

**Revelation 16: 4; “Martin Luther and Katherine”, Sermon # 123 in the series –  
“The Faithful and True Witness”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall  
on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in the Morning Worship Service.**

One of the most significant developments which came out of the Reformation in the 1520s was the approval and re-affirmation of marriage; that it was, and it is, a good thing, for all men unless they have the gift of celibacy, the gift of remaining single. You will recall that monasticism was a tremendous movement which had begun a thousand years before, and was still strong in the days of Luther. It was as a monk, in the convent at Erfurth, that Luther had found the Bible, and in finding the Christ of the Bible, after long asceticism, a long course of being monkish, that he finally in 1525 came to better views of marriage. I believe that this was an integral part of his helping to pour out God’s wrath on the system of Roman Catholicism. It had been the teaching of Rome that priests and nuns should not marry. In this, is found the fulfillment of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4: 1-3 – “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry....”

At this hour, I want to show you the beauty of Luther’s thought on marriage, home, and family. He set a very good example for so many in that day, and he made it apparent to all, what a help marriage is to the establishment of God’s good will in our sanctification; that each person ought to know how to possess his own vessel, his own body and have his own wife, as it says in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4: 3 – “For this is the will of God, your sanctification that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.” “For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.” I want to read to you the good story of Martin Luther’s marriage to Katherine Von Bora, which took place in 1525. I am going to be using Philip Schaff’s History of the Reformation, to do so. We will look at his views on marriage first, and then his home life second. And then I will give you some concluding remarks on the life of Katherine Von Bora.

**1<sup>st</sup> of all – Luther’s views on Marriage.**

“Amidst the disturbances and terrors of the Peasants’ War, in full view of his personal danger, and in expectation of the approaching end of the world, Luther surprised his friends and encouraged his foes by his sudden marriage with a poor fugitive nun. He wrote to his friend Link: “Suddenly, and while I was occupied with far other thoughts, the Lord has, plunged me into marriage.” The manner was highly characteristic, neither saint-like nor sinner-like, but eminently Luther-like. By taking to himself a wife, he wished to please his father, to tease the Pope, and to vex the Devil. Beneath was a deeper and nobler motive, to rescue the oldest ordinance of God on earth from the tyranny of Rome, and to vindicate by his own example the right of ministers to the benefit of this ordinance. Under this view, his marriage is a public event of far-reaching consequence. It created the home life of the evangelical clergy.”

“He had long before been convinced that vows of perpetual celibacy are unscriptural and unnatural. He held that God has created man for marriage, and that those who oppose it must either be ashamed of their manhood, or pretend to be wiser than God. He did not object to the marriage of Carlstadt, Jonas, Bugenhagen, and other priests and monks. But he himself seemed resolved to remain single, and continued to live in the convent. He was now over forty years of age; eight years had elapsed since he opened the controversy with Rome in the Ninety-Five Theses; and, although a man of powerful passions, he had strictly kept his monastic and clerical vow. His enemies charged him with drinking beer, playing the lute, leading a worldly life, but never dared to

dispute his chastity till after his marriage. As late as November 30, 1524, he wrote to Spalatin: "I shall never take a wife, as I feel at present. Not that I am insensible to my flesh or sex (for I am neither wood nor stone); but my mind is averse to wedlock, because I daily expect the death of a heretic." But on April 10, 1525, he wrote to the same friend: "Why do you not get married? I find so many reasons for urging others to marry, that I shall soon be brought to it myself, notwithstanding that enemies never cease to condemn the married state, and our little wiseacres (sapientuli) ridicule it every day."

"He got tired of his monastic seclusion; the convent was nearly emptied, and its resources cut off; his bed, as Melanchthon tells us, was not properly made for months, and was mildewed with perspiration; he lived on the plainest food; he worked himself nearly to death; he felt the need of a helpmate. In April, 1523, nine nuns escaped from the convent of Nimptsch near Grimma, fled to Wittenberg, and appealed to Luther for protection and aid. Among them was Catharina von Bora, (there are different spellings of her name) a virgin of noble birth, but poor, fifteen years younger than Luther, not remarkable for beauty or culture, but healthy, strong, frank, intelligent, and high-minded. In looking at the portraits of Dr. and Mrs. Luther in their honeymoon, we must remember that they were painted by Cranach, and not by Raphael or Titian. Catharina had been attached and almost engaged to a former student of Wittenberg from Nürnberg; but he changed his mind, to her great grief, and married a rich wife (1523)."

