

Luther's Authentic Voice on Polygamy

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On June 25, 2015, the United States Supreme Court legitimized a major upheaval in sexual ethics when it ruled that it is unconstitutional to ban same-sex marriage. While progressive churches rejoiced that the law of the land was finally catching up to decisions that those churches had already made, other churches that seek to follow the authority of Scripture and the traditions of their faith bemoaned the slide into immorality and warned of future moral outrages to come, such as legalized polygamy or inter-species "marriage."

Warning against polygamy as a moral outrage resonates with many Christians. It is common today to take for granted what was first expressed as a direct Christian law at the Council of Trent: "If anyone says that it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time and that this is not forbidden by any divine law, let him be anathema."¹ Even Martin Chemnitz, who wrote a scathing review of the Council of Trent from a Lutheran perspective, agreed with the Council on this point:

Therefore Christians are not permitted to have a number of wives at one and the same time, and that not as though Christ had instituted a new and special sacrament of matrimony in the New Testament, but because God established it thus at the beginning of the creation, when He first instituted marriage. And Christ recalls and restores matrimonial matters in the New Testament to this rule of the original institution, thus abrogating the exceptions which Moses had permitted. Therefore the Anabaptists and all others who, contrary to the norm of this institution, taught by God in the beginning of the creation and afterward repeated and confirmed by Christ, attempt either to introduce or to defend polygamy in the New Testament are rightly condemned.²

It is an embarrassment for many Lutherans to learn that Luther's attitude toward polygamy was more ambiguous than Chemnitz's, and

¹ Council of Trent, Session 24, canon 2, 11 November 1563, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Matrimony*.

² Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. F. Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 731.

that the canon from the Council of Trent may have been directed, at least partially, against Luther's teaching. Though Luther was vehemently opposed to making polygamy legal in Germany, he nevertheless said, "It must not be said that it is not allowed. It is certainly allowed; Scripture does not prohibit it."³ Thus Luther agreed with the first part of the Tridentine canon that faulted the *legalization* of polygamy, but disagreed with the second part that claimed that polygamy is forbidden by divine law.

Much of what Luther wrote and said about polygamy is not included in the American edition of *Luther's Works* and thus remains hidden from English speakers. The additional twenty volumes projected for the new series of *Luther's Works* will supply some of the omitted works, but none that include his further comments about polygamy have yet been published.⁴ The original series included the following tantalizing note, hinting at the enormity of the issue that has remained largely hidden all these years:

Landgrave Philip of Hesse, a prominent evangelical prince who had been unhappily married to the daughter of Duke George of Saxony and had been resorting to a succession of prostitutes, finally decided to end his immoral conduct by marrying Margaret von der Sale. The theologian Martin Bucer interceded in his behalf with Luther and Melanchthon, who reluctantly gave their approval to the proposed marriage on condition that the arrangements be kept secret. On March 4, 1540, the marriage took place. When it became widely known soon after, a scandal resulted.⁵

Julius Köstlin characterizes this scandal as "the greatest stain on the history of the Reformation, and in spite of everything that can be said in explanation and excuse it remains a stain on the life of Luther."⁶ The key document of this important scandal, the *Wittenberger Ratschlag*,

³ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 127 vols. (Weimar: H Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-2009), 14:253, 11-12 (hereafter cited as WA, DB, TR, or BR according to the subseries in the edition). Compare the assertion of Melanchthon in his advice to King Henry VIII: "Necessity therefore allows the king, if done according to the conscience, to have another wife, according to the rule: one must obey God rather than men.... The king has the highest authority to make laws and dispensations from them in his own kingdom, ... even if the pope issues an opinion that polygamy is prohibited by divine law" ("De Divortio Henrici VIII, 1531," *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. Carl Gottlieb Bretschneider, Heinrich Ernst Bindseil [Halae Saxonum, 1834-], 2:527).

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86), hereafter cited as LW; the new series is cited as LW1 with projected subcategories and works cited according to the prospectus available at <http://therebelgod.com/Luher/ProspectusLW.pdf>.

⁵ LW 54:379 n 57.

⁶ Martin Luther, *sein Leben und seine Schriften*, 5th ed. (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1903), 2:478.

“Wittenberg Counsel,” will finally be included in the new series of *Luther’s Works* as the letter “To Ph. von Hessen (Luther and Melanchthon, 10 Dec 1539).”⁷

To explore Luther’s authentic voice on polygamy, *all* that Luther wrote or said about polygamy needs to be examined to see whether his approval of Philip’s bigamy was a one-time aberration or was consistent with his teaching on polygamy in general. For this study, an electronic search was conducted for all occurrences of key words in three languages in the most comprehensive collection of Luther’s writings available, the Weimar edition.⁸ The following table shows the number of hits of each search term with its wildcard.

Term	Hits
uxor*	5,079
poly*	184
monogam*	11
digam*	145
bigam*	73

Term	Hits
mulier*	4,519
zweyweib*	21
zwey weyb*	21
doppelehe*	72
πολυγαμ*	9
διγαμ*	6

These 10,140 references come from about 115 distinct works in the Weimar edition, of which 90 are not (yet) included in the American edition. The following quotations are Luther’s more direct teachings about polygamy, arranged by the year in which he made the statements.⁹ They show that, despite the additions planned in the new series of *Luther’s Works*, much of what Luther wrote and said on the subject remains hidden from English speakers.

⁷ LW1 8.153.

⁸ The searchable electronic edition is at <http://luther.chadwyck.co.uk/>.

⁹ Translations follow the *LW* where it exists, and other works where they are cited. My original translations have been carefully reviewed and improved by Jonathan Mumme. *LW1* citations with a question mark indicate that they lie within a portion of *WA* from which selections are planned for publication in the new series of *Luther’s Works*. *LW1* citations without a question mark indicate that they are specifically included in the plan for publication, although none of them had yet been published at the time of this article’s publication.

Quotations

1 "The Law permitted a bill of divorce, polygamy, and many other things that are a hindrance to the spirit, like riches, honors, pleasures."

1513 "Scholae: Psalmus XI [XII]," *WA* 3:97, 4; *LW* 10:102

2 "For what could be said more simply than that Lamech took two wives? Who, nevertheless, is firmly censured [as having acted out] of lust."

1519 "Scholia in librum Genesios," *WA* 9:339, 32; *LW* null

3 "For my part I so greatly detest divorce that I should prefer bigamy to it."

1520 "De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae," *WA* 6:559, 20–21; *LW* 36:105

4 "That God approved that polygamous marriage for Jacob is clear from the text, as first Leah, then Rachel gave thanks to God and went with God."

1521 "Predigten," *WA* 9:501, 25–26; *LW* 1.8?

5 "Jacob was polygamous and is not criticized. Esau and Lamech were polygamous and were criticized, wherefore it is not to be judged by the work, but the Spirit discerns."

1521 "Predigten," *WA* 9:505, 18–26; *LW* 1.8?

6 "Let us hear of the wives of Jacob, since they presented examples of a Christian life."

1521 "Predigten," *WA* 9:510, 2–3; *LW* 1.8?

