-willing, these sessions help equip for conversations.

I think we can say that our generations have gone through lamenting that common sense is no longer common. We've moved onto basics need to be taught again. And the church—and Christians—can do that.

I hope this structure lets us view some of these things from an encouraging perspective, as the Lord is not only at work in marriage and parenting, but also in all vocations by the power of the Word.

In this session, right before the Q&A session, we'll take a pretty speedy pace through culturally rough terrain. Ready?

STRUGGLING TO LOVE

We were not all raised in a Christian church, let alone a Lutheran one. Some of us continue to struggle, wanting to *love*, but getting a lot of conflicting messages about what love even is.

Unbelieving media is oddly quick to assert when something is Christian or unchristian. Any lack of support is taken as hateful. Isn't it ironic how a person can hardly dare put words into the mouth of a friend these days, yet so many put words into the mouth of God!

The media may not know that God as His own being. He has His own mind. His own ways. His own decisions and judgments. But as Christians we should. It's *written out for us*. Using words. We can read it, download it, listen, sing, study, memorize, and frankly do our best to live it.

During this stage in our cultural de-evolution, there are a few basics it's always good to affirm.

- God knows what is *really* happening.
- God determines right and wrong, good and evil.
- God can't be manipulated.

My cousin is a darling girl. Thoughtful. Sincere. She cares about theology. And she thinks she's a pastor.

She was pretty worried about how I would treat her once she started down that path—She's a Methodist. She started out as a church musician.

On the off chance that this will be helpful to any of you, I'll be specific. I don't "Facebook like" things I disagree with. I don't listen to her sermons. I won't be visiting her church. Though none of that is exclusive to her ordination, right?

I *am* happy to talk with her. Even about theology and church things. I love to see her. Thanks be to God she's been introduced to the liturgy and litanies. We talk about music. Our relatives. Life.

I believe her to be a Christian, and, though a liberal Methodist, she isn't entirely unorthodox. She retains the Gospel. But I won't call her pastor or preacher. I didn't go to her ordination.

She doesn't understand how or why I would be against the ordination of women. I of all people, who have had an intensity for theology my whole life.

But I am. For two very good reasons: First, Scripture teaches against it and God's Word, ahem, speaks for Him. Right? Second, I believe that *God* places us into our vocations.

I don't believe a woman *can* be made a pastor. It's out of our hands.

Likewise, I don't believe a man *can* marry a man or a woman marry a woman.

If God says "don't," we have no standing to presume He'll join what He never promised to, whether that's a same sex couple or a woman seeking the Office of the Ministry.

BOUNDARIES

Vocation recognizes boundaries.

I am not a surgeon. I shouldn't cut people. We take this for granted in most professional areas. Society, however, no longer understands boundaries.

Are boundaries an enslavement or a gift? Are boundaries good or bad? How do we talk about them? And what are areas and topics they affect?

Here are a few positive ways to talk about boundaries: they let me know what I'm supposed to care for and what I'm responsible over. Boundaries help keep us safe. Boundaries clarify things between neighbors. A quick proverb by the American poet Robert Frost: "Good fences make good neighbors."

We can think of boundaries as an expanding set of circles. On a map, you might see your house, your yard, your neighborhood, your town, etc. In your vocations, you have your closest neighbors, like spouse and children. You have some who frequent your "yard," etc. You have a congregational ring, maybe a coworker ring, etc.

When there's a grief or pain that affects the inner circle, so to speak, the outer circles can lend extra support to the inner circle. Right? Just like it's ok for the inner circle to ask for help from those consecutive circles. Congregation friends might make a casserole. A neighbor might move your trash cans, etc.

However, there is a more negative side to that. Support can flow inward, but those in the midst of a trauma are not in the position to give even more outward. Right? Yet people will get angry about that. "I'm grieving, too!" "I'm going through this, too."

I can't say who is inner circle and who is a ring out. Inner circle isn't really defined, after all. Nieces and nephews grieve, as do co-workers, etc. We can aim to have support for everyone while easing things for those most immediately affected. When a grandparent dies, should grandchildren not turn to their parents? This isn't a case where there are always answers.

But Christians do not believe others exist merely to meet our own needs. (This is that negative part that people may not like.) Just because you are grieving, too, doesn't mean you can enter the hospital room. Just because you care, you may not be sitting at the table with the bride and group. Etc.

