Overview

As a young monk, Martin Luther took a vow that he would remain celibate for life. Nevertheless, by age 35, Luther was speaking publicly against such vows. In Luther’s understanding of marriage as part of God’s good creation, despising marriage was the real sin. He arrived at the radical (for his time) conclusion that marriage was a true vocation—a divine calling. As a result of Luther’s sermons and writings, dropout rates at some northern European monasteries and convents increased significantly during the 1520s. By the beginning of 1525, the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, Germany, was occupied only by Luther and one other monk.

Objective
In this first session, the story of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora will help couples reflect upon their own thoughts and experiences regarding marriage.

Materials needed
• name tags
• Table Talk cards for Session 1
• songbooks
• a Bible
• The Lutheran Handbook on Marriage
• The Lutheran Course on Marriage Workbook
• Course DVD
• DVD player and screen

Martin Luther, a former monk, and Katharina von Bora, a former nun, married in June 1525. This marriage is still celebrated in Wittenberg, Germany, in June each year.
Luther, however, was a newlywed by the middle of that same year. His bride was Katharina von Bora, a former nun, who had escaped a convent and settled in Wittenberg two years earlier. The Luther-von Bora wedding caused quite a stir around Europe. Closer to home, Luther would later comment on how odd it was for a man to see “a pair of pigtails lying beside him, which he hadn’t seen there before” (Luther’s Works 54:191). Together the couple weathered various storms of life, including the tragic loss of two of their six children, severe illness, a household constantly overrun with guests, and the general upheaval of 16th-century church and society (caused, in part, by Luther).

Through it all, Martin and Katharina abided in each other, as the Lord Christ abided in them. Their marriage provides Christians with a robust model and an opportunity to reflect upon the “estate of marriage” and the call of married life.

Table Talk

This first session is a time to celebrate marriage—the marriage of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora, and the marriages of the couples taking this course. If possible, get the celebration going by making arrangements to serve pieces of cake (maybe even a decorated wedding cake) during this time.

The Lutheran Handbook on Marriage entries for this session:

“Five Important Stages of the Luther/von Bora Relationship,” pp. 16-17
“Katharina von Bora’s Herring Barrel Escape from the Convent,” pp. 18-19
“Five Noteworthy Things Martin Luther Said about Marriage,” pp. 22-24
Couples will discuss these Table Talk questions:

- How long have you been married? How did you meet your spouse?
- What Scripture passage was read during your wedding?
- What was the most memorable thing that happened at your wedding?
- Tell about a married couple that you admire. What makes them admirable?

Suggest that one person at each table pick up a Table Talk card at random, respond to the question, and pass the card to the person to the right, who will also answer the question and pass the card on. When that card has gone around the table, someone else can pick up another card and repeat the process until time is up.

**Large Group Stuff**

**Opening**

Briefly introduce yourself (if you haven’t already done so). If time and group size allows, invite couples to introduce themselves.

Open with a hymn or song, then read, or have a volunteer prepared to read, Genesis 1:27-28 (through “be fruitful and multiply”).

Invite couples to turn to pages 22-24 of The Lutheran Handbook on Marriage and read (or invite them to read) “Five Noteworthy Things Martin Luther Said about Marriage.” The session title comes from this Handbook entry, while the video presentation will actually include more than five things Luther said about marriage.

If time permits, you might also read the story of “Katharina von Bora’s Herring Barrel Escape from the Convent,” pages 18-19.
Read or have a volunteer read the Overview on page 8 of the Workbook.

Lead the group in prayer, using your own words or one of the following prayers.

Gracious God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ into the world to reveal your love to all people. Enrich these couples with every good gift, that their lives together may show forth your love; and grant that at the last we may all celebrate with Christ the marriage feast that has no end; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Adapted from ELW, p. 287.

Good and Gracious God, you bless the family and renew your people. Enrich husbands and wives, parents and children more and more with your grace, that, strengthening and supporting each other, they may serve those in need and be a sign of the fulfillment of your perfect kingdom; where, with your Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign, one God through all ages. Amen.

—Adapted from LBW, p. 204.

Video

Introduce the presenter: Hans Wiersma is a Lutheran pastor and Assistant Professor of Religion at Augsburg College whose doctoral work was in Reformation History. He has presented on the subject of “Luther on Marriage and Family” in many congregations and teaches a college course titled “Theology of Marriage and Family.” His own experience with marriage and family these days includes his wife, Kristin, and their four children.

Play the Session 1 DVD presentation in its entirety.
Large Group Activity

Turn to the newlywed portraits of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora on page 9 in the Workbook and discuss the questions about the portraits. Be sure to draw attention to Katharina’s portrait. Katharina actually bears two facial expressions—a clever trick by the artist. When the left side of her face is covered, you see a rather serious-looking woman. When the right side of her face is covered, you see a woman with a coy, Mona Lisa-like smile.

Point out that the marriage of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora was one of the most famous (or infamous) marriages of the time. Although the two were certainly not perfect partners, many Christians over the years have found inspiration and even instruction in the union of this former monk and former nun.

Hymn suggestions

• ELW 504
• LBW 229

Conclude Large Group Stuff with a hymn or song.
Small Group Stuff

Direct participants into small groups to discuss the questions on page 10 of the Workbook. Tell the groups what time to return for Wrap-Up. Answer questions from facilitators and participants as needed.

Wrap-Up

After the small groups return, remind participants to honor the confidences of their small group as they briefly share from their time together. Use questions like these from the Workbook to get started:

- What were some of the “pet names” that were shared? (You might mention that Martin Luther would sometimes also refer to his wife as “My Lord” —probably only half jokingly.)
- What were some of the “job titles” used to praise one another?
- What do you think is meant by the claim that Katharina “symbolizes the sacredness of everyday life”? (Point out that, in the 16th century, “women’s work” was considered mundane and therefore unholy. The “discovery” that the work of bearing and raising children, and running a household, was indeed God’s work must have been heard as gospel by many women of the time.)

Invite participants to share additional reactions or questions about today’s session or upcoming sessions.

Look at the At-Home Stuff on page 11 in the Workbook. Encourage couples to discuss the questions, do the activities they have time for, and read the selections from The Lutheran Handbook on Marriage for the next session.
Closing Litany and Prayer

Leader: God of love, in the beginning you created us male and female.
Group: Your love lasts forever.
Leader: Bless us abundantly as we live out our wedding promises.
Group: Your love lasts forever.
Leader: Fill us with your love and joy, and inspire us to celebrate Martin and Katie Luther and our own marriages.
Group: Your love lasts forever.
Leader: Guide us in the weeks ahead as we talk, learn, and laugh about married life.
Group: Your steadfast love lasts forever.
Leader: Help us to see marriage as your gift and always give thanks for it.