7 "Now I say that this marriage of Jacob and the two wives was not unjust, as if it took place for lust. It was in the third degree, which God had not forbidden, and it was a custom at that time, that one man might have two wives, as was said. But that he had the two maids was not of his own will. This the women did. But he allowed it only that he obtain children and bring forth the Seed that was promised to him by God. That the marriage pleased God is clear from the text, which says, 'Leah beseeched God, Rachel also beseeched.' These were holy women—the words that they spoke were not words of a mean spirit. They thanked God when they obtained children and entrusted them then to God. Now our Lord God also allowed Jacob to err, as all the patriarchs. He thought that Rachel would be the proper wife of his house and mother of the children, whom God had promised to him. But Leah, the lesser of the two, bears Judah, from whom Christ has come, and on whose account all this is written."

1521 "Predigten," *WA* 9:543, 10–23; *LW* null

8 "Lamech and Esau sin and are rebuked, for they married two wives. Jacob

had four and he was pleasing to God."

1521 "Predigten," WA 9:547, 2-4; LW null

9 Lamech and Esau had two wives and displeased God. Jacob had four and pleased God.

1521 "Predigten," WA 9:561, 2 note; LW null

10 "They speak of the beauty of the patriarchs who had many wives, of whom all the works were complete in faith, to whom must not be preferred writings of chastity."

1523 "Dominica Letare Euangelium Ioh. 6," WA 11:64, 17 note; LW null

11 "And yet we blind men do not see that the most holy patriarchs had not merely one, but four wives, and the priests of the Old Testament were forced to live married."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:113a, 8-10; LW null

12 "Lamech had two wives." ... Our learned men say that Lamech was the first to have been a bigamist, as the law has it, but with this fact it is not established that he did this wickedly, because in what follows we see that many more holy men, etc."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:171a, 12-15; LW null

13 "Lamech was the first bigamist or the first adulterer. Our commentators and the holy divine law rightly conclude from this that it is not permitted to have two wives, etc."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:171b, 28-29; LW null

14 "Scripture does not say that Lamech sinned by having two wives, nor that bigamy is sinful, when both are legitimate wives at the same time. We read later that even holy men had multiple wives."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:171c, 35-37; LW null

15 "Should one have multiple wives? That this takes place even in these stories stands written [here]; that one must leave uncontested, for the Holy Spirit rules here."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:252a, 8-10; LW null

16 "On multiple wives: Divine works must be sinless, therefore this is not sinful. Also Abraham is a true Christian, whose example is not bad."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:252c, 33-35; LW null

17 "[Polygamous] Abraham was a true Christian and filled with the Spirit, therefore his work must be allowed to stand, that it might be an example,

when it should be."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:252a, 10–12; LW null

18 "[Even though] I do not wish to make it [polygamy] allowed, it must not be said that it is not allowed. It is certainly allowed; Scripture does not prohibit it."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:253a, 11–12; LW null

19 "Abraham used only one additional wife. Others took a great number of wives, and yet they were true marriages."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:253c, 35–37; LW null

20 "Christ seems only to have prohibited divorce to Christians [Mt 19:9]. And Paul wants a bishop to be chosen who is the husband of one wife [1Tm 3:2]."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:253c, 37–38; LW null

21 "At this point, you have what Scripture calls concubines: they were not harlots, but wives; they were not truly *matres familias*; they did not bear the keys. Hagar was such a wife, who was not the primary one. They are compelled to give way to the primary [wife] like the other handmaids. And this Scripture calls concubines, which is [the conclusion] to which this text leads[, saying,] 'He took another wife,' and yet, 'He gave Isaac all his goods.'"

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:320a, 15–19; LW null

22 "Augustine and others who extol virginity are deceived. They are offended by the fathers who had a multitude of wives. Then immediately we fall into line and believe them, as if some angel had said so. Just as in this place, also in other places, they have gone astray. I hold the matrimonial life of Abraham, even if he had had ten wives, higher than the chastity of Jerome. Therefore I say this, lest we despise the state of marriage."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:323b, 5–10; LW null

23 "This is the text, stronger than a hundred popes, and because this Scripture does not chastise Jacob, it is necessary that we allow him to remain pious and holy. God confirms the 'error'; he gives sons and wishes that he marry two wives. It is true: the example must not be imitated, for God acts in a special way in this instance, etc."

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:405d, 23 – 406d, 13; LW null

24 "Jacob married four wives.... What shall we say? If God commends him, it is necessary that we close [our] mouth and say that anything that

pleases God pleases us.... Ought we then to do the same and imitate Jacob in this? No, look at the person, not the works, if you are Jacob, do it, if not, don't.]"

1523 "Predigten über das erste Buch Mose," WA 14:411a, 13 – 412a, 14; LW null

25 Allegorically God is married to two wives: "The two wives of one man are that double and yet single church consisting of Jews and Gentiles."

1523 "Vorlesung über das Deuteronomium," WA 14:698b, 35 – 699b, 1; LW 9:214

26 "As for me, I truly admit that I cannot prohibit it if someone wishes to marry several wives, nor is it repugnant to the Sacred Scriptures: in truth, however, I would not want such an example introduced among Christians in the first place, among whom it is proper to abstain even from things that are allowed, in order to avoid scandal, and for the integrity of life, which everywhere Paul requires."

1524 BR 3:231, 10–14; LW 1 8.41

27 "Polygamy, however, was characteristic of this people on the basis both of the example of the patriarchs and of legal right.... Here you see, therefore, that polygamy is permitted by law."

1525 "Vorlesung über das Deuteronomium," WA 14:696b, 4–24; LW 9:210–11

28 "God says thus: 'I will give you a wife, that you may have enough....' Thus he reproached David, 'I have taken away the wives from Saul and given them into your bosom,' etc. This occasion here makes the adulterer just like a thief.... So that we may be chaste, he gives to each a wife, prohibits nothing with a wife, nevertheless we are not chaste."

1525 "Predigten über das 2. Buch Mose," WA 16:511b, 6 – 512b, 9; LW 1 4.2

29 "Previously they had multiple wives and their own maids, because God wished to increase and multiply their population."

1525 "Predigten über das 2. Buch Mose," WA 16:533b, 31–32; LW 1 4.2

30 Responding to a question whether one may marry a sister's daughter: "For here stands our ground and rock: What God has not forbidden, but has left free, everyone should leave free, and no one is to be obeyed who forbids what God wishes to be free, but everyone needs to fight against such a prohibition with word and deed ... Gal 2 & 5."

1526 BR 4:18–22; LW null

31 "As to the other matter it is my honest warning and counsel that no one (especially Christians) should have more than one wife, not only because it is scandalous, and no Christian should cause scandal except in a case of

necessity but should diligently avoid it, but also because there is no word of God here on which one can rely that this is pleasing to him in regard to Christians. Heathens and Turks may do what they please. The ancient fathers had a great many wives, but they were driven to this by necessity, as Abraham and Jacob and thereafter many kings, to whom the wives of their relatives fell as an inheritance upon the death of these relatives according to the law of Moses. But it is not sufficient for a Christian to observe the work of the fathers (patriarchs). He too must have a divine word for himself that makes him certain, just as they had. For where there was no necessity or cause, the ancient fathers did not have more than one wife, as Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and many others. Therefore I cannot advise it (taking more than one wife), but must advise against it, especially for Christians, unless it were a case of high necessity, such as that the wife was leprous or otherwise taken away from her husband. With others [i.e. non-Christians] however, I know not how to shield them from this."