Offer support *inward*, share burden *outward*. Burdens can be spread out rather than locked in, where resources are already over-extended. But Jesus is absolutely right: seek a lower seat and your host may move you closer to where you ought to be.

Boundaries are not prisons. Rather, they allow levels of intimacy and support. So another way to say it is boundaries help keep our baggage in while helping us to respect our neighbor and his stuff. Boundaries are part of civil stability & clarity of communication.

Another term to consider is, portion. Portion can be used within a household and more broadly. As the psalmist says in Psalm 16:

5 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

Now, these aren't concepts or even words that folks may be learning in public schools: "You hold my lot." But it is among the wealth of revelation we are given to teach.

WANDERERS: THE UNBOUND

So. Living in a time when boundaries are no longer recognized. What do we do? We should expect wanderers and the unbound. Wanderers who simply do not know and the unbound who purposefully try to cross and destroy boundaries.

What do we do? First, we have to emphasize that the Lord is our portion. The boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places for us. We can give thanks for all that the Lord has done and given us.

Second, know that some people don't even see the line markers. They don't know. When folks get belligerent, try to be safe. Protect your women and children.

As for the "offended," that may be better addressed with a pause or a hyphen. The off-ended. We can no longer take stability for granted. Which takes our expectations and drops them down significantly. Instability undermines logic and a great many other things.

However, we're Lutheran. It's not like we believe we can by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him.

There are wanderers trespassing. Who may even want applause for it. But, when we turn our focus to what God does, it again re-frames things. It keeps us stable on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

For example, marriage *is* desirable. It just isn't redefinable. People who pursue homosexual marriage are not actually getting the unity or blessings of marriage. May those men and women be blessed with a marriage between a man and a woman because, here's the scandalous part, it is better to marry than to burn (1 Cor. 7:9).

Historically, whether or not one was attracted to the opposite sex, one married. In order to have help. Children. Your own household & nuclear family.

Some don't apply 1 Cor 7:9 to so-called homosexuals, saying Paul is clearly talking to heterosexuals here, even more specifically, the married and the engaged. I won't fight a pastor about it, but the original statement Paul is responding to is this one: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (7:1). Sure would like to know how that came up!

That some have temptations less common than others . . . doesn't actually say that much about the individuals themselves. There is diversity of sin and diversity of people. Christians ought not define those for whom Christ died by the temptations that may afflict them.

Sexual temptations are in a different category. "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (1 Cor. 6:18).

And who else is your own body? Your spouse. Note that Job's wife did not attack him until after Satan was allowed to go after his very flesh!

A few more Bible verses:

- because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 1 Corinthians 7:2. It's clear. And doesn't say anything about waiting until you've graduated.
- You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. Lev. 18:22
- He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. Prov 6:32

I don't even need to mention Romans 1:24-27, although those verses need to be taught in the congregations.

"Beloved," St. Peter says, "I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). So much pastoral care in Scripture!

SO HOW DO WE LOVE?

So how do we love? Not necessarily as pastors or church workers, but as *family members*. Members of society. By being *humane* but also by upholding that humanity is determined by the God-made-Man, not our impulses to duck away from awkward situations. Express your boundaries. Use your words. Stay grounded where you should be.

The Incarnate Christ defines humanity as it should be. Love your neighbor as your neighbor. Not by however he or she identifies himself. Sometimes re-framing things like this can be surprisingly helpful and liberating.

As Christians, we don't actually believe that any specific sins are enough to identify someone except one: unbeliever. And unbelievers can be approached with love and God's Word.

Unbelievers are still kin and still human. Christ is incarnate into the same flesh that they share. And even those who would divorce or disown any sort of family relationship with us . . . are still neighbors.

You really can't get away from family vocations and its extension throughout humanity.

Is the person bodily ok? Because love protects and nourishes. We can feed anybody (except babies ;))! We are pro-shelter! Is the person mentally ok? Because establishing safety—not only your own but also theirs—is important. Is the person socially connected? Isolated people are at greater risk of abuse, neglect, and suicide. Can they get where they need? Transportation is a **big thing** when you don't have it. Is the person involved in a hobby or topic? Maybe some light conversation can lead to more areas to talk about.

Having said that, sometimes I just hold my tongue. I think that can be a valid option.

Sometimes we are honestly waiting on the Lord. God is the one who provides opportunities. We can *work* toward opportunities, but only God can provide them.

