

From: Julia O'Faolin and Laura Martin,
Not in God's Image: Women in History
from Greeks to Victorians

4 Protestants

The Protestant revolution against the medieval church cut so deeply that no serious moral or social question escaped its effects. Marriage, divorce, and the condition and status of women soon registered the impact. The Protestant cry against the cloister brought a revitalized emphasis upon the dignity and spirituality of marriage. Henceforth marriage was as good as celibacy and virginity, if not better. Quite obviously women stood to gain from this change. Paradoxically, moreover, owing to the reemphasis on the spiritual core of marriage, divorce swiftly came to be seen as a genuine possibility, at all events in cases in which the spiritual bond had been manifestly dissolved. Impotence and adultery immediately figured among the chief grounds for divorce, and the adultery of husbands became no less serious than that of wives.

Women achieved some prominence as workers and even agitators in the more extreme affirmations of Protestantism, the movement of Anabaptists and radical sectaries. Catherine Zell (below) was a Protestant female 'activist,' though not one of the extravagant sort. A century later (Chapter X) Protestant women were to be active in political as well as religious matters. The historical and psychological causes behind the relative prominence of women within the Protestant movement cannot, regrettably, be explored here. We must content ourselves with noting that the Protestant stress on the Word of God, on the universal reading of the Bible in the vernacular languages, greatly accentuated the importance of literacy for all members of the Reform churches. In theory at least, if not always in fact, women, the poor, and the humiliated were the true benefactors of this new turn. Martin Bucer, a leading reformer, called for the establishment of free public schools in all parishes:

As we acknowledge that all the faithful, however poor their place and low their condition, are made in the image and likeness of God and are redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, to be remade and reformed in that image, the good and loyal ministers of the people of God must work to remake and re-establish that image by means of the doctrine of salvation. And this they shall teach to the young [above all through the reading of the Holy Bible. Hence be it ordained] that all the children

of Christians, girls as well as boys, be carefully taught to read. [Bucer, *De Regno Christi*]⁹

LUTHER (1483–1546)

*Father and son of the Reformation, Martin Luther, throughout the years of his ministry, repeatedly touched upon questions of marriage, divorce, and the nature of women. In his famous tract *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), he rejected the traditional sacrament of marriage and allowed three grounds for divorce—adultery, impotence, and disbelief. The passage on impotence is revealing:*

Now let us discuss the matter of impotence. Consider the following case: A woman, wed to an impotent man, is unable to prove her husband's impotence in court, or perhaps she is unwilling to do so with the mass of evidence and all the notoriety which the law demands; yet she is desirous of having children or is unable to remain continent. Now suppose I had counseled her to procure a divorce from her husband in order to marry another, satisfied that her own and her husband's conscience and their experience were ample testimony of his impotence; but the husband refused his consent to this. Then I would further counsel her, with the consent of the man (who is not really her husband, but only a dweller under the same roof with her), to have intercourse with another, say her husband's brother, but to keep this marriage secret and to ascribe the children to the so-called putative father. The question is: Is such a woman saved and in a saved state? I answer: Certainly, because in this case an error, ignorance of the man's impotence, impedes the marriage; and the tyranny of the laws permits no divorce. But the woman is free through the divine law, and cannot be compelled to remain continent. Therefore the man ought to concede her right, and give up to somebody else the wife who is his only in outward appearance.

Moreover, if the man will not give his consent, or agree to this separation—rather than allow the woman to burn [I Corinthians 7: 9] or to commit adultery—I would counsel her to contract a marriage with another and flee to a distant unknown place. What other counsel can be given to one constantly

struggling with the dangers of natural emotions? Now I know that some are troubled by the fact that the children of this secret marriage are not the rightful heirs of their putative father. But if it was done with the consent of the husband, then the children will be the rightful heirs. If, however, it was done without his knowledge or against his will, then let unbiased Christian reason, or better, charity, decide which one of the two has done the greater injury to the other. The wife alienates the inheritance, but the husband has deceived his wife and is defrauding her completely of her body and her life. Is not the sin of a man who wastes his wife's body and life a greater sin than that of the woman who merely alienates the temporal goods of her husband? Let him, therefore, agree to a divorce, or else be satisfied with heirs not his own, for by his own fault he deceived an innocent girl and defrauded her both of life and of the full use of her body, besides giving her an almost irresistible cause for committing adultery. [Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*]¹⁰

In a letter of August 6, 1524, written to three nuns, Luther affirmed that there are two reasons for a nun's abandoning the cloister, one because of her having been forced into a convent against her will.