1526 *BR* 4:140, 1-17; *LW* 1 8.63

32 "In regard to your first question, whether someone may marry more than one wife, this is my answer: The unbelievers may do what they please, but Christian liberty should direct itself according love (charity), that is, in such a way that all is directed in the service of the neighbor, provided only that he can render such service without jeopardy and damage to his faith and conscience.... Moreover, although the ancients had many wives, Christians are not to follow their example, because there is no necessity for doing this, no improvement is obtained thereby, nor is there a special word of God that commands this practice, and because great offense and trouble may come from it. Accordingly, I do not view this as open to Christians any more. First a command would have to be given by God about such a liberty."

1526 *BR* 4:141, 3 – 142, 18; *LW* null

33 "Here have our teachers become wise, in that they say, Lamech was the first adulterer (which is how they view bigamy, that is, to have two wives). I do not agree that this is the meaning. For the text says simply that he had two wedded-wives. Whether he was also the first, I do not know. But if he were the first that does not mean that he did wrong to have two wives. For one later reads that the same thing about many people, also holy ones."

1527 "Predigten über das 1. Buch Mose," *WA* 24:144, 19–24; *LW* null

34 "It is necessary that divine acts are sinless, therefore in this deed there is nothing sinful. Again, Abraham was truly a Christian, whose example is not evil. To have multiple wives was not prohibited to Abraham. Again, previously kings are said to have had multiple wives; truly it might seem that this was abolished on account of the gospel [Mt 19:5; 1 Cor 7:2] 'Each

one should have his own wife and cling to his own wife.' Naturally, as Abraham did certain external works, these should not be imitated by all. But this is not enough, it is necessary that we speak in the simplest way concerning sacred things. This is true: some things were abrogated, so that he allows [them] to be done or omitted, so long as this happens without the notion that one is sanctified and without the hope that one is justified [by so doing or omitting] – such as eating the [Easter] lamb, circumcision, etc., and almost all the examples of the patriarchs. Here Abraham added only one other wife; others had a great number of wives, and they were, nevertheless, true marriages. Thus Christ showed that only divorce is forbidden to Christians, and Paul wishes a bishop to be selected who is the husband of one wife [1Tm 3:2]. Truly, where there is no Christian thought, but some diabolical and perpetual discord, there I wish this law of divorce to be observed, which Moses spoke of on account of the hardness of heart of some, in order that women be expelled in this way, by giving a writ of divorce, that they might marry whomever else they pleased. But those who expelled them were not Christians. For a Christian would always bear the cross; he does not get separated, whether he has multiple wives as the holy patriarchs or one. I am not able to defend that it is not permitted to have multiple wives; there are many examples now, and they are not to be blamed, neither are they commanded. Because here there is no necessity, I would not counsel to introduce this custom again."

1527 "In Genesin Mosi librum sanctissimum Declamationes," *WA* 24:303a, 9 – 305a, 11; *LW* null

35 "Polygamy, which in former times was permitted to the Jews and Gentiles, cannot honestly be approved of among Christians, and cannot be attempted with a good conscience, unless it were an extreme case of necessity, as, for instance, when one of the spouses is separated from the other by leprosy or for a similar cause."

1527 *BR* 4:177, 24–26; *LW* 8.69

36 "They are mistaken who think that Solomon took all these wives because he was so lustful. The law imposed this necessity upon him, for it enjoined that when a husband died, the next of kin was to take his place. Accordingly, forsaken widows realized that it would be the best arrangement for them if they were among the royal wives or concubines. It was for this reason that Solomon became the husband of so many wives."

1528 "Vorlesung über das Hohelied," *WA* 31.2:726b, 31 – 727, 27; *LW* 15:245

37 "See concerning polygamy, in order that you be cautious and prudent."

1528 *BR* 4:447, 8–9; *LW* null

38 "Jews who had multiple wives would have gotten tired of them and wished that they had only one or even none. But they were forced [Gn 15:5; 22:17; 28:14] to have multiple wives by the necessity of the promise and of families."

1530 *TR* 1:589, 18–20; *LW* null

39 "The holy patriarchs married close relations and multiple wives."

1530 "Tischreden," *WA* 48:698, 24–27; *LW* null

40 "Before I would approve of such a divorce I would rather permit the King [Henry VIII] to marry still another woman and to have, according to the examples of the patriarchs and kings, two women or queens at the same time."

1531 *BR* 6:179, 26–29; *LW* 50:33

41 "[Martin Luther said,] 'The time will come when a man will take more than one wife.' The doctor's wife responded, 'Let the devil believe that!' The doctor said, 'The reason, Katy, is that a woman can bear a child only once a year while her husband can beget many.' Katy responded, 'Paul said that each man should have his own wife' [1Co 7:2]. To this the doctor replied, 'Yes, "his own wife" and not "only one wife," for the latter isn't what Paul wrote.' The doctor spoke thus in jest for a long time, and finally the doctor's wife said, 'Before I put up with this, I'd rather go back to the convent and leave you and all our children.'"

1532 *TR* 2:105, 11–19; *LW* 31:153

42 "Although there was polygamy, the decency of those nations [Egypt and Palestine] was extraordinary."

1535 "In Genesin Enarrationum," *WA* 42:480, 12–13; *LW* 2:305

43 "People who are coarse and lack experience in spiritual matters see only the fact that she [Sarah] brings her maid to her husband. Because they themselves burn with lust, they do not consider the promise which gave occasion for this action; they consider only those filthy deeds of the flesh.... The godly husband and wife do not resort to these plans because they have been spurred on by lust; they succumb to temptation, both because they are concerned about offspring on account of the promise and because they are eagerly waiting for the Seed promised to Adam in Paradise. Therefore Sarah, who knows that she is both exhausted and barren, shares her plan with Abram and has her maid Hagar lie with him, in order that she may be built from her. Even though she is not in doubt concerning the promise, yet she does have doubts about the persons whom God wants to choose for this work....

Even though Sarah sees that the fulfillment of the promise is being delayed and even though she despairs—both because of her barrenness and because of her age—of being a mother, she nevertheless relinquishes the glory of motherhood in the utmost humility and is content if her maid Hagar becomes pregnant by Abraham....

Abraham's virtuousness is also outstanding. Although he had the right to take another woman, as was customary—for at that time polygamy was in vogue—yet he does this only at the urging of his wife. This was a rare example on the part of both. Abraham could have taken another woman than that Egyptian servant, one who was more distinguished, more refined, and in better circumstances; but he yields to his wife, who has her maid lie with him. Sarah herself intends to remain the mother and the mistress in the household; she herself intends to have the promised Seed—if not the natural one, still the legal one....