Jonathan Fisk has a new book out, self-published I think, called *Talk Them Into It: The Truth about making Christians*. I was pleasantly surprised and pleased. Because, even though we, as sinners, still fall into needing to *learn* how to love, *learn* how to pray, *learn* how to live, God's gifts are far better than we even give them credit for! Pretty good on how to have civil conversations with not-yet-Christians.

KIDS

So. Awkward situations! How do we explain this stuff to kids? Who suddenly read a book from the library or catch a gay-friendly episode on Netflix? I get a lot of questions for this. And, by the way, *Family Vocation* does *not* address gay marriage at all—because it's not a vocation from God.

But we can tell kids things like “It's good to want to get married. But God says marriage is between a man and a woman.” Or “I'm sure she is doing her best for that church. But God promises to provide men for the ministry.”

Or without bringing up sinful scenarios whatsoever, we can say things like, “I'm really thankful God places us into family. I'm glad we get to be children of God together. I hope you grow up and find a faithful husband/wife. And, if God gives you children, I know that God will give you all that you need to raise them well in the faith.” And “We can use our brains and our skills in all sorts of ways. I know God will work through you in lots of ways to love others.”

The church does not need to rely on negative statements: don't's and nos. The church has *positive teachings*. It is the *Lord* who emphasizes the existence and roles of blessings in this world. It is the *LORD* who consistently refers to Himself as the source of *all good*. And not only has the Lord shown us His favor, but creation itself favors our explanations and teachings of it. Teach brotherhood. *Caregiving*. Sacrifice.

I think there are also things we are still learning about. For example, do we really mean to teach our kids to hug and kiss people they don't want to? Affection as obedience? Physicality as a right outside of marriage? Or has culture changed enough that our practices should change?

Boundaries are excellent teaching tools. They help us to teach safety. Respect. Privacy. Order. *Distinctions*. And, though kids aren't particularly respected, they won't *learn* respect either if they aren't taught that boundaries work both ways.

SINNERS ARE ALSO SINNED AGAINST.

Sinners are also sinned against. For example, we're talking about vocation. Let's honor honest work. Brains and brawns and courage are great in *all the vocations. All the jobs! All the services.*

Raise your hand if you saw that first episode of BBQ Pitmasters on Amazon Prime. A ton of Lutherans watched it because the bbqer is a Lutheran! There's even a clip of a divine setting as part of the episode that lit my Facebook page on fire!

But you know what? The greatest bbqer in Texas is also a school janitor. And good for her!

Who came up with the thought that jobs define us in negative ways? The devil? Honest work is honest work. That people can use jobs as an excuse to look down on people is just a sign that they . . . look down on people and if they lose what they have they will look down on themselves, their loved ones, or anyone else. *That* is a position of instability and uncertainty. Whereas honest labor is a service to others and a discipline to self.

I got my master's. And had a baby. I was at a height in my career. Then I was home without any grownups to talk with. No theological libraries around! But my dad said something oddly encouraging. My dad said sometimes God works through paradoxes. How could all of my education serve my little babbling baby? God knows. God knows!

It is not a sin against us that we have been placed into vocations. It is not a sin against us that things can change, plans shatter, etc. God doesn't work in our narrow, expected ways. And that's good news!

We have to be careful. Even education and a respected career can be idolized. So let's not do that. And let's not unintentionally teach our children that. Marriage and parenthood can be idolized, too. Let's not do that. Or tempt others to do so either. Not everyone will get a high paid job. Am I preaching to the choir here? And it's ok. We need daily bread, not daily lobster.

It is also necessary to remember that it is very, very possible for Christians to sin against sinners, including homosexuals, so called women preachers, political opponents, etc. And that happens when we trespass a boundary.

SINGLE

Not everyone will marry. Not everyone will have children. And no child owes their parents a marriage and grandchildren. Can you imagine anyone thinking that? But people talk that way.

It's hard to meet people. Let alone connect well. A *lot* of people, recognizing that there just aren't single Lutherans around them, turn to the Internet. Frankly, it's helped a lot of people. God-willing we can cultivate communities among the Lutherans in our own areas, too. It isn't either/or but both/and. How will God provide? <Shrug> But He does!

Generally, Luther understood that most people have urges that are best suited for marriage. It's a fair point that lines up with Scripture. I'll quote St. Paul: "It is good to remain single, but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 20:8-9).

Marriage can be idolized. Marriage will *not* solve all problems of immaturity and instability, and marriage is *not* a threshold into adulthood. Marriage is *not* a way to get ahead in this world, nor does it promise self-fulfillment *anywhere*.