The other reason has to do with the flesh. Women are ashamed to admit this, but Scripture and life reveal that only one woman in thousands has been endowed with the God-given aptitude to live in chastity and virginity. A woman is not fully the master of herself. God fashioned her body so that she should be with a man, to have and to rear children. The words of Genesis, Chap. I [27-28] plainly indicate this, and parts of her body show God's purpose Therefore let this suffice. No woman should be ashamed of that for which God made and intended her. [D. Martin Luthers Werke]¹¹

Luther's informal conversation not seldom included observations of this sort:

Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and broad hips. Women ought to stay at home; the way they were

created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon, keep house and bear and raise children [Date: 1531].

Marriage consists of these things; the natural desire of sex, the bringing to life offspring, and life together with mutual fidelity [Date: 1532].

Crotus [Rubcanus, c. 1480-c. 1539, a humanist] wrote blasphemously about the marriage of priests, declaring that the most holy bishop of Mainz was irritated by no annoyance more than by the stinking, putrid, private parts of women. That godless knave, forgetful of his mother and sister, dares to blaspheme God's creature through whom he was himself born. It would be tolerable if he were to find fault with the behavior of women, but to defile their creation and nature is most godless. As if I were to ridicule man's face on account of his nose! For the nose is the latrine of man's head and stands above his mouth [Date: 1532]. [Luther, *The Table Talk*]¹²

In August 1545, Luther delivered a sermon on marriage at Merseburg, occasioned by the marriage of the dean of the cathedral in that town. He reemphasized views which he had been expressing since the early 1520s.

It is written in the first book of Moses: 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." . . .

Therefore all men should marry and be married, and since through the fall of our first parents we have been so spoiled that we are not all fit for marriage, yet those who are not fit for the married state should so live that they walk chastely and honorably and give offense to no one, though at the beginning it was not so and all were fit to become married . . . [But those] who desire and want to be married [i.e., nuns and priests] and are also fit and competent to do so, even though they enter the marriage state contrary to human laws, do what is right, and nobody should be scandalized by what they do . . .

The pope and his cardinals, monks, nuns, and priests have tried to improve things and ordain a holy estate in which they

might live in holiness and chastity. But how holy, pure, and chaste [their] lives . . . have been is so apparent that the sun, moon, and stars have cried out against it. . . . Why, then, did this happen? Because they tore down and despised God's holy ordinance of the estate of matrimony and they were not worthy to enter into marriage. . . .

But here you say: Yes, but we have vowed and sworn to God that we shall be chaste and live without women; I am obliged to keep this vow; therefore I cannot be married. My answer to that is: Right, do what you have to do; be chaste and pure. Why don't you keep it, why don't you do it? Who is stopping you from being chaste and pure? Yes, you say, but I can't keep it. What a proper fool you are; why do you vow what you neither know nor can keep? . . . Who commanded you to vow and swear something which is contrary to God and his ordinance, namely, to swear that you are neither a man nor a woman, when it is certain that you are either a man or a woman, created by God. Why, then, do you swear that you are not a man or a woman?

If you are able to remain chaste and be pure by your own strength, why then do you vow to be chaste? Keep it, if you can; but it is a mere nothing that you should want to boast about your vow and then plead that they have led you astray. Do you want to know to whom you have vowed to keep chastity? I'll tell you: the miserable devil in hell and his mother. . . .

St Augustine writes in one place concerning married people, that even if one of them is somewhat weak etc., he should not be afraid of the sudden and infallible Day of the Lord; even if the Day of the Lord were to come in the hour when man and wife were having marital intercourse, they should not be afraid of it. Why is this so? Because even if the Lord comes in that hour he will find them in the ordinance and station in which they have been placed and installed by God. [Luther, *Sermons*]¹³

CALVIN (1509-64)

Born in northern France and schooled in law, after an early flirtation with humanism John Calvin turned to religion, sired the hard line of Protestantism, and became the greatest reformer after Luther. His

trenchant and uncompromising views on marriage are expressed in his great work of theology, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536).

Then there came those times [the Middle Ages] when the esteem for abstaining from marriage grew into a crazy superstition. Virginity was so greatly prized that it became very difficult to think that there was any other virtue worthy of being compared to it. And although marriage was not condemned as something filthy, yet its dignity was so overshadowed that a man could really aspire to perfection, it was thought, only if he remained celibate. This is what inspired the church laws forbidding priests to marry. [Calvin, *Institution de la religion Chrestienne*]¹⁴

Man was not created to live in solitude but to have a companion somewhat like himself. After the Fall, he was all the more subjected to this companionship, the society of women. The Lord, therefore, gave us a remedy for this in marriage. It follows that all companionship outside of marriage between a man and a woman is damned and that marriage has been given to us in order to bridle our lust. . . .