But this case should not be set up as a pattern, as though we were allowed to do the same things; for it is necessary to consider the circumstances. The promise of the Seed has not been made to us, as it was to Abraham; and no matter if your marriage is completely barren, there is no danger whatever from this source, even if your entire lineage should die out if God so wills. Abraham, however, not only had the promise of the Seed, but it was also an assured fact that Sarah was barren.

These circumstances do not exist in your case. Therefore this unusual action of these spouses should in no wise be adduced as a pattern, especially not in the New Testament.

For the Old Testament permitted polygamy also for the sake of children, and in Moses there is a law which states that if anyone has ravished a maid, he must keep her as his wife (Dt 22:29). But regulations concerning ceremonial or legal matters have come to an end, and Abraham's case is far different from the one which appears in Moses....

Moses states clearly that Abraham obeyed Sarah; he does not say that he was glad to do so. I for my part am completely convinced that he obeyed Sarah unwillingly; for he loved her very much, as the account shows. Yet he yielded to her reasons when she mentioned her barrenness and her old age. Therefore he does this in compliance with his wife's wishes, not as the polygamists of the Old Testament were in the habit of doing.

And Moses has reason to continue to call Sarah Abram's wife, and Abram her husband. He does so in order to show that Abram did not become an adulterer and that the earlier marriage of Sarah and Abram had not been dissolved by this new arrangement. Abram remains the chaste husband of his very chaste wife. He lies with Hagar only to prevent the promise of God from being obstructed....

And why should the Jews use Abraham's example to justify polygamy when

this practice was commanded in the Law (Dt 25:5)? For the widow of a brother who died without children had to become the wife of her deceased husband's brother, in order that the latter might bring forth offspring for him who had died.

When we reflect on this command, we commonly assent to the opinion that much license was given to sexual lust among the Jews, since polygamy was not only permitted but even commanded.

But my opinion is different, for we see the ways of nature. As soon as the law orders us to do something, we do it unwillingly and incline toward what is forbidden. Nor did polygamy lack disadvantages. We see the boundless weakness of women. They indulge their moods and are controlled by them. One is irritable and quarrelsome; another is proud. This one is unsuited to manage a household; that one is negligent in bringing up children, etc. Therefore it was a serious matter to marry the wife of a deceased brother, for the law could not be evaded under any pretext. Hence this law did not give license for lust; but it did increase trouble, toil, and worries."

1535 "In Genesin Enarrationum," *WA* 42:580, 19 – 581, 9 – 582, 18; *LW* 3:42–47

44 "But when Deuteronomy (25:5) directs a brother to raise up offspring for his dead brother, polygamy is included and is established by Moses. And this was the reason why Solomon had such a large number of wives, of whom some were certainly related to him by consanguinity or affinity; and if there was some poor little woman in that household, she joined herself to the king as her blood relative or her relative by marriage. Then they attached themselves to their cousin, and he supported a large number of such women. Nevertheless, because of this law some were undoubtedly concubines alongside the queen. Surely it was troublesome and intolerable to be burdened with so many wives or concubines for whom you do not have the slightest desire."

1535 "In Genesin Enarrationum," *WA* 44:315, 32 – 316, 2; *LW* 7:18–19

46 "Lamech was the first man who had two wives at the same time, and Jacob had four, yet they were holy ministers of God."

1537 *TR* 3:453, 3–4; *LW* 54:244

47 "This sin Moses points out clearly when he states: 'They took to wife such of them as they chose.' It is as though he were saying: 'To take a wife is nothing evil; if it is done properly, it is something good. But those men were sinning in this respect, that without discretion and contrary to the will and judgment of the fathers they married whomever they themselves wished, as many as they wished, and without distinction took married women as well as unmarried ones.'

This is a harsh statement. With it Moses indicates the great sins that they

promiscuously took two or more wives, exchanged wives, or took them away from others by force the way Herod took possession of his brother Philip's wife (Mk 6:17). This boundless dissoluteness of their lusts Moses points out and condemns."

1538 "In Genesin Enarrationum," *WA* 42:283, 11-19; *LW* 2:31-32

48 "If you want to be like Joshua and Samson, see to it also that all the circumstances impel you to change the civil administration and slay the magistrate, just as those heroes were moved by a special call. Otherwise the example has no validity....

Accordingly, this is handed down not as an example but in order that we may abstain from the example and from imitating it. We should admire but not imitate it, for there are some things which we should imitate and some things which we should admire. Hope, believe, pray, just as Leah did. But you should not marry four wives, as Jacob did. For this pertains only to Jacob and to those whom God wanted to be exempted from the rule."

1538 "Text des Genesisvorlesung," *WA* 43:653, 13-29; *LW* 5:326

49 "In his *Confessions* Augustine reports that the Manichaeans inveighed against the very saintly patriarchs with the most virulent reproaches for having many wives and children.... They do not see that it is stated very clearly in the text how the very saintly women cry out, pray, give thanks, and trust in God, likewise that God heard them, that God had regard for them and brought about a change. God, who was invoked, who heard, and who was praised and blessed, is in the midst of these accounts. Therefore they should not have regarded purity, innocence, and chastity in accordance with their own judgment as concupiscence and lustful acts befitting pimps.... Therefore they were not harlots. No, they were lawful wives given to Jacob for the purpose of procreating offspring."

1538 "Text des Genesisvorlesung," *WA* 43:666, 18-35; *LW* 5:344-45

50 "This belongs to the sacrament: when man and woman—not [man and] virgin—come together and become one flesh, that is the sacrament, and bigamy prevents nothing. It is enough that the man and woman are one body as Christ and the church. And Paul [says] to all husbands, not only those who have a [living] wife, but [also to those who have] other [wives] who are dead, "Love." [He says this] without regard for whether he has one, etc. If [his first wife is] dead, [and] he takes another, he again becomes one body with her."

1539 "Predigten," *WA* 47:677, 12-17; *LWI* 7.92

51 "This must have been a very chaste people.... This is not an example for us. Abraham had two wives."

1539 "Predigten," WA 47:680a, 25 – 681a, 1; LW null

52 "It was lawful for them to have many wives and concubines."¹⁰

1539 "Handschriftliche Einträge ins Alte Testament," DB 3:286, 7–8; LW null

53 "Solomon and David were made polygamous on account of poor female relatives. But now our avaricious nobles and peasants seek it on account of their rich female kin, and thus the wretched and impoverished girls are not provided for. Therefore we prohibit these men on a political level on account of necessity; but the pope prohibits [this] on account of hypocrisy and the dispensation of money."

1539 TR 4:300, 34 – 301, 1; LW null

54 "He was saying concerning the polygamy of David, who had ten wives, [that] he was [so] oppressed with various other burdensome and troubling matters, that he scarcely would have touched a wife once a year."