Marriage *is* great. It *is* a revelation about Christ and the Church! It *is* where babies should come from! And sex is pretty awesome! But there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:12). So says Christ in Matthew 19:12.

The sexual relationship of marriage is not for everyone.

SEX

Sex is a definite perk of marriage. In fact, we can go so far as to say sex is a *proper work* in marriage. It’s especially designed for marriage and the uniting of flesh. It’s companionable, pleasurable, and . . . productive.

Sex is *good* within marriage. Sex is a *remedy* for temptation. An aid to self-control. And unifying.

God *blesses* sex. In fact, it was historically believed that the term blessing was inherently related to fertility. You could read more about that in my book, *Blessed: God’s Gift of Love*.

1 Corinthians establishes sex as a marital *right*, going so far as to say that a “husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does” (1 Cor. 7:4). Paul as anti-woman? I think not. Again, the wife has authority over her husband’s body, particularly in a sexual way! On the other hand, 1 Cor. 7 is very much against using sex as a weapon or tool of manipulation. “Do not deprive one another, except *perhaps* by agreement for a limited time” (7:5).

Maybe my premarriage counseling was odd, but the pastor explicitly said the more sex the better because you never know what temptations the other person is facing.

In First Corinthians 6:16, although sex should be reserved for marriage, joining bodies through sex does unity a man and woman into one flesh: “Do you not know that He who is joined to a prostitute becomes One body with her? For, as it is written, ‘The two will become one flesh.’” So having sex should never be done lightly, both in regard to the other person—who you may rend, even as you desensitize and impact yourself—or to God, who cannot fail to notice both the act and the impact.

However, in other places, one flesh union is about more than sex. “Husbands should love their 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 (Eph 5:28-29).

I know. It’s hard to believe that “no one ever hated his own flesh.” Then what is it we feel? Here are a few words that may prove helpful: disconnected, insecure, afraid, broken, ashamed. Sometimes moving past the word hate is a step in a more precise direction.

But, ideally, here is the marital scene: we *do* nourish and cherish ourselves. Selflessly loving our spouse actually turns into an *indirect self-care*! Because spouses are not property! Our Lord makes perfectly clear: The husband is the wife’s body just as much as the wife is the husband’s.

Scripturally, a one-flesh union constitutes a real condition before God. That is, it affects how God sees you!

Self-care? Honestly? Sometimes it isn't the actual rest and reset it should be. But love of neighbor, particularly love of spouse, is a fleshly investment with very little to compare it to other than Christ and the Church! *Indirect self-care* has, as far as I can tell, zero downsides.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

“What God has joined together, let not man separate.” *Has joined*. Past perfect tense. God joined once in such a way that it *continues*. By the act of God. And this is neither spiritual nor abstract. Two actual bodies are involved. With signs, privileges, and responsibilities.

You know how Jacob married Leah by mistake? Genesis 29. Well, God worked through that marriage, sending Jesus through her bloodline as a direct descendant. *God* joined them together. Even though Jacob failed to know what he was doing. Jacob didn't even consent by our standards.

Neither individual ceased to exist, but they were joined into a new creation.

To say that marriage is a vocation means that God calls two people together to be a new family. And further, that God works in and through this couple to accomplish his purposes, both in their lives and in the lives of others.

ROMANCE

The Middle Ages brought further complications to marriage. (Aha! It was NOT just the sixties!) Yes, even before that time, marriage could be used to advance social connections and expand property holdings. You likely know that Roman Catholicism did its best to regulate marriage with various canon laws and granting it sacrament status because marriage as an institute was so abused. But the Middle Ages mark the rise of the cult of romantic love. (Romance used to refer to Rome. Romantic languages? ROMAN languages.)

Before the romantic age, married life was considered a lesser spiritual state than that of clergy and lay-monastics. It was handled at times as a business venture or alliance. Often higher-class couples met at their wedding. Still, I'm happy to report, church canon law required both parties to consent—not just the parents, not just the groom, but everyone.

The concept of love was as a fruit: first a seed, often planted just after marriage, and eventually it bears fruit, often around children or a long life together. But somehow, and no one is quite sure how, a new genre of literature started. In which knights loved fair ladies. Sometimes from afar. Sometimes unlawfully. But this “courtly love” was full of intoxication. And passion.

Now, I love my husband. He is quite dreamy. I am not against feelings of love. There is romance in our relationship. But the new interpretation of love during the Middle Ages introduced entirely new themes: unrequited love, slavish dedication to another's happiness and whims.

