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Receptions of Israelite Nation-building: Modern Protestant Natalism and Martin Luther

by John Patrick McKeown

Abstract: Ancient nation-building demanded fecundity and traces of this lie dormant in Old Testament scriptures. In the USA today some Protestants preach natalism (an ideology promoting high fecundity) often with the objective shifted from national preservation to denominational aggrandizement. Some present Martin Luther as a forerunner of natalism and this article evaluates that claim, looking at his references to reproduction in historical and theological context.

Key Terms: population, fertility, Old Testament, Luther.

In the ancient world rivalry between tribes, city-states and empires for political existence and dominance led to desires for higher fecundity than necessary for maintaining a pacific human species. This was partly to offset deaths in war, but mostly a competitive wish to outnumber others. Fertility was encouraged by cultural means, but occasionally also by law. For example, Sparta imposed financial penalties and disgrace on bachelors, and exempted from tax fathers of four sons or more. Rome's censors in 403 BC fined older bachelors and Plutarch ascribed this to a need to replenish numbers lost in wars.ⁱ Later, emperor Augustus "penalized childless men ... and rewarded the prolific" because of worries about barbarian invasion, and Tacitus warned of German fecundity.ⁱⁱ

Centuries earlier, surrounded by empires, Judea had good reason to fear the political extinction that later happened. Archeologists have retrieved from sites across Judea from the 8th and 7th centuries BC more than eight hundred statuettes of a woman ready to lactate, and these "pillar figurines portray the fertile archetype, an ideal model of the dutiful Judean woman, wife, mother, the progenitress of Judeans."ⁱⁱⁱ The context was Assyrian aggression that extinguished the northern kingdom, Samaria, and the city-states of Arpad, Hamath and Damascus, enslaving their populations. Judean towns also fell, and Jerusalem was besieged (2 Kings 18). Byrne considers that "social reproduction ... represented a priority of state as well as family in Iron Age Judah."^{iv} After a war or plague the nation sought to repopulate emptied towns, as Judah did in the 7th century, so to "fill the land" was not a past event in national origins but a recurring imperative (Ezekiel 36:38; Nehemiah 7:4). Even in more peaceful times in the premodern world death stalked all age cohorts, especially as infant mortality and maternal death in labour, so maintaining a national population required that each woman gave birth five times, on average.^v

Such concerns are reflected in the Hebrew Bible but also transformed. God promises to bring from the loins of the patriarchs a "great nation" (Genesis 12:2, 15:4). Human fertility is a symbol of national hopes (Hosea 9:11), and "a large population is a king's glory, but without subjects a prince is ruined" (Proverbs 14:28). Genealogies portray an Israelite nation consisting mostly of biological descendants of those who entered the Promised Land after the exodus. However, national identity was not strictly ethnic. Birth did not guarantee loyalty to the national covenant, and conversely *ger* (strangers) can join Israel (Isaiah 14:1).

Post-biblical Judaism read “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28; 9:1) as God’s first command, a legal obligation upon every Jewish male to marry, and Maimonides writes “When does a man become obligated by this commandment? From the age of seventeen.”^{vi} Since the command was addressed to Noah and his sons (Genesis 9:1), to men alone, women were excused from obligation and allowed to use contraception. There was an extrinsic goal in preserving the nation, or rather the covenant people. However the minimal requirement, that a man produce at least two children (hardly sufficient for replacement), suggests that aggrandizement was not in view.

Early Christian exegetes of national promises and hopes discerned a trajectory beginning within the Old Testament, from biological ethnicity to covenant and voluntary affiliation, from chosen nation to holy church, born not of the flesh but the Spirit. Many admitted that “be fruitful” was originally a command to marry, but all agreed the command had been abolished. They looked instead to the spiritual fecundity of the