"After this Luther arranged a match between her and Dr. Glatz of Orlamünde (who was afterwards deposed); but she refused him, and intimated to Amsdorf, that she would not object to marry him or the Reformer. Amsdorf remained single. Luther at first was afraid of her pride, but changed his mind. On May 4, 1525, he wrote to Dr. Rühel (councilor of Count Albrecht of Mansfeld, and of Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz), that he would, "take his Katie to wife before he died, in spite of the Devil." He left his friends ignorant of the secret, deeming it unwise to talk much about such delicate matters. "A man," he said, "must ask God for counsel, and pray, and then act accordingly." On the evening of June 13, on Tuesday after Trinity Sunday, he invited Bugenhagen, Jonas, Lucas Cranach and wife, and a professor of jurisprudence, Apel (an ex-Dean of the Cathedral of Bamberg, who had himself married a nun), to his house, and in their presence was joined in matrimony to Catharina von Bora in the name of the Holy Trinity."

"Bugenhagen performed the ceremony in the customary manner. On the following morning he entertained his friends at breakfast. Justus Jonas reported the marriage to Spalatin through a special messenger. He was affected by it to tears, and saw in it the wonderful hand of God. On June 27 Luther celebrated his wedding in a more public, yet modest style, by a nuptial feast, and invited his father and mother and his distant friends to "seal and ratify" the union, and to "pronounce the benediction." He mentioned with special satisfaction that he had now fulfilled an old duty to his father, who wished him to marry. The University presented him with a rich silver goblet (now in possession of the University of Greifswald), bearing the inscription: "The honorable University of the electoral town of Wittenberg presents this wedding gift to Doctor Martin Luther and his wife Kethe von Bora."

"Luther was forty-two years of age, and Catherine twenty-seven. He did not even ask the consent of the Elector; but, he sent him an humble request for some game to supply his wedding dinner-table. Before the wedding, Luther offered the following prayer: "Heavenly Father, inasmuch as thou hast honored me with the office of the ministry, and wilt also that I should be honored as a husband and the head of a family, grant me grace to govern my household in a godly and Christian manner. Grant me wisdom and strength to direct and train all the members of my family in the right way. Give them willing hearts and pious dispositions to be obedient, and to follow in all things the instructions of thy word. Amen."

They lived together in the old Augustinian convent, which was now empty. He was not much interrupted in his studies, and at the end of the same year he published his violent book against

Erasmus, who wondered that marriage had not softened his temper. The event was a rich theme for slander and gossip. His enemies circulated a slander about a previous breach of the vow of chastity, and predicted that, according to a popular tradition, the ex-monk and ex-nun would give birth to Antichrist. Erasmus contradicts the slander, and remarked that if that tradition was true, there must have been many thousands of antichrists before this. Melanchthon (who had been invited to the feast of the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, but not to the ceremony of the 13<sup>th</sup>), in a Greek letter to his friend Camerarius (June 16), expressed the fear that Luther, though he might be ultimately benefited by his marriage, had committed a lamentable act of levity and weakness, and injured his influence at a time when Germany most needed it.”

John G. Morris in his book *Catherine Von Bora, Social and Domestic Scenes in the home of Luther*, says this: “Still, he highly honored the married relation as an institution of God. Long after this he wrote thus to his friend Stiefel: " I did not marry as though I expected to live long, but to establish my doctrine by my example, and to leave behind me a consolation for weak consciences." "I married also for the purpose of opposing the doctrine of Satan, and putting to shame the scandalous immorality practiced in the papacy, and if I had no wife I would now marry even in my old age, just to honor the divine institution and to pour contempt on the ungodly lives of so many popish priests."

“Luther himself felt at first strange and restless in his new relation, but soon recovered. He wrote to Spalatin, June 16, “I have made myself so vile and contemptible forsooth that all the angels, I hope, will laugh, and all the devils weep.” A year after he wrote to Stiefel (Aug. 11, 1526): “Catharina, my dear rib, salutes you, and thanks you for your letter. She is, thanks to God, gentle, obedient, compliant in all things, beyond my hopes. I would not exchange my poverty for the wealth of Croesus.” He often preached on the trials and duties of married life truthfully and effectively, from practical experience, and with pious gratitude for that holy state which God ordained in paradise, and which Christ honored by his first miracle. He calls matrimony a gift of God, wedlock the sweetest, chastest life, above all celibacy, or else a veritable hell.”