This is when it became desirable to be in love whether or not that neighbor is actually in your life. This is an explicitly *disconnected* love, residing in one person without any necessary connection with the other.

Frankly, it sounds idolatrous, and it was, again explicitly, a love outside of the vocations we've talked about.

Goals became to “win” people. Are family vocations about merit and contests? Escape from one’s real life and responsibilities for a chance to be away, secluded, *drowning in another*.

Such literary themes have remained with us. Even terms like “courting” reflect the odd relationship between the present and the past. Courting comes from cohort but also has nuances of romance.

It was not an entirely new line of thinking, of course. It’s been said that *eros* is actually a type of madness, for *eros* is why the Greeks had to fight the Trojan War, Helen attacked by *eros*’s arrow, thereby leaving her husband and children, whom, eventually, she goes back to!

But romance was consistently a love *outside* marriage. It challenged marriages. It broke families apart.

Ironically, according to its proponents, romantic love was seen as more pure than the sexual love one had with a spouse. It was platonic. Ideal. Above mere physical planes. CS Lewis writes extensively on it in his first book, *The Allegory of Love*.

This holds true regarding homosexual attraction. People say it isn’t about sex—and it likely isn’t only about sex. It’s also people stumbling around the messages society is teaching about love. Homosexual couples can have elements of non-sexual love in addition to sexual love. They certainly fall into the category of romance, although it wasn’t culturally acceptable during the middle ages.

Now, it didn’t help that sex was philosophically scorned in marriage. That is, one could be “celibate,” visit houses of ill-repute, and still not get in trouble with your diocese or monastery because you remained unmarried. But passion within marriage, from celibate lips, was described itself as inherently adulterous.

(As an aside, such *legally* celibate clergy ensured church property wouldn’t be eligible to be given away as an inheritance.)

Logically, if sex with your spouse is adulterous, how much worse is sex with your beloved? Adultery gained higher esteem than the vocations of spouse.

Countless tragedies later, Chaucer tries to level things out. In a *Canterbury Tale*, a couple fall in love. As it is romantic, the man swears to be the woman’s “servant in love, and lord in marriage.” As though those are typically mutually exclusive!

REFORMATION SHIFT

Romantic themes remain all around us, but the Reformation countered the social trajectory with the argument that marriage is actually the highest form of love between a man and a woman. Luther became known for “Advocating marital love and making it the norm for entering into marriage and thriving within marriage.” (For more, you can read on that in the essay, “Martin Luther’s Reform of Marriage” in Crossway’s book, *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, 2005.)

I found that a little shocking.

Here’s a Luther quote for you: “It is the highest grace of God, when love continues to flourish in married life. The first love is ardent, is an intoxication love, so that we are blinded and are drawn to marriage. After we have slept off our intoxication, sincere love remains in the married life of the godly; but the ungodly are sorry they ever married.” (Both quotes from Taylor’s essay above)

Gaining a better understanding and way to talk about things—then Protestant poet Sir Edmund Spenser made a bit of a switch. His sonnet sequence *Amoretti* actually addresses an actual woman, rather than an ideal. The poem *Epithalamion* is about their wedding day and actually includes a Christian meditation on their wedding, saying, in “the safety of our joy,” the newlyweds enjoy “the sweet pleasures of their love’s delight: in the hopes of engendering new immortal souls for Heaven, begetting children who will grow up to be “bless’d saints.”

Thank you, Lord, for re-framing love back toward marriage! Folks, it can be done!

When we talk with others now, including unbelievers, folks will slip up into disconnected love. It’s an entirely different concept than what we typically assume. For us, love is relationship, connective, *living*, serving. For others, it really can be disembodied, amorphous—even for people attracted to their same sex! But even as they try to describe it as platonic or among the highest levels of love . . . it just isn’t the family vocations God has given us.

Love isn’t what makes a marriage. *Happiness* isn’t what makes a marriage. Self-fulfillment? As far as I can tell, no one *ever* actually believed that prior to Hollywood. Bonhoeffer wrote a wedding sermon from prison, saying, “It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on the marriage that sustains your love.”

BIRTH CONTROL

What follows romance? Birth control.

Who can tell me what contraceptive means? Against reception & conception.

Contraception is specific to trying to prevent pregnancy. Birth control is a broad category that includes *any methods to prevent either pregnancy or birth*. So. Scary stuff. Control is very much the emphasis.