1539 TR 4:437, 5–7; LW null

55 "We cannot advise that any should make a public introduction, that is, a law, that it is allowable to marry more than one wife.... But when it is said that what is right before God shall be permitted, this may be true in a measure."¹⁰

1539 "Wittenberger Ratschlag," BR 8:640, 22–32; LWI 8.153

56 "God has instituted marriage as a society between two persons alone, and not more, so nature does not become destroyed. So we have the passage, These two shall become one flesh, and thus it was at first. But Lamech introduced the example of having more than one wife, which is spoken of concerning him in the Scriptures as bringing in something against the first rule. Accordingly it became a custom with the unbelieving, until Abraham and his descendants took more wives; and so it came to be allowed in the law of Moses, Deut. 21:[15]. If a man have two wives. For God allowed something to weak nature.

But inasmuch as at the beginning and conformably to the creation, a man was not to have more than one wife, so such a law is praiseworthy and therefore to be received in the Church; and no other law is to be made against it. For Christ repeats this passage, They two shall be one flesh, Matt. 19, and reminds us of how it was before the time of human weakness.

But that in a certain case a dispensation might be given, as for instance in the case of a captive in a strange land, who has become free and brings his wife with him, or in the case of some chronic disorder such as was thought

¹⁰ John A. Faulkner, "Luther and the Bigamous Marriage of Philip of Hesse," *The American Journal of Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 1913): 206–31; here 213.

of for a time with lepers—that in such cases, with the advice of their pastor, a man might take a wife again, not to bring in a law but as counsel for his necessity, this we do not condemn. Because it is one thing to bring in a law and another to use a dispensation, this we humbly beg you to observe.”¹¹

1539 *“Wittenberger Ratschlag,”* BR 8:640, 36 – 641, 61; LWI 8.153

57 “As now Your Princely Grace has finally concluded to have another wife, so we think that such is to be held secret, as is said above of a dispensation.”¹²

1539 *“Wittenberger Ratschlag,”* BR 8:643, 140–41; LWI 8.153

58 “So far we hold this for right that what was permitted concerning marriage in the law of Moses is not forbidden by the Gospel.”¹³

1539 *“Wittenberger Ratschlag,”* BR 8:643, 150–51; LWI 8.153

59 “Now polygamy pertained to the Jews along with writs of divorce, both of which the gospel abrogated in accordance with the first institution: ‘The two will be one flesh,’ whether inseparably glued together, or as Caesar says, ‘the individual mode of life.’ Also the perverse examples, as Lamech, Esau, David, who took another wife. For even if one is not to judge by examples but by laws, nevertheless the adding in of examples does not in any way shed light on the material to be explained, but it does illustrate and often even interpret the laws themselves.”

1540 *“Dialectica,”* WA 60:154, 265–71; LWI 2.54

60 “Lamech is the author of polygamy, authors of a great new evil.”

1540 *“Einträge in Luthers Handexemplar des Neuen Testaments,”* DB 4:318, 22–24; LW null

61 “I have received Your Princely Grace’s letter and note therein that you are pleased with our counsel, which we would be pleased to see kept secret. However, Melanchthon has not yet written me, that Your Princely Grace [has given any] indication. But he will certainly write me, or report orally. In any case, the reason we would like the business to be left a secret is because of the example it would set, which thereafter everyone would want to follow, right down to the coarse peasants. Perhaps [there are] equally weighty or weightier reasons—be they for or against [giving indication of the marriage]—that could be brought forward, through which we might well have our hands full. Wherefore your Grace will please not only keep secrecy

¹¹ Faulkner, 213–14.

¹² Faulkner, 215–16.

¹³ Faulkner, 216.

in this matter, but also improve [your life] as you promised in regard to this matter."

1540-04-10 BR 9:90, 4-14; LW null

62 "In answer to your question about the Landgrave's new wedding, dear Antony, I can write nothing.... I only know that no public proofs of the nuptials have been shown me.... One must not pronounce rashly on insufficient evidence about the doings of princes."¹⁴

1540-06-02 BR 9:123, 3 - 124, 12; LW null

63 "Most serene, high-born Elector, most gracious Lord! I have heard that Your Electoral Grace is being unjustly importuned by the court at Dresden about the matter concerning the Landgrave and would like to know what he should give such wise-guys from Meissen to understand. For what pertains to the matter, we both—I and Melanchthon—were unwilling to report to *you*, Your Electoral Grace (as a matter of confession), as it is clearly proper to keep things secret in confessional matters both the matter [itself] and the counsel given about it in confession. And had the Landgrave not revealed this matter and counsel of the confessional, [all] this unpleasantness and idle talk might never [have taken place]. I still say that if the matter were brought up with me even today, I would not know what counsel to give other than what I did.... We, for our part,... humbly bade His Princely Grace that if he would not, or, as he averred before God and his conscience, could not, do otherwise, to please keep the matter secret, because such necessity drove him to it. For before the world and the imperial laws it was indefensible. This he promised to do. Accordingly, we wished as much as was possible to help cover the action before God by means of examples, such as Abraham and others. This happened and was handled confessionally, in clean fashion, so that no one can lay the guilt at our feet, as though we did this readily and gladly or with delight and joy.... Indeed, both under the papacy and later, I have received and given counsel in more matters in a confessional manner. If these were revealed, I should have to say no to them or even report the confession. Such things do not belong in the secular courts, nor are they to be revealed. God has here His very own court and must counsel the soul where no code of justice or legal arts can help.... But had I known that the Landgrave had long since been making satisfaction for his insuppressible desires, and could make satisfaction for them with others, as I have now just learned that he did with her of Eschwege,¹⁵ certainly not even an angel could have brought me to give such counsel. I was looking at his unavoidable necessity and weakness, and

¹⁴ In this letter of June 2, 1540, Luther feigns ignorance of Philip's marriage that took place on March 4, 1540.

¹⁵ A mistress of unknown identity.

also at the peril of his conscience, which M. Bucer reported to us. Much less would I have advised that this should come to a public wedding ceremony, and with such a woman (this bit was kept from us) from whom a princess and young countess should come. This is certainly intolerable, even to the whole empire [it is] unbearable. However, I understood and hoped, that because he, out of weakness of the flesh, had to make use of commoners with sin and shame, that he would do something like take an honorable maiden, secretly keep her in a house, have her in secret marriage (even if this would have been seen before the world as illegitimate) for the great exigency of his conscience, mount her and ride her out, as indeed often takes place with great lords. In like manner I also advised certain parsons under Duke George and the bishops that they should secretly marry their cooks.... I am not ashamed of what is being reported, even if it should come out before the whole world; but for the sake of the unpleasantness which would then follow, I should prefer, if possible, to know the matter kept quiet."

1540-06-10 *BR* 9:133, 1 – 134, 74; *LW* null

64 "As for this Macedonian business [Philip's bigamous marriage], afflict not yourself [Melanchthon] too much respecting it; matters are now come to a pass that renders utterly futile either joy or sadness. Why should we kill ourselves?"¹⁶

1540-06-18 *BR* 9:144, 23–25; *LW* null

65 "Is it not a good plan to say that the bigamy had been discussed and should not he [Philip of Hesse] say that he had indeed debated the matter, but wasn't finally decided? All else must be kept quiet. How would it be, if for the sake of the greater good and of the Christian Church, one would tell a good, strong lie?... And before he, Luther, would reveal the confession, which Bucer had made to him in the Landgrave's name, and thus speak about the pious prince, whom he above all had wished to serve, he would rather say that Luther had talked like a fool, and take the blame on himself."