### **2<sup>nd</sup> – Luther’s Home Life.**

“Luther and Katie were well suited to each other. They lived happily together for twenty-one years, and shared the usual burdens and joys. Their domestic life was very characteristic, full of good nature, innocent humor, cordial affection, rugged simplicity, and thoroughly German. It falls below the refinement of a modern Christian home, and some of his utterances on the relation between the two sexes are coarse; but we must remember the rudeness of the age, and his peasant origin. No stain rests upon his home life, in which he was as gentle as a lamb and as a child among children. “Next to God’s Word,” he said from his personal experience, “there is no more precious treasure than holy matrimony. God’s highest gift on earth is a pious, cheerful, God-fearing, home-keeping wife, with whom you may live peacefully, to whom you may entrust your goods and body and life.” He loved his wife dearly, and playfully called her in his letters “my heartily beloved, gracious housewife, bound hand and foot in loving service, Catharine, Lady Luther, Lady Doctor, Lady of Zulsdorf. Lady of the Pigmarket, and whatever else she may be.”

“She was a good German Hausfrau, caring for the wants of her husband and children; she contributed to his personal comfort in sickness and health, and enabled him to exercise his hospitality. She had a strong will, and knew how to take her own part. He sometimes speaks of her as his “Lord Katie,” and of himself as her “willing servant.” “Katie,” he said to her, “you have a pious husband who loves you; you are an empress.” Once in 1535 he promised her fifty guilders if she would read the Bible through; whereupon, as he told a friend, it became a very serious matter with her.” She could not understand why God commanded Abraham to do such a cruel thing as to kill his own child; but Luther pointed her to God’s sacrifice of his only Son, and to the resurrection from the dead. To Katie and to Melanchthon he wrote his last letters (five to her, three to Melanchthon) from Eisleben shortly before his death, informing her of his journey, his diet and

condition, complaining of fifty Jews under the protection of the widowed Countess of Mansfeld, sending greetings to Master Philip (Melanchthon), and quieting her apprehensions about his health.”

“Pray read, dear Katie, the Gospel of John and the little Catechism ... You worry yourself about your God, just as if He were not Almighty, and able to create ten Doctor Martin Luthers for the old one drowned perhaps in the Saale, or fallen dead by the fireplace, or on Wolf’s fowling floor. Leave me in peace with your cares; I have a better protector than you and all the angels. He — my Protector — lies in the manger and hangs upon a Virgin’s breast, but He sits also at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. Rest, therefore, in peace. Amen.” In his will (1542), seventeen years after his marriage, he calls her a “pious, faithful, and devoted wife, full of loving, tender care towards him.” At times, however, he felt oppressed by domestic troubles, and said once he would not marry again, not even a queen. Those were passing moods. “Oh, how smoothly things move on, when man and wife sit lovingly at table! Though they have their little bickerings now and then, they must not mind that. Put up with it.” “We must have patience with woman, though she be it times sharp and bitter. She presides over the household machinery, and the servants deserve occasionally a good scolding.” He put the highest honor of woman on her motherhood. “All men,” he said, “are conceived, born, and nursed by women. Thence come the little darlings, the highly prized heirs. This honor ought in fairness to cover up all feminine weakness.”

Luther had six children, — three daughters, two of whom died young, and three sons, Hans (John), Martin, and Paul. None inherited his genius. Hans gave him much trouble. Paul rose to some eminence as physician of the Elector, and died at Dresden, 1593. The sons accompanied their father on his last journey to Eisleben. His wife’s aunt, Magdalen von Bora, who had been a nun and head-nurse in the same cloister, lived with his family, and was esteemed like a grandmother by him and his children. Two orphan nieces, and a tutor for the boys, an amanuensis, and a number of students as boarders, belonged to the household in a portion of the former convent on the banks of the Elbe. The chief sitting-room of the family, his bedroom, and the lecture hall are still shown in “the Lutherhaus”. He began the day, after his private devotions, which were frequent and ardent, with reciting in his family the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and a Psalm. He went to bed at nine, but rose early, and kept wide awake during the day. Of his private devotions we have an authentic account from his companion, Veit Dietrich, who wrote to Melanchthon during the Diet of Augsburg, 1530, when Luther was at Coburg, feeling the whole weight of that great crisis: — “No day passes that he does not give three hours to prayer, and those the fittest for study.”