Speaking of words, just so you know, intercourse wasn’t a sexual term at all until almost the 19th century. Even the expression “making love” just meant to woo or pay amorous attention to until the early 20th century. The Scriptural term in Genesis is *to know*. Talk about a pregnant term!

Well, birth control is an attempt to control what God rightly controls. And who is trying to control conceptions? *Parents* are a primary force toward pill and condom use. *Doctors and medical clinics* are big into pushing contraceptives. Even OBGYNs, even when you’re already pregnant, are quick to talk about contraceptive choices.

Contraception isn’t about teenagers. Or just sex outside of marriage. I am a woman with six kids. It seems like practically everyone has an opinion on whether we should stop or have more, even though we’re all doing just fine.

God help us. There are loud voices teaching about contraception but the church is rarely amongst them.

Now, we can talk about types of contraceptives. We could get into some of the ethical concerns. But *I’m* here to talk about family vocations. My concern isn’t exactly how or when folks teach the next generation about the birds and the bees. My concern is *not* what you are, or are not, doing, but let’s raise some vocational concerns.

- Are couples equipped to talk about sex and procreation, with one another or with children?
- Have husbands thought about how to care for their wives during and following pregnancy?

- How can we help when Christians are fearful of sex? Pregnancy? Child-rearing?
- Are financial concerns real or imagined? How can the church help, either way?

It may seem counter-intuitive, but it can be helpful to ask, “Are there blessings we choose not to pursue?” What is a Christian understanding of distinctions between pursuit and limiting opportunities?

Every generation passes on teachings about sex and procreation, and even the one or two people we teach will likely make a generational difference. But what are we teaching about sex, pregnancy, and the fact that ultimately only God is in control?

Sex will not always cause children. Children do not validate or invalidate either sex or marriage. But historically Christians *wanted* babies as families and the church actively taught that babies are blessings. Which they are.

I am *not* going to give you law about what to do with your own body and within your own marriage. I don’t need to. The thing is, the *culture* is giving the family law about all sorts of things, like when it’s ok to start a family, when it’s ok to have a second child, when it’s ok to do this that or the other.

Other people, largely outside the church but also some inside, blame women for having babies. “How can you do it, have a large family?” Um. But not stopping entirely natural processes? By the weaving of the Lord & acting married? By living one day at a time? By not expecting things to be easy?

Family comes from fertility. But family is no longer pro-fertility. What is our reasoning?

Now, I am not anti-culture. Culture can include all sorts of good things, including expressions of love. Taking out the trash is a great way for someone to say “You’re worth getting my hands dirty!” That’s a cultural association. But what do we think culture is if it is given the right to join a husband and wife in matters of their marriage bed and a woman’s *womb*?

Contraceptives are the assumption now. But Scripture is certainly not what’s supported that change. Ninety years ago, every Christian church body was still against all forms of contraception, including natural family planning.

Now. Personally, I don’t really think that’s possible. Women experience their cycles. Fertile times often follow regular patterns. I’m not sure how one could *avoid* some degree of family planning apart from absolute abstinence which isn’t an option for Christians due to 1 Cor. 7.

Although Christians do not tend to think of fertility as a medical problem, there can be medical concerns. The pill, as it is known, is a medicine. Medicine is a tool. Medicines can be given for primary purposes and secondary purposes, sometimes called side-effects. Who determines a primary purpose over a secondary one? Marketers. Sometimes initial studies hoping for particular results. There are many women who are on the pill for a reason *other* than contraception. So there is that. On the other hand, the church does not particularly aim for exceptions that prove the rule.

Chemicals can be helpful. We can pray to God that chemicals are used well rather than abused. We can also, as Christians, think deeply about what we are doing and whether that is the best course of action, either temporarily or permanently.

A pastoral concern includes this: how can a pastor help a couple who may very well have opposing beliefs about fertility? Frankly, conversations about contraception can quickly become fraught with complicating factors.

When my parents were first being catechized into a Lutheran church, they were a young married couple, still having children. Their pastor approached it in this simple way: we should not kill but there is a difference between killing and not conceiving.

My parents had three children. Felt content and were done. But that teaching, which is really quite clear, did not result in having only one or two grandchildren. My sister and I both have six children each.

Although I think that pastor, whom I still love and respect, could have elaborated more on children as blessings—although perhaps he did. I was in the womb at the time so I can't recall—but one can be pro-large family, or pro-whatever-size-family-God-gives-you, without being against all forms of contraception.