1540-07-15 "First Protocol at the Eisenach Conference";¹⁷ *LW* null

¹⁶ "When he [Melanchthon] had gone as far as Weimar, the worriment and anxiety occasioned by the threatened publication of his and Luther's advice to the landgrave, cast him upon a bed of sickness. He saw that such a publication would not only put him and Luther in a very bad light, but was calculated to injure the cause of the Gospel. He communicated his troubles to Luther and received a letter of consolation in reply. But he broke down at any rate, and his strength failed so rapidly that death seemed imminent" (Joseph Stump, *Life of Philip Melanchthon* [Reading, PA: Pilger Publishing House, 1897], 158–59). Melanchthon recovered after Luther's heroic prayer, in which he demanded that God heal Melanchthon for the sake of the Reformation.

¹⁷ Max Lenz, *Briefwechsel Landgraf Phillipps Des Grossmüthigen von Hessen mit Bucer* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1880), 1:373. The document is not included in the Weimar edition, but Luther participated in this conference and his views shaped its conclusion.

66 "Therefore I wish (if it is possible) that the Landgrave again would go back to living in the secret 'Yes' and in the public 'No,' and simply let talk and preaching have their way, so that no one is able to help himself to having more than one wedded-wife by way of the law or example. [I wish that] he would hold his peace about everything concerning the secret counsel and the difficult situation that were discussed in confession or might come up in the future. But I wish that he would forbear the announcement. For so long as no announcement has been made that one may have two wives, but there is just loud talk for it (and this only about the single person of the Landgrave), let loud talk combat loud talk."

1540-07-16 BR 9:178, 42 – 179, 50; LW null

67 "By God's grace I know well to distinguish what in a crisis of the conscience before God can possibly by grace be ceded from what (outside of such a crisis situation before God) does not rightly belong in open society on earth."

1540-07-24 BR 9:200, 25–28; LW 8.161

68 Philip of Hesse should keep his bigamy secret and give ambiguous answers concerning the matter: "For this Your Princely Grace will not be able to obtain, that the world should take such a secret marriage of Your Princely Grace as an open [legal] marriage, even if you could present a hundred Luthers, Philip[Melanchthon]s, and others for it. For people will indeed say, 'Luther and Philip [Melanchthon] do not have the power to establish another law against public and praiseworthy law even if they are in secret obliged to counsel otherwise for the sake of the conscience in crisis.'... Should Your Princely Grace now wish, by revealing the counsel that was given, to go out of God's court (who yields it with grace if there be a crisis) into the court of man, so must Your Princely Grace also suffer the punishments of human law without the assistance or aid of God's court, in which Your Princely Grace did not remain.... And why are you arguing about not wishing the gal to be taken for a whore? Already now, before the counsel is revealed, must you suffer that she be taken for a whore before the whole world, though before the three of us, that is before God, she is held to be nothing other than a wedded concubine."

1540-07-24 BR 9:200, 30 – 201, 69; LW 8.161

69 "It pleases me right well that Your Princely Grace has given such a reserved answer to the unnecessary and dangerous questions of the Margrave and the men of Meissen, for, as they wish to be so holy and so friendly, they should be so before others by helping quiet such loud talk, as, thank God, everyone does. The Margrave has also tried to poke around with

me, but I will answer him as I have done many others, particularly those in Dresden, perhaps more strongly. For I shall do it with good conscience, as Christ does [when he says] in the gospel, 'The Son does not know the day,' and as a pious father confessor, who should and must say publicly or in court that he knows nothing of what is being asked him of a secret confession. Thus what one secretly knows, one cannot know publicly. So even if it should get spoken of openly, one should not believe it. Now since Your Princely Grace does not desire to defend this matter, making a public example of it, but to make use of such grace in view of your crisis of conscience, it seems good to me that, should they come again, your Grace should be a little sharp with them."

1540-09-17 *BR* 9:233, 4-19; *LW* null

70 "It seems to me that silence in such cases is not only a response, but also the best response. But it is not against us that Sir Justice proceeds against the law and example of public polygamy, as we also do, and not against necessity and casuistic dispensation for a single person, with which we as father confessors were dealing."

1540-09-17 *BR* 9:240, 34-39; *LW* null

71 "When news of the bigamy of Hesse spread abroad, the doctor [Martin Luther] said with a serene countenance, 'He's a remarkable man. He has his [propitious] star. I think he wishes to obtain it [consent for his bigamy] through the emperor and the pope in order to gratify his desire. It's also possible that he may defect from us as a result of this business.'"

1540 *TR* 4:625, 24 - 626, 4; *LW* 54:379

72 "Something could have been done about secret concubinage."

1540 *TR* 4:628, 8-9; *LW* 54:381

73 "The doctor [Martin Luther] said, 'Great is the scandal caused by our Hesse, but the restoration [of Württemberg] caused much greater offense.... Bigamy has well-known examples in the Scriptures and could have been kept secret, but to drive out the king, the emperor's brother, from the duchy [of Württemberg] in the face of the raging of the bishops and the pope! That was a great risk.... Just be calm! It will blow over. Perhaps she [Philip's second wife] will soon die.'"

1540 *TR* 4:634, 12-19; *LW* 54:382

74 "We have suffered greater scandals than this, but the papists excuse all their sodomous lusts by this bigamy. What can we do? If they had only followed my advice! But with the way it was done, we cannot leave the church. The scandal will be blamed on me. I believe that he [Philip] will

round up some others, who will defend what he has done. They cannot make a rule out of it; the example has no validity. We are under our magistrate and make use of our political laws according to Paul's doctrine. That they cannot take from me."

1540 *TR* 4:651, 13–21; *LW* null

75 "They [papists] kill people while we strive for life—and practice polygamy!" This he said with a pleased look on his face and not without loud laughter."

1540 *TR* 4:657, 14–15; *LW* 54:389

76 "If somebody should ask, 'Does that deed [Philip's second marriage] please you?' I would reply, 'No!' If I could change it I would. If I can't change it I'll bear it with equanimity."

1540 *TR* 4:658, 9–11; *LW* 54:390

77 "We have up to this point through so many writings shown that Moses's law does not apply to us and no longer has any legal standing. And one should observe neither the example of the history of the saints, much less of the kings, but rather God's command and their faith."