“Once I happened to hear him praying. Good God! how great a spirit, how great a faith, was in his very words! With such reverence did he ask, as if he felt that he was speaking with God; with such hope and faith, as with a Father and a Friend. ‘I know,’ he said, ‘that Thou art our Father and our God. I am certain, therefore, that Thou art about to destroy the persecutors of Thy children. If Thou doest not, then our danger is Thine too. This business is wholly Thine, we come to it under compulsion: Thou, therefore, defend.’ ... In almost these words I, standing afar off, heard him praying with a clear voice. And my mind burned within me with a singular emotion when he spoke in so friendly a manner, so weightily, so reverently, to God.”

“He was deeply grieved by the early death of his favorite daughter Lena (Magdalen), a pious, gentle, and affectionate girl of fourteen, with large, imaginative eyes, and full of promise. “I love her very much,” he prayed; “but, dear God, if it is thy holy will to take her hence, I would gladly leave her with Thee.” And to her he said, “Lena dear, my little daughter, thou wouldst love to remain here with thy father: art thou willing to go to that other Father?” — “Yes, dear father,” she replied, “just as God wills.” And when she was dying, he fell on his knees beside her bed, wept bitterly, and prayed for her redemption. As she lay in her coffin, he exclaimed, “Ah! my darling Lena, thou wilt rise again, and shine like a star, — yea, as a sun. I am happy in the spirit, but very

sorrowful in the flesh.” He wrote to his friend Jonas: “You will have heard that my dearest child is born again into the eternal kingdom of God. We ought to be glad at her departure, for she is taken away from the world, the flesh, and the devil; but so strong is natural love, that we cannot bear it without anguish of heart, without the sense of death in ourselves.” On her tomb he inscribed these lines: — “Here do I Lena, Luther’s daughter, rest, Sleep in my little bed with all the blessed. In sin and trespass was I born; Forever would I be forlorn, But yet I live, and all is good — Thou, Christ, didst save me with thy blood.”

“He bought in 1540 from his brother-in-law a little farm, Zulsdorf, between Leipzig and Borna, for six hundred and ten guilders, as a home for his family. His wife cultivated a little garden with fruit-trees, even mulberry and fig trees, raised hops and brewed beer for domestic use, as was then the custom. She also had a small fish-pond. She enjoyed hard work. Luther assisted her in gardening and fishing. In 1541 he purchased a small house near the convent, for his wife. He willed all his property, which amounted to about nine thousand guilders, to his wife during her lifetime, wishing that, “she should not receive from her children, but the children from her; that they must honor and obey her, as God has commanded.”

A few years later J.H. Alexander writes this in her book — *“Ladies of the Reformation”*: “*The vigor of Luther’s life was really beginning to ebb and the death of this dear girl aged him prematurely. Things politically were in a great state of upheaval and he hardly felt equal to his work. He mourned over the wicked state of the city and began to plan to retire permanently to the farm. His friends were alarmed to think of losing their adviser, but he was actually in the act of packing up when a deputation from the university and even from the Elector himself came to implore him not to leave them. Almost sorrowfully he re-settled himself.*

*Soon afterwards he was asked to go to Eisleben to settle a dispute between the Counts of Mansfeld about the mines. Here he had been born, here baptized, and here it was he was to die. He was unsuccessful in his arbitration, and was invited again some weeks later. This was January 1546. He was this time accompanied by his three sons (the eldest would be about twenty) and his friend, Dr. Jonas, on what was considered a very delicate mission. He had come away feeling unwell and Katherine, very anxious, had packed him some remedies which generally helped him. Following this up with tender letters she received this reply:*

*‘To the gracious Dame Katherine Luther, my dear spouse, who is tormenting herself quite unnecessarily, grace, peace in our Lord Jesus Christ. Dear Katherine you should read St. John and what the catechism says respecting the confidence we ought to have in God. You afflict yourself just as if God were not all powerful and able to raise up new Dr. Martins by dozens should the old Dr. Martin be drowned in the Salle or perish in any other way. There is One who takes care of me in His own manner better than you and all the angels could ever do. He sits by the side of the Almighty Father. Tranquillize yourself, then. Amen.’*