Now, the media narrative is that chauvinistic Christians want to burden women and enslave them to childbearing. Really, it seems to me that the media narrative is enslaving women, making them fear and blame babies, and then doubling down with crazy assumptions about what sex and parenting are supposed to be like.

Therefore, how can we, who are generally modest, generally avoiding topics like sex and birth control, liberate women? The place to start is to let them be women. Let them be honored vessels, vessels for honorable use, as said in 2 Timothy 2:21. Let them relax a little as heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7). Don't set up their fertility as the end of the world or an ongoing punisher (with either children or infertility!)

Encourage children if they may be a possibility, but fertility is not a matter of salvation. (We'll get to more on the vocation of mother later.)

For more information on contraceptives from a Lutheran point of view, you can visit [lcms.org/life-ministry/library/procreation](https://www.lcms.org/life-ministry/library/procreation) for articles and resolutions.

EXPECTATIONS

Expectations? can be brutal. There are wonderful, God-fearing, women who dreamed of having big Lutheran families only to face infertility instead. And men who dreamed of being faithful husbands and fathers who have just never had the chance.

Belittling fertility also belittles infertility and the griefs involved in it.

Infertility is not something we always talk about. I think things are getting better in that regard. Likewise, most people 50 years ago were quiet not only about miscarriage but also *cancer* and other devastation.

Christians should be encouraged to *want to love*. It's a good thing to want to be a parent.

But God has plans for the barren also, plans for their good. There are 21 references to being barren in the ESV translation. Every matriarch (Sarai, Rebekah, until Leah, who was became discontent with her fertility), David's first wife, Hannah (Samuel's mother), and Elizabeth (John's mother) were barren. Samson's mother!

I know that doesn't necessarily help because most of those were eventually given a child. Katie Schuermann has written a book on the topic: *He Remembers the Barren*. I've also heard great things about her book, *He Restores My Soul: Writings on Cross and Comfort*.

Maybe that can help us digest some of the realities of the world we live in. There are days when people say, "Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed! . . . For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:29, 31).

MORE CONTROVERSIAL MATERIAL: ABUSE

More controversial material before the Q&A!

Do you know that, as of last September, 1 out of 16 US women report that their first sexual encounter was forced? On average at age 15.¹ Well, isn't that brutal. Sex is *not* always a choice.

Sexual abuse is wildly out of control. In part because of all the people who say, "Sex doesn't hurt anybody." I've been blessed with a relatively safe life. But my friends haven't. Their stories aren't mind to share, but, wow, incest still happens. Abuse is *everywhere*. In more theological terms, Cain *really did* murder his brother. And, as much as we may want to be dismissive of MeToo movements? Are we really that optimistic about original sin and sinful manifestations during these dark days?

We are *not* living in an enlightened time. People are *not* inherently good. And blurring family vocations for the sake of pleasure—or neglect—is a matter of life and death, heaven and hell for people.

One of the best talks I ever heard Dr. Bev Yahnke give was on caring for sinned against sinners. You can google "Sinner and the Sinned Against" and Doxology to find two papers: One is "When God's Gifts are Defiled: Pastoral Care for the Sinner and the Sinned Against." The other is just "When God's Good Gifts are Defiled: The Sinner and the Sinned Against."

We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us." But sometimes we're so focused on *guilt* that we exclude conversations about the repercussions of the *wounds* of being sinned against.

Neighbors should bind up wounds when they can. We know this. The Good Samaritan did it. But *children*, brothers and sisters, and even the elderly are being ignored in cases of outright abuse. Because we want to live by sight. Rather than ear.

Does that mean people won't lie? No. But we can, at minimum, do our best for those we can. THAT is what we're called to do.

FIRST AID

What can we learn and teach within our families and our congregations to give First Aid to the broken world of right now? Step one: reinforce non-sexual relationships. Inter-generational groups are *great*! Step two: reconsider what constitutes safety. Step three: consider both guilt *and* shame. And, while we're at it, cleansing because thousands, if not millions, of women and men and boys and girls right now consider themselves as *dirty*. Without any further explanation or understanding of what that biblical imagery even means!

¹ <https://khn.org/morning-breakout/1-in-16-u-s-women-report-that-first-sexual-encounter-was-forced-experts-say-thats-just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg/>

Children. Our brothers and sisters. Parents. Grandparents. Anyone can be abused. For all sorts of crazy reasons! And this world is rife with lies about it. It's all very complex, but what cuts through that is a simple task: love your neighbor. Investigate safety as necessary!