1542 "Antwort D. M. L. auff den Dialogum Hulrichi Nebulonis," *WA* 53:193a, 30–33; *LWI* 6.22

78 "Whoever follows this idiot [writing under the pseudonym Huldreichus Neobulus] and book and thereupon takes more than one wedded-wife, and desires that it should be a righteous thing, the devil will bury him in the abyss of hell, Amen."¹⁸

1542 "Antwort D. M. L. auff den Dialogum Hulrichi Nebulonis," *WA* 53:195a, 14 – 196a, 1; *LWI* 6.22

79 "The reference to the fathers of whom Moses speaks is irrelevant: Moses is dead. Granted, however, that bigamy was legal in the days of the fathers and Moses—which can never be established—still they had God's word for it that such a permission was given them. That we have not. And although it was permitted to the Jews and tolerated by God, while God Himself considered it wrong, ... it was merely a dispensation.... Now, there is a great difference between a legal right and a dispensation, or something that is tolerated or permitted. A legal right is not a dispensation, and a dispensation is not a legal right; whoever does, obtains, or holds something

¹⁸ Hastings Eells, *The Attitude of Martin Bucer toward the Bigamy of Philip of Hesse*, Yale Historical Publications, Miscellany, XII (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1924), 212.

by a dispensation does not do, obtain, or hold it by legal right."¹⁹

1542 "Antwort D. M. L. auff den Dialogum Hulrichi Nebulonis," *WA* 53:196a, 8 – 197a, 7; *LWI* 6.22

80 "What need is there why we should try to find all sorts of reasons to explain why the fathers under Moses were permitted to have many wives? God is sovereign; He may abrogate, alter, mitigate a law as He pleases, for emergency's sake or not. But it does not behoove us to imitate such instances, much less to establish them as a right. But this Tulrich [Huldreichus Neobulus] rashly declares carnal lust free, and wants to put the world back to where it was before the Flood, when they took them wives, not like the Jews by God's permission, or because of an emergency or for charity's sake towards homeless women, as Moses directs, but, as the text says, 'which they chose' (Gen. 6, 2).... That is the way nowadays to rise to the stars. In this way we have Moses and the fathers with their examples as beautiful cloaks for carnal liberty; we say with our lips that we are following the examples of the fathers, but in very deed we act contrary to them. Lord, have mercy! If the world continues, what all may we not expect to happen these times, if even now shameless fellows may print what they please."²⁰

1542 "Antwort D. M. L. auff den Dialogum Hulrichi Nebulonis," *WA* 53:199a, 11 – 200a, 14; *LWI* 6.22

81 Solomon had so many wives because he married widows as their royal "next of kin." God allowed polygamy to take care of widows and increase population.

1542 *TR* 5:180, 20 – 181, 9; *LW* null

82 David was allowed ten wives, but sinned when he lusted after Bathsheba.

1544 "Predigten," *WA* 49:527, 5–7; *LW* null

As the quotations above show, Luther's comments began from before he posted his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517 and continued until two years before his death in 1546, with a flurry of activity around 1540 when Philip of Hesse had his bigamous marriage. Luther's advice to Philip was not simply one mistaken answer given in the heat of the moment, but represented his complex teaching on polygamy in general. He was personally and politically opposed to it, but refused to condemn it as sinful for all people in all times and places because of the example of the Old Testament patriarchs and a

¹⁹ W. H. T. Dau, *Luther Examined and Reexamined: A Review of Catholic Criticism and a Plea for Reevaluation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 233.

²⁰ Dau, 234.

lack of any scriptural *sedes doctrinae* prohibiting it.

Luther's teaching on polygamy may be a source of embarrassment to modern Lutherans, but one cannot legitimately eliminate the embarrassment by claiming that Luther had the same attitude toward polygamy as canonized in the Council of Trent and endorsed by Chemnitz. Though Luther found polygamy personally repugnant, he refused to claim scriptural authority for his personal attitude by adding to Scripture an absolute prohibition against the practice. As an exegete he had to conclude, "What shall we say? If God commands him [polygamous Jacob], it is necessary that we close [our] mouth and say that anything that pleases God pleases us" (#24 above).

True, Luther expressed regret about how Philip's bigamy turned out. He was angry at Philip for not giving a completely accurate description of his situation when he was asking for permission to contract a second marriage and for not keeping it secret. His ultimate conclusion, however, as expressed to John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, shows that he did not think his counsel was a mistake: "I still say that if the matter were brought up with me even today, I would not know what counsel to give other than what I did.... I am not ashamed of what is being reported, even if it should come out before the whole world; but for the sake of the unpleasantness which would then follow, I should prefer, if possible, to know the matter kept quiet" (#63 above).

Luther did not stand alone in his teaching about polygamy. Melanchthon agreed with him, as can be seen from his co-signing the *Wittenberger Ratschlag*. Previous to this watershed moment, Melanchthon had written concerning King Henry VIII's question about the permissibility of divorcing Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn:

If the King desires to provide for the succession, how much better it is to do so without throwing any stigma on his previous marriage! And this may be done without peril to any one's conscience or reputation by a second marriage. For although I would not concede polygamy generally—for I said above that we are not laying down laws—yet in this case, for the great benefit of the kingdom, and, it may be also, for the sake of the King's conscience, I hold that the safest course for the King would be to marry a second wife, without casting off the first; because it is certain that polygamy is not prohibited by Divine Law; nor is it unprecedented. Abraham, David, and other holy men had a number of wives.²¹

²¹ Melanchthon, "De Divortio Henrici VIII, 1531" *Corpus Reformatorum* 2:526; as translated by Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 262-263.

Nor were Luther and Melanchthon alone in their teaching on polygamy. "The careful study of Rockwell has shown that his [Luther's] opinion [on bigamy] was shared by the great majority of his contemporaries, Catholic and Protestant alike."²²

While Luther's teaching on polygamy is an embarrassment for many Christians today, his reasoning is still worth serious consideration by those who seek to derive doctrine from Scripture alone, *sola scriptura*, while at the same time being aware of the serious problems that can result from legalized polygamy. A candid acknowledgment of the complexity of the question is particularly appropriate in view of the heightened interest in Luther as the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation approaches. The issue played a major historical role in the Reformation as theologians and rulers lined up for or against Philip of Hesse and his theological allies. It became a touchstone to test whether churches would solve moral problems by creating convenient canon law or whether they would restrict themselves to what Scripture alone teaches. It was used to teach the difference between the two kingdoms, in this case characterized as the difference between man's court and God's court. Finally, it illustrated particularly well the tension that could come to boil between exegetical, systematic, and practical theology. While Luther was not completely consistent in his teaching, the following comments are recurrent themes in his writings.

In the realm of exegetical theology, and contrary to the Council of Trent, Luther concluded that it was neither commanded nor forbidden by any divine law for Christians to have several wives at the same time (#1, 5, 18, 26, 27, 34, 41, 52). Luther also found that God forbade polygamy for pastors (#20, 34), but commanded it in the case of levirate marriages (#43, 44), and that polygamous marriages were true marriages that created one-flesh unions (#19, 21, 34, 49, 50). He was certain that monogamy conforms to creation and is God pleasing (#55, 56). On the whole, he concluded that Lamech's polygamy proves nothing about its goodness or badness,²³ but that patriarchal polygamy was legal, holy, approved by God, and not sinful (#4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 28, 34, 43, 49, 51).