*His prevailing language had been prayer, adoration, and trust in God. Among his last words were these: ‘O my Heavenly Father, eternal and merciful God, Thou hast revealed to me Thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Him I have preached, Him I have confessed. Him I love and worship as my dearest Saviour and deliverer, whom the ungodly persecute and blaspheme. Receive my poor soul. O Heavenly Father, although I must quit this body and am hurried away from this life, yet I certainly know that I shall abide eternally with Thee and that none can pluck me out of Thy hand.’*

His widow survived him seven years, and suffered from poverty and affliction. The Elector, the Counts of Mansfeld, and the King of Denmark added small sums to her income; but the unfortunate issue of the Smalkaldian war (1547) disturbed her peace, and drove her from Wittenberg. She returned after the war. Melanchthon and Bugenhagen did for her what they could. When the pestilence broke out at Wittenberg in 1552, and the university was moved to Torgau, she followed with her children; but on the journey she was thrown from the wagon into a ditch, and

contracted a cold which soon passed into consumption. She died on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1552, at Torgau; her last prayer was for her children and the Lutheran Church.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> – Let's think over the life of this marvelous help-meet for Martin Luther.**

“It must be acknowledged that there is nothing remarkably striking in the history of Catharine de Bora, considered apart from her relation to her illustrious husband. She was distinguished by no extraordinary talents or surprising act of heroism after her marriage; she has left no literary monument to perpetuate her memory, nor any public institution founded by her munificence. She was nothing more than the “virtuous” woman so eloquently described by King Solomon in the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, but she was that, in an eminent degree. A noble dignity and a temperate self-reliance were the fundamental traits of her character. Hence, though dependent on others for support, she possessed sufficient independence of mind to reject several brilliant offers of marriage, and showed herself worthy of Luther. Her resolution to exchange the noiseless cloister for a life of honorable and useful activity in the disturbed world without, displayed not only a noble courage in the certain anticipation of poverty and persecution, but also a strong confidence in God. It is more than probable that she read many of Luther’s writings as soon as they appeared, not actuated by a blind curiosity, but with a sincere desire to ascertain the truth, and to derive from them instruction for heart and head.”

“Afterwards, during her married life, she took every opportunity of correcting and enlarging her religious views. Although, as the result of the spirit of that age and of her previous monastic training, she was not profoundly educated, yet Luther esteemed her as a woman possessing a noble, dignified, independent spirit, in whose feelings and opinions he found an echo of his own. Pious, in the proper sense of the word, she found her highest enjoyment in solitary communion with God, and those hours which she devoted to the attentive reading of the Scriptures were always the most happy. To this profitable exercise she was often exhorted by her husband, and she followed his advice. Said she, “I hear a great deal of the Scriptures, and read them diligently every day.” In writing to Jonas on one occasion, Luther says, “She is a diligent reader of the Bible; she shows deep earnestness in this duty.” She faithfully attended the public means of grace also, and with her Christian brothers and sisters worshipped God in the sanctuary.”

“She was devotedly attached to the doctrines of the Reformation, and one of her dying prayers was for their preservation in purity to the end of time. She never neglected her domestic duties. To her husband, in all the relations of his active life, she was the most affectionate companion; in his sickness, the most faithful nurse; in his troubles, the most tender comforter : to her children, she was a most gentle mother ; in her household affairs she was a model to all in regard to cleanliness, order, and neatness; to her domestics and dependents. She was a pattern of every domestic and Christian virtue; of righteousness and good works to her generation, and may the daughters and wives of the present day imitate her example, and profit by the practical lessons which her life has taught!”

Let me close by saying that I believe that Katherine Von Bora was a good representation of the Proverbs chapter 31 woman; a good helper, lover, friend, and encouragement to the great Reformer Martin Luther. Together they turned the rivers of Rome’s false doctrine into blood when it came to their showing Rome and all the world the truth of God’s good institution of marriage, versus living in the monastery. While celibacy may be a commendable and virtuous life for those whom Christ has given the gift of singleness, we can say with real confidence that in the majority of the cases of leaders and Reformers of the Christian Church, that marriage was not only a good thing, but it was a very desirable thing; something which not only refuted the false doctrine of Rome that their priests must be celibate to minister on God’s behalf, but also that he who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord; and obtains many blessings, which enrich their life and strengthen their ability to minister. May each of us thank God that Martin Luther chose to marry, for in doing so, he glorified God and tore down the strongholds of the Rome’s false doctrine.