A few weeks ago I had a 13 year old girl explain to me that when she's 18 she needs to move out of her dad's and move into either a boyfriend or a girlfriend's house. People, right now, are being taught to have sex with people in order to keep a roof over their head. And we wonder why so many people are too ashamed to come back to church? Sex has become livelihood.

Perpetuating cycles of sin is the unbelievers' counterpart to the Christian cycle of repentance and forgiveness. But the Church has received her voice from her Lord!

What the world considers liberating, we see as enslaving. What the world considers enslaving, we consider liberating!

SUBMISSION

Which brings us to submission.

Submission is far more amazing than most people think. Once again, I find it helpful to think back to perfect submission rather than fallen submission. Christ, who God knew would be slain from before the foundation of the earth, submits to His Father.

He's no less God for it. And that He submitted even to His earthly parents? That's amazing! He could do so because God would provide. It was an act of faith.

Jesus is no less God. No less all-knowing, all-powerful, omnipresent, etc. But in His relationship to His Father, the Son of God submits.

Again, He even submitted to His earthly parents, who knew *far less than He did!* Because God provides! It pleases God that Mary and Joseph could serve their God through *parenting* Jesus.

Our Lord calls the Church to submit to His Word, receive His gifts, and live the life *He* has prepared for her. In the place *He* picked out. While *He* does the heavy lifting. It's pretty great! Liberating, rather than imprisoning. Encouraging rather than taxing.

It doesn't mean everything is easy. Especially since distrust, rebellion, and flat out rejection affects us mentally, spiritually, emotionally. And that's in addition to areas of ignorance, miscommunication, and our personal pendulums of discernment & understanding.

The principle of denying one's self for others—specifically sacrificing one's own desire for the desires of others—runs throughout the New Testament: "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (1 Cor. 10:24). "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

Submission is Christological. And, in its various guises, it is an intrinsic part of every vocation—the Word speaks. We are to submit to it! One cannot love and serve one's neighbor without some kind of submission to them. The employee may not "want" to go to work, but he does. The driver may not "want" to stop at the red light, but he does.

Submission allows a particular form of transmission.

Submission is a broad sort of category. Not only are there levels of internal and external submission, but there are different types. A wife's submission is *not* a child's submission.

God calls children to submit to their parents. More specifically, God calls children to obey. Obedience is a subset within submission with simpler and more external connotations. Obedience follows directions and fulfills commands. Disobedience is discouraged, often to the point of punishment. No completed homework? No dessert.

But while obedience does not guarantee agreement or understanding, submission yields. Ideally with respect and love for whoever is in authority.

Obedience *does not require explanation or discussion*. Obedience asks for trust. Submission? More easily follows discussion, brainstorming, and planning. *Together*. And ideally with some amount of agreement about purpose and plan. Such as respect! Submission asks for trust, support, and often *cooperation*.

Obedience can be external rather than internal. Submission within marriage should be both internal and external.

Does Jesus obey His Father? Yes. Does Jesus submit to His Father? Yes. Does Jesus share His perspective with the Father and the Spirit? Yes. As Christians, we believe the Word of God when it says God speaks, within Himself, "Let us . . ."

All human beings are in some sort of submissive role at some point in their life—and forever as they are all under the law and God. *At the same time*, all have also been given dominion over earth. These statements don't conflict, but elaborate on how God has ordered things.

HEADSHIP

Husbands are called to be the head. Wives are called to be the body. That does not mean that husbands cut themselves off from the body. Decapitation doesn't work well for any body part. Separation? Leads to death.

Society is so abstract these days! People think about the heads of corporations, as though it is a matter of organization and not also of *life*. Heads which belittle their bodies find trouble. Heads which torment their bodies . . . whether done with misguided religious reasoning or not . . . find trouble.

But the problem isn't with there being a head. Heads are great! Jesus is our head! Praise the Lord! The problem lies with rivalry rather than working together.

There are so many ways for a body to neglect the head, whether you're talking about one's intellect, one's decision-making, or one's husband. There are so many ways to neglect the body! There are a lot of ways to go wrong, yet . . . what keeps them together? Not separating them! Tending to both. Sometimes taking turns. Watching for dangers. Noticing signs of need or desire.

Husbands have a head, too. All of us have a head in Christ. The Triune God says in His Word, "I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3.)