A Forceful and Fruitful Verse: Textual and Contextual Studies on Genesis 1:28 in Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation (1521-1531)

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Abstract: This dissertation asks—and seeks to answer—what the place and significance of “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) were, both in the thought of Martin Luther as well as in the context of the Wittenberg Reformation, from the verse’s initial polemic appearance in 1521 through Melanchthon’s Apologia in 1531. In accomplishing this task, this study gives careful attention to the historical setting and circumstances in which Genesis 1:28 first entered the polemical discourse via the debates surrounding clerical marriage and monastic vows. It then goes on to note the specific contours and power of Luther’s understanding of this verse as well as the controversy which surrounded its interpretation in the subsequent years. Such controversy is then observed both with respect to Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues as they squared off against prominent Catholic defenders, as well as in the wider German setting and the pamphlet wars which took place there. Finally, attention is given to the constructive power of Genesis 1:28 as it not only left its mark on Lutheran teachings and practices, but also as it was enshrined in such Lutheran confessional writings as the Augsburg Confession and its Apology.

While the primary focus of this study is to retell the story of this verse in the Wittenberg Reformation with priority given to Luther’s writings, this work also gives substantial notice to three areas which border upon the reformer’s thought. To begin with, significant attention is given to the thought context in which Luther’s understanding of Genesis 1:28 developed, here taking account of the church historical, natural legal, and natural philosophical conversations which framed its emergence. In this respect, historic discussions relating not only to this verse, but also to the natural affects and their relationship with the will come into our purview. Secondly, this study offers consideration to the importance of Luther’s
colleagues, both as they provided impetus for Luther’s thought in the context of the debate surrounding monastic vows, as well as through their polemical, translational, and catechetical contributions which assisted in its spread. Finally, observance is made as to the manner and means in which Luther’s teachings on Genesis 1:28 were disseminated throughout Reformation Germany and beyond, whether through Flugschriften and other polemical works, or via catechetical literature, confessional writings, and Kirchenordnungen.

Ultimately, this study argues that Luther’s newfound understanding regarding Genesis 1:28, not to mention its polemical employment in the debates surrounding vows of celibacy and priestly marriage, imbued this already explosive verse with heretofore unprecedented power and significance. Such power is then once again witnessed in this verse’s ability to constructively norm and shape not only the Wittenberg Reformation’s confession of marriage and sexuality, but also engrain itself in varying ways at the popular level. At deeper levels, however, this study gains a glimpse of a uniquely Lutheran understanding of humanity, sexuality, and man’s (natural) affective nature, even while tangential questions related to such an understanding evade simplistic answers.

Key terms: Martin Luther, Genesis, procreation, marriage, sexuality, celibacy, monasticism, natural affects, Philipp Melanchthon, natural law, natural philosophy, the body, Flugschriften