I confess that virginity is not a virtue to be disdained. But as it is not given to everyone and given to some only for a time, those who are tormented by incontinence and cannot overcome it should have recourse to the remedy of marriage in order that they may preserve chastity according to the degree of their calling. . . .

Let no man despise marriage as a thing profitless and unnecessary; and let no man desire to pass it by unless he can live without a woman. . . . Let him who has the gift of continence abstain from marriage for as long as he can be continent, but no longer. If the power to conquer and tame the lust of the flesh fails him, let him understand by this that God has imposed the necessity of marriage upon him. . . . If those who are incontinent disdain to cure their infirmity by means of the remedy of marriage, they sin. And let no man who actually refrains from fornication flatter himself, as if he were not guilty of lewdness when his heart burns inwardly with wicked lust. . . .

Knowing that their association is blessed by God, married

couples are thereby warned and commanded not to pollute the relationship with unbridled and self-indulgent lust. For even though the dignity of marriage hides the shame of incontinence, this is not to say that marriage is an invitation to sensuality. Married couples should not think that all things are permitted to them. Let every man go soberly to his wife and every woman soberly to her husband, and let them behave in such a way as to do nothing against the sanctity of marriage. The Lord's will should be seen in the light of such modesty, in order to keep marriage from brimming over in lasciviousness. Censuring those who abuse marriage by lecherous intemperance, St Ambrose says something hard but fitting: that is, that they are adulterers with their own wives. [Calvin, *Institution*]¹⁵

MARTIN BUCER (1491-1551)

A German Dominican monk, Bucer quickly came out for Luther (1518) and was for many years the leading reformer at Strasbourg, as well as a key figure in the organization of Protestant churches at Augsburg, Constance, and Ulm. His major work, On the Kingdom of Christ (1550), was addressed to the young English king, Edward VI. Like Calvin, Bucer was haunted by the terrifying promise of the kingdom of the flesh. Both men gave way, accordingly, to a boundless paternalism: they laid great accent on parental authority, called for the civil power to crack down, and poured out a flood of adamant moral strictures. So far as advances in the history of women go, their views led two steps forward and one back: 'respectable' women gained more rights, but people of 'easier' morals suffered in the ensuing climate, and later on certain cities would see the execution of alleged prostitutes (see p. 227). Nevertheless, Bucer's conception of marriage and divorce was at the vanguard of development. His attitude toward the spiritual equality of the partners in marriage issued in a view of divorce which accorded unheard-of rights to Protestant women (e.g., the right to remarry), rights soon to be claimed in parts of Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, and Scotland, but not, for example, in England until the second half of the nineteenth century.

Having held in the previous chapter of his work that adulterers should be put to death, Bucer goes on to argue that a woman may repudiate her adulterous husband and remarry:

For the Holy Spirit says that there is neither male nor female

in Christ. In all things that pertain to salvation one should have as much regard for woman as for man. For though she is bound to keep her place, to put herself under the authority of her husband, just as the church does in relation to Christ, yet her subjection does not cancel the right of an honest woman, in accordance with the laws of God, to have recourse to and demand, by legitimate means, deliverance from a husband who hates her. For the Lord has certainly not made married woman subservient to have her be polluted and tormented by the extortions and injuries of her husband but rather so that she may receive discipline from him, as if from her master and savior, like the church from Christ. A wife is not so subject to her husband that she is bound to suffer anything he may impose upon her. Being free, she is joined to him in holy marriage that she may be loved, nourished, and maintained by him, as if she were his own flesh, just as the church is maintained by Christ. . . . Again, though a wife may be something less than her husband and subject to him, in order that they be rightly joined, the Holy Spirit has declared, through its apostle, that man and woman are equal before God in things pertaining to the alliance and mutual confederation of marriage. This is the meaning of the apostle's saying that a wife has power over the body of her husband, just as a husband has power over the body of his wife (1 Corinthians 7) Hence if wives feel that their association and cohabitation with their husbands is injurious to salvation as well of one as of the other, owing to the hardening and hatred on the part of their husbands, let them have recourse to the civil authority, which is enjoined by the Lord to help the afflicted. [Bucer, *De Regno Christi*]¹⁶