

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Twenty Six

Martin's Dearest - Katie Luther

Introduction

While Luther was in hiding at the castle in Wartburg, he spent his time translating the New Testament and writing a number of articles and tracts. One of the matters he addressed in his writing was the matter regarding monastic vows. He was especially burdened that the monks and nuns would be released practically and in their conscience especially from the vow of chastity, which mandated celibacy. This, Martin maintained, was contrary to God's word and the natural order of man.

Fighting for the Proper Married Life

The Catholic teaching encouraged people to forgo marriage in a so-called "pursuit of holiness." In fact, it was taught that it would be difficult to enjoy salvation without being a celibate clergy. Luther believed the Word of God spoken through the apostle Paul that to forbid marriage was a teaching of demons (1 Tim. 4:1, 3) and that to teach that marriage is unclean and not to be partaken of was wholly contrary to the Bible. He taught from the Scriptures that marriage is to be held in honor (Heb. 13:4), and that it has been ordained by God since the time of creation.

Luther further argued that marriage was holy and was not sinful, but actually prevented sin. Luther believed that for most people (the exception being those few who have received a gift from God to remain single for the sake of the kingdom) it is better to marry in order to avoid falling into fornication (1 Cor. 7:1-2).

Luther's writings on this matter caused no small stir. Some of the monks and nuns renounced their vows, left the monasteries and convents and began to marry. Luther was encouraged by these reports; he felt it was much better for these monks and nuns to marry than to end up in a life of immorality, which was sometimes the case of those living in convents and monasteries.

Luther encouraged Christians to follow the principle of one husband for one wife. But both his enemies and his followers asked him why he encouraged others to do something that he appeared not to have courage to do himself – get married.

Luther made it clear that he was not a man without feelings, but that he expected to face the death of an accused heretic and did not want to put a wife in the place of a widow. Luther knew God's word in Genesis 2:18 that it was not good for man to be alone, but he felt to continue for more years as a single man in order to devote himself fully to the Lord and to his work. Hearing that the monks were given wives in Wittenberg, he declared, "They won't give me one."

This all would change on June 13, 1525, when Martin Luther became a married man. How this came about and to whom he gave his heart are described below.

Katherine von Bora

Two years earlier in April of 1523 Luther and his friend Leonard Kopp devised a plan to help twelve nuns who wanted to leave their convent. This was a risky and daring endeavor; the convent was ruled by Duke George, who had made it a capital offense to assist in the escape of nuns or monks. The nuns were secretly led out in Kopp's covered wagon at night among empty barrels that were previously used in the delivery of smoked herring to the convent.



After the nuns were freed, Luther realized that, though it was difficult to arrange their escape, it was a much heavier responsibility to further assist them once they were freed. Martin, however, was full of sympathy to these weaker vessels and full of disdain to the cruel parents and religious leaders who had influenced them, often as young girls, to enter the cloister. He sought shelter and support for them from their relatives, but because of fear of the Duke, most refused. Eventually he found local families to take them in and places of employment for them. After two years only Katherine von Bora remained unmarried; she was living and working in the home of a local wealthy family.

Katherine, also known as Katie, was born in 1499 and was placed in the nunnery at the age of ten by her father. She took the vows of a nun at the age of sixteen. Like her companions, she became dissatisfied in the convent and was seeking the Lord, especially in response to the writings of Luther.

A Statement

Katharine apparently was attractive and had a couple of suitors. One in particular, of high social class, was one who Katherine would have married, but since his parents objected, no match took place and she was left alone. When Luther recommended another man to her, she declined – but said she would be willing to marry him!

Luther began to reconsider his resolve not to marry, even though he was sixteen years older than Katherine. He sought counsel of his parents, who were thrilled with the prospect of posterity. Although Luther did not claim to be madly in love, he gave three reasons why he changed his mind to marry. He said that this would definitely please his father, rile the pope and defy the devil. Thus at the age of forty-one Martin Luther married his twenty-six year old bride. Martin's aged parents were able to be present. Luther's friend, John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, gave the couple the Black Cloister as a wedding gift. This was the former monastery where Luther used to live during his years as a monk.



Many eyes were focused on this union in Wittenberg, which was so significant at that time. Some were happy with the newly-wed couple, but others criticized spitefully. This was Katherine's first taste of bearing the Lord's reproach with her reformer husband. One of Luther's friends told him that Katherine would be a "partner of his calamities."

Mutual Help

Katherine became a wonderful helpmate to Martin just as God created Eve to be for Adam. She was the one sovereignly chosen by God to match him. They were equally yoked in many ways, and both were consecrated to God, strong believers pursuing the Lord. Reading their letters, one can appreciate their compatible personalities. Martin referred to Katie as his *carissima* (his dearest), and addressed her as *Meine Herzliebe* (my heart love). But sometimes, because of her balancing and restricting of Martin, he sometimes referred to her as his "Kette" or (chain)!

History tells us that their love did blossom and grow over the years of their marriage. Watchman Nee once said that "Love is like anything organic; it needs feeding, and it needs food. Love dies without food. If you starve it, it will die. But if you feed it, it will grow."

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W. Nee

Martin and Katie learned during their years of marriage to love, value and respect one another. Martin later said, "If I should lose my Katie I would not take another wife though I were offered a queen." They were truly fellow heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7).