In the realm of systematic theology, Luther concluded the following:

1. Marriage is between a man and a woman (#56).

²² Preserved Smith, 384; William Walker Rockwell, *Die doppelhehe des landgrafen Philipp von Hessen* (Leipzig: A. Pries, 1903); Rockwell's work is available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951001713806;rview=1up;seq=5>.

²³ See especially #33 in the quotations above. Luther was inconsistent with his comments on Lamech's polygamy. The quotations above include the following claims: it was not necessarily bad (#2, 5, 8, 9, 12, 14, 33); it was good (#46); it was bad (#13, 56, 59, 60).

2. God approved of polygamy for the sake of population growth or other necessity (##7, 29, 31, 32, 36, 38, 43, 44, 49, 53, 54, 80, 81).
3. God gave a special call to patriarchs to be polygamous, but their example should not be imitated by those who have not received the same special call (##23, 24, 34, 43, 48, 51).
4. Laws rather than examples must govern behavior (##31, 59, 77).
5. Though we may disapprove of polygamy, we should not condemn what God commends (##17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 26, 55).
6. What God has not forbidden must be left free, and what is right before God should be permitted (##30, 55, 58).
7. What God has not commanded may be uncertain (##31, 32).
8. One must have a clear conscience before engaging in polygamy, and must not engage in polygamy for the wrong reasons (##43, 47, 53).

In the realm of practical theology, and in agreement with the Council of Trent, Luther concluded that it should be forbidden by human law for Christians to have several wives at the same time (##26, 30, 32, 35, 53, 55). His agreement on this point, however, was not absolute. He thought that polygamy could be approved for Christians in cases of extreme necessity, not as a law, but as a dispensation from the law (##31, 35, 55, 56, 57, 63, 67, 68, 70, 74). He thought that serious marital problems would better be solved by polygamy than by divorce (##3, 40). Of paramount concern was that scandal must be avoided when exercising Christian freedom (##26, 31, 32). Therefore polygamy should be kept secret from society (##57, 61, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73), and if necessary, lies should be told to conceal it (##62, 65, 66, 69).

The last conclusions of Luther in the realm of exegetical and practical theology are particularly problematic for modern students of Luther. That patriarchal polygamy was approved by God and not sinful, and that secrecy and lies are acceptable methods to avoid scandal, violate common moral standards today. Knowing that Luther held these conclusions, however, helps resolve some contradictory statements that Luther made about polygamy.

Luther found himself in a very difficult position when the *Dialogue of Hulrich Nebulo* was published pseudonymously as part of a movement to legalize polygamy. Luther felt compelled to write a rebuttal of the tract. The problem was that it would not serve Luther's purpose in the rebuttal to repeat again his oft-repeated teaching that God was pleased with patriarchal polygamy. Because the conflict over polygamy had the possibility of seriously harming the Reformation and hindering the spread of the gospel, Luther thought that no holds should be barred in the fight. When secrecy

about Philip's bigamy became impossible, he encouraged telling "a good, strong lie" for the good of the church (#65). Luther was not above following his own advice. He feigned ignorance of Philip's marriage (#62), wished that Philip would openly deny that the marriage had taken place (#66), and said that he would feign ignorance with a good conscience, "as Christ does [when he says] in the gospel, 'The Son does not know the day,'" (#69). It is therefore entirely reasonable to evaluate some of his statements in his rebuttal as words designed to mislead the reader, words that could be characterized as exegetical lies.

In his rebuttal, Luther gives the impression that taking more than one wife could never be a righteous thing, but he doesn't really agree with that as he shows in many other places. A careful reader discerns that what Luther actually says is that it could never be a righteous thing to take more than one wife *for the reasons given in the Dialog of Hulrich Nebulo*.²⁴ Taking more than one wife *for valid reasons* is left open as an unexpressed possibility. In his rebuttal, Luther gives the impression that the legality of patriarchal polygamy is uncertain,²⁵ but he doesn't think so himself, as he shows in other places on the basis of the holiness of the patriarchs and the law of levirate marriage. In his rebuttal, Luther suggests that God considered polygamy wrong despite his contrary interactions with the patriarchs,²⁶ thereby effectively pitting God in his supposed hidden thoughts against God as he revealed himself in Scripture. It is the revealed God that Luther confesses elsewhere when he says again and again that patriarchal polygamy was legal, holy, approved by God, and not sinful. Whether Luther would have revised the statements in his rebuttal before publication is not known, since he decided not to fan the flames of controversy by publishing his scathing draft. It is ironic that this anomalous unpublished opinion is the one that is considered most authentically "Lutheran" today.

It is relatively easy to select isolated quotations from Luther's writings that make him appear to be completely inconsistent, at times approving, and at times disapproving, of polygamy. When Luther's statements are examined together, one can see that his teaching about polygamy was for the most part consistent, though quite complex: he both approved and disapproved of polygamy, but for different reasons and in different contexts.

²⁴ "Whoever follows this idiot and book and thereupon takes more than one wedded-wife, and desires that it should be a righteous thing, the devil will bury him in the abyss of hell. Amen." (#78 above; italics added).

²⁵ "Granted, however, that bigamy was legal in the days of the fathers and Moses—which can never be established—..." (#79 above; italics added).

²⁶ "And although it was permitted to the Jews and tolerated by God, while God Himself considered it wrong.... it was merely a dispensation..." (WA 53:196a, 12 – 197a, 2; italics added).

The search for historical truth, then, provides one good reason to restudy Luther's teaching about polygamy. Another good reason is the search for exegetical truth, the desire to interpret Scripture properly, neither adding to, nor subtracting from, what God has revealed. In addition, systematic theology is strengthened by properly distinguishing revealed doctrine from human application. Finally, practical theology may reap substantial benefits from this study as the church engages the world today.

According to comprehensive anthropological data collected in the 1960s, roughly 48 percent of societies practice frequent polygyny, and another 37 percent practice occasional polygyny, whereas only about 15 percent are limited to monogamy.²⁷ By a curious coincidence, the Christian church is growing most quickly in Africa, where polygamy is often legal and practiced. As the Lutheran church continues its missionary activity and its doctrinal discussions with these growing churches, it will need to wrestle with how it approaches the issue of polygamy.

Luther still has much to contribute to this discussion, though his advice about secrecy and lies are best rejected. Polygamy is a complex issue that should be examined from exegetical, systematic, and practical points of view. Instead of answering the question with an absolute yes or no, the church should preserve the important principles identified by Luther as he struggled with the issue. The best short answer, after all, may be the one Luther gave to George Brück in 1524: "As for me, I truly admit that I cannot prohibit it if someone wishes to marry several wives, nor is it repugnant to the Sacred Scriptures: in truth, however, I would not want such an example introduced among Christians in the first place, among whom it is proper to abstain even from things that are allowed, in order to avoid scandal, and for the integrity of life, which everywhere Paul requires" (#26).

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²⁷ J. Patrick Gray, ed., "Ethnographic Atlas Codebook," *World Cultures* 10, no. 1 (1998):89-90; <http://eclectic.ss.uci.edu/~drwhite/worldcul/Codebook4EthnoAtlas.pdf> (accessed 1/19/2016); this data is based on George P. Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Pr., 1969).