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Sola Wife

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Sola Wife

Abstract

"Debates over marriage were featured prominently in the early years of the Reformation movements."

Posting about the struggle over theological differences during the Reformation from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/sola-wife/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

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The Latin terms *sola gratia*, *sola fides*, *sola scriptura*, *solus Christus*, and *solī Deo gloria* describe concepts that stood at the center of Protestant theological and polemical writings in the early sixteenth century. Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, and Christ alone were emphasized as the foundational principles which guided Christians who were justified by faith to live a life dedicated to the glory of God alone. Ironically, the ideal of achieving Christian unity rooted in these *solas* clashed with the reality that there were many ways to interpret and apply them. As a result, Protestantism divided into a series of theological movements and modes of ecclesiastical organization. Given the strong Protestant emphasis on unity in singularities, the willingness of some Protestant reformers to accommodate marital plurality in two famous cases sparks immediate interest – and resulting reflection – from contemporary students of their lives and writings.

Debates over marriage were featured prominently in the early years of the Reformation movements. For example, Martin Luther and his associates at Wittenberg embraced clerical marriage as both permissible and desirable in defiance of Roman Catholic practice. Other Protestants followed suit. However, their celebration of marriage ran into a snag when a former adversary and also one of their political allies sought advice about some thorny marital relations.

There had been no love lost between Henry VIII and Martin Luther; the two men and their proxies had carried on a pamphlet war in the early 1520s over the issue of how many sacraments should be practiced by the church. Luther's earthy rebukes had enraged Henry, but the king's hurt feelings were soothed to some degree when the Pope awarded him the title "Defender of the Faith" for his trouble.

It is surprising, then, to find that the ground had shifted against the Catholic church by the end of the decade, as Henry sought a way out of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. Henry argued that securing a divorce or annulment of his marriage to Catherine was in fact a matter of conscience, because he had violated Leviticus 20:21 by marrying his brother's widow. In response to Henry's plea, Pope Julius II granted a dispensation to Henry and Catherine in 1509 which should have resolved the issue for Henry. But it was soon apparent to most observers, and to history books today, that Henry's quest was more about lust and securing a male heir than it was conscience. The public learned that he had married Anne secretly in 1533 before his marriage to Catherine had ended, probably because Anne was pregnant with the future Elizabeth I. This act therefore made the future Supreme Head of the English church a polygamist for almost a year, and it certainly threatened the legitimacy of his heir.

Still, the most interesting part of this story is how the Reformers dealt with Henry's polygamy.

Reformers on the continent didn't take long to realize that the Protestant Anne and her faction at court could influence Henry to move England into the Protestant fold, and prominent Reformers crafted some interesting proposals to help that happen.

In 1531 – 2 years before the annulment – Martin Luther and Phillip Melanchthon (Luther's close collaborator and ally) shared a written message with the English reformer Robert Barnes. The content of the message suggested that polygamy might be the solution to the king's problem! Melanchthon wrote to Henry advising him that if the welfare of the kingdom was at stake and provision must be made for the succession, then bigamy might be the answer. Melanchthon did not actually endorse polygamy as a positive good, but he did argue that it might be the lesser of two evils when the only other option was divorce. Melanchthon argued that polygamy was not "forbidden by divine law" and cited the example of the patriarchs as well as King David to support his opinion. Luther affirmed

Melanchthon's argument that polygamy might be permissible in this case, if only as an expedient to insure the welfare of the kingdom. Even some Catholic leaders of the day, such as Pope Clement VII and Erasmus of Rotterdam, equivocated on the issue of bigamy, being careful to use ambiguous language when consulted about Henry's case.

An even more awkward situation arose concerning marriage when Phillip the Landgrave of Hesse, a German prince and a staunch Lutheran supporter, requested permission to contract a second marriage with Margarethe von der Saale in 1539. Like Henry, Phillip crafted his own argument that a second marriage would have a positive, even healing, effect, but in his case the healing was of body rather than of conscience. Phillip had contracted syphilis, and had convinced himself that sexual union with a virgin would cure him of the illness. But even this pretext loses a lot of its force when one learns that Phillip had been engaged in numerous adulterous affairs since marrying Christine of Saxony in 1523. Ever the loving husband, Phillip claimed that Christine had disgusting habits and drank too much. Thus, he argued with Luther as early as 1526 that it would be better for him to take a second wife rather than engage in affairs. Luther replied that it was not proper for Christians to take more than one wife. The idea was scandalous, he said. But Melanchthon's advice to Henry in 1531 only added fuel to Phillip's insistence that he also be allowed to commit bigamy, and the prince continued to harass Luther throughout the 1530s regarding his marital status.

Phillip finally wore Luther down when he threatened to abandon Luther and support the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Phillip sent the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer to Luther with a new written request to marry Margarethe in late 1539. After some debate, all came to agree that the Reformers had no choice but to grant Phillip's request. Melanchthon and Luther crafted a special dispensation for Phillip with instructions that it be kept quiet.

Their reasons for this secrecy were twofold. First, Luther feared that his followers might try to justify polygamy as a normal practice for all Christians if they heard about the special dispensation for Phillip. Also, there were concerns that the situation might look too much like Anabaptism. Only a few years earlier, in 1534-35, Europe had been rocked by the actions of an apocalyptic cult claiming affinity with the Anabaptist movements which took over the German city of Münster. Believing that the New Jerusalem would appear at Münster, leaders of the group had instituted many Old Testament practices – including polygamy. During this time, the population had been plunged into disease and starvation as the city was besieged by Protestant and Catholic armies. When the city finally fell in 1535, leaders of the revolt were put to death and their bodies exhibited in cages hung from the spire of St. Lambert's Cathedral. The horrific atrocities resulting from the cult's actions were consequences that the Reformers were loath to incur or claim by anything resembling support of Anabaptism. But even though polygamy had come to be identified with the worst excesses of the radical Reformation by the time that Phillip of Hesse made his request in 1539, history notes that Phillip and Margarethe were married in 1540 with Bucer and Melanchthon present.

It appears, then, that the Reformers' surprising support for polygamy in these unusual cases was part charity and part political expediency. From the beginning, Luther argued in 1539 that polygamy was preferable to divorce as the lesser of two evils. At least in the case of bigamy, he reasoned, the original spouse would continue to receive financial support and retain her status rather than live destitute.

Even so, the Reformers would likely be as shocked at the permissive attitudes towards divorce in our society as we are at their willingness to accommodate polygamy for these powerful men.

These Reformation-age dilemmas illustrate how the tenuous relationships between Christians and their political leaders were no less complicated in the past than they are today. Henry VIII and Phillip of Hesse serve to remind us anew of how tempting it is for Christians to compromise theological fidelity for political expediency.