A Virtuous Wife and Loving Mother

Over time, Katie and Martin were blessed with six children: Hans, Elizabeth, Magdalene, Martin, Paul, and Margaret. Katherine was a loving wife and mother, and an able manager of all the family household and business affairs. She transformed the Black Cloister into a comfortable home – a challenging feat. The cloister functioned as a home, hostel, and hospital with Katie overseeing all. At times, all forty rooms would be occupied, not only with their own children, but also with extended family, friends, poor students, and an assortment of other guests and refugees. As Roland Bainton, a biographer of Martin Luther, wrote, "The hubbub in the household of babies, children, students, guests, refuges, and servants was so great that Luther sent his son Hans early away to school where he could study in quiet."

Katie was a diligent overseer of all the things at home, including a garden, an orchard, fish pond, and barnyard full of livestock. Martin called her "The Morning Star of Wittenberg" since she would arise at 4 a.m. in the summer and at 5 a.m. in the winter. Martin was so happy with his wife that he later exclaimed, "I would not change my Katie for France and Venice." He acknowledged that God had given her to him and said, "She is true to me and a good mother to my children." He appreciated her abilities to care for all the affairs at home, which allowed him a way not to neglect his work. He deferred to her in all the domestic affairs. Katie also assisted Martin in the care of his health, both physical and psychological. Her son, a medical doctor, said his mother was "half a doctor" because she cared for Martin and many others at home.

Katie and Martin experienced many joys, trials, anxieties, and had their share of

sorrows too. Their daughter Elizabeth died before she reached her first birthday. Speaking of this Luther said, "I would never have believed that the hearts of parents are so moved toward their children." Then their daughter Magdalene died at the age of thirteen. This truly was a great loss to them. At her deathbed, in sorrow, Martin prayed, "Lord, I love her very much and would like to keep her. But, dear Lord, since it is Thy will to take her away, I am glad to know that she will be with Thee."



They considered their children as "the fruit and joy of marriage." The Luther's loved spending time with their children, including many a musical evening. And their times around their table brought a variety of conversations, of which Katie was an active participant. Many of these conversations were written down by visiting students and recorded in the book *Table Talks*.

Martin and Katie enjoyed many conversations in their companionship with each other. Like other couples, they would sometimes teasingly banter each other. One time Katie asked Martin, "How could David say [Psa. 7:8], 'Judge me according to my righteousness,' when he didn't have any?" When Martin prodded her to read the Bible more, she said, "I've read enough, I've heard enough. I know enough. Would to God I lived it." Of course she did not always carry the conversation. Once she told Martin that she had a hard time believing that God commanded Abraham to kill his own son. She said, "God would not have done that to His son." To this Martin replied, "But Katie, He did." At one point Katie exposed Martin and assisted him in dealing with unbelief. After Martin had been depressed for several days,

Katie put on a funeral dress. When Martin asked her for the reason of her mourning clothes, she said he was in such distress that it seemed as if his God had died. Luther got the message and cheered up.

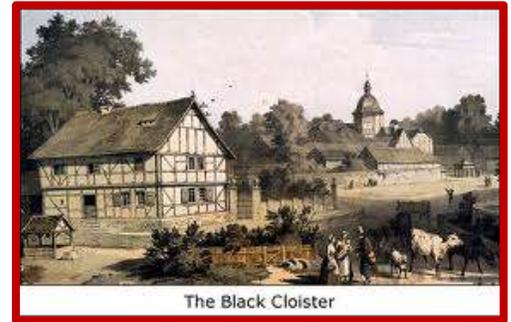
Conclusion

The end of this loving relationship came when Martin died at the age of 62. No doubt, Martin Luther is remembered for his great struggle with the degraded Roman Catholic Church and the release of the teaching of justification by faith, and of translating the Bible into the vernacular and giving people direct access to God. But as we can see, his marriage to Katie and their family life was also a great testimony to believers of that day and had a great impact on the German people, in particular. The appraisal of Roland Bainton was, "The Luther who got married in order to testify to his faith actually founded a home and did more than any other person to determine the tone of German domestic relations for the next four centuries."

Martin Luther, as Proverbs 18:22 tells us, found a good thing and favor from Jehovah in finding his wife Katie. She was a like the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31 who was a crown to her husband. Martin trusted in her and she was good to him all her days (31:11-12). She delighted to work, even arising while it was still night to care for her household. She stretched out her hand to the afflicted, and often supplied the needy. Strength and dignity were her clothing (25). She watched closely over the ways of her household, and did not eat the bread of idleness (27).

Katie pressed on six more years after her husband fell asleep in the Lord. She kept the cloister for a time by renting rooms to students until war besieged Wittenberg and she had to flee with her children. She attempted to return and rebuild a couple of times, but war and pestilence kept her from re-establishing her home. While fleeing the plague on horseback, Katie had a bad accident and never recuperated, but went to be with the Lord at the age of 53. Her final words were, "I will stick to Christ as a burr to a top coat."

What a sweet testimony the Luthers have given to us through their marriage and family life. Martin Luther had written that "Youthful infatuation does not last." He saw it like the wine at the wedding at Cana which ran out. But he said, "Nothing



is more sweet than harmony in marriage, and nothing more distressing than dissension." He noted that "Marriage offers the greatest sphere for good works, because it rests on love—love between the husband and the wife, love of the parents for the children, whom they nourish, clothe, rear, and nurse. . . . If it be said that marriage entails concern, worry, and trouble, that is all true, but these the Christian is not to shun." May we learn of the pattern of this couple. We are thankful for the testimony of this dear sister and wife of Martin Luther – Katherine von Bora or Katie Luther.

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

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