

The Augsburg Confession

Article 23

The Marriage of Priests

This is a subject which has been of source of great contention between members within the visible church for hundreds of years. It continues to be a “hot topic” in our time, as is seen in the recent and widely publicized cases of sexual misconduct of priests in the Catholic church. Because there is some false information propagated on both sides of this issue, we will consider the history of celibacy, the purpose of this article, and the Words of Scripture related to this subject in their context.

Note: This is one of the longest articles in the Augsburg Confession and will not be included here in our study in its entirety. The Roman reply in the Confutation, and Lutheran defense in the Apology are even more lengthy.

History of Celibacy

Throughout the history of the Church there were many attempts to make celibacy of the clergy mandatory. Already at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. we find a proposal to mandate clerical celibacy, including those clergy already married. While this was rejected by the Council of Nicea in 325, the movement toward clerical celibacy continued. During the following centuries several popes decreed celibacy: Damasus I (384), Siricius (385), Innocent I (404), and Leo I (458). In addition, local councils issued edicts imposing celibacy on the clergy: Carthage in Africa (390, 401-19); Orange (441) and Tours (461) in France; and Turin (398) in Italy. By the time of Pope Leo I (who died in 461), no bishop, priest, deacon, or subdeacon could be married.

In 1075, Pope Gregory VII forbade married priests from saying Mass or performing other ecclesiastical functions, and forbade the laity from hearing these Masses or participating in other liturgical functions offered by such priests. Finally, the First Lateran Council (1123) mandated celibacy for the Western clergy. The Second Lateran Council (1139) subsequently decreed Holy Orders as an impediment to marriage, making any attempt at marriage by an ordained cleric invalid. In 1563, following the period of the Reformation, the Council of Trent stipulated that although celibacy was not a divine law, the Church had the authority to impose celibacy as a discipline.

The Catholic Church has continued to affirm the discipline of clerical celibacy (Second Vatican Council - 1965, Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* - 1967, and the Code of Canon Law - 1983).

The Catholic Church currently states that they “forbid no one to marry. No one is required to take a vow of celibacy; those who do, do so voluntarily. They ‘renounce marriage’ (Matthew 19:12); no one forbids it to them.” Then they continue with this phrase: “The Church simply elects candidates for the priesthood from among those who voluntarily renounce marriage” (this is from the official website of the Catholic Church - www.catholic.com).

The Purpose of this Article

The reason for this article was the abuses that were taking place by the priests as a result of vows of celibacy. *“Among all people, both of high and of low degree, there has been loud complaint throughout the world concerning the flagrant immorality and the dissolute life of priests who were not able to remain continent and who went so far as to engage in abominable vices... the vow of celibacy has been the cause of so much frightful and unchristian offense, so much adultery, and such terrible, shocking immorality and abominable vice that even some honest men among the cathedral clergy and some of the courtiers in Rome have often acknowledged this and have complained that such vices among the clergy would on account of their abomination and prevalence, arouse the wrath of God”* (Augsburg Confession, § 1,18).

Scripture and Celibacy

Now we will consider some of the Scripture passages used in the discussion of this topic by both sides and consider their context and the context of Scripture as a whole on this subject.

- Jesus (Matt. 19:11-12) and the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:5, 32-35) approve of voluntary celibacy, for the sake of the Kingdom of God; but at the same time both clearly point out that not everyone is able to make such a commitment. On one hand, Paul expresses approval of those who wish to refrain from getting married, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, but on the other hand, he points out that marriage is God's ordinance, and that those who are already married do not

belong to themselves, but to their spouses. (Notice also in Matthew 9:9 that Jesus does not give an okay to divorce a wife on the basis of vow made to God - see the Confutation where the Romans defend such an action.)

- The passages in 1 Corinthians 7:32-33 and 2 Timothy 2:4, do not imply that a married person in the ministry are not able to be concerned for the things which are the Lord's (compare 1 Tim. 3:2, 4; Gen. 2:18; Prov. 14:1).
- The advice of 1 Corinthians 7 applies to the whole church, and does not exclude the clergy. It is not faithful to the Word of God to interpret some verse in that chapter as applying only to the clergy, and other verses in the same chapter as referring only to the laity.
- Although Paul was celibate (1 Cor. 7:8), this was by choice, not by compulsion; and other apostles were married (1 Cor. 9:5).
- Paul includes marriage among the good qualities of a bishop (1 Tim. 3:2; 1 Cor. 7:25, 35; Titus 1:5-6; Prov. 31:10-23; 1 Tim. 3:4-5, 11-12; Titus 1:5-9). These passages do not mean that a bishop **MUST** be married, but indicates that marriage is good preparation for caring for Christ's flock. Similarly, the fact that marriage is mentioned in this list indicates that it is acceptable for a bishop to be married.
- Paul demands chastity in the ministry (1 Tim. 4:12; 5:2), but shows that this chastity is of two kinds, namely, in celibacy (1 Cor. 7:7) and in marriage (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:5-6; 2:4-5; 1 Tim. 4:1-5, 12). Chastity in celibacy does not make one more holy than others who do not observe celibacy (see the Roman Confutation where this is clearly stated).
- Paul insists that it is a doctrine of demons to prohibit marriage on account of hypocrisy or external show of holiness (1 Tim. 4:1-3), for marriage is honorable in men of every class (Heb. 13:4).

- The Old Testament, while forbidding various defilements under the Levitical law to the priests, nevertheless did not forbid them marriage (Lev. 21:7; Ezek. 44:22).
- While the prophet Jeremiah was forbidden by the LORD to take a wife (Jeremiah 16:1-2), other prophets were married (Isaiah 8:3) and others commanded by the LORD to marry (Hosea 1:2).

Summary

We must recognize that marriage is a wonderful blessing given by God, and that this blessing has been granted to all people. We must also take note of the fact that there is no general prohibition from God stating that His called servants are not to marry. In addition both Christ and Paul state that the gift of celibacy is not given to all people, and that such a rule by the Church has been the cause of prevalent immorality throughout history. A vow of celibacy is not required by God for service to Him as a spiritual leader and it should not be mandated or forced on them by other human beings or religious institutions.

Note: This study was prepared for the Bible Class at Zion Lutheran Church, Lawrenceville, GA by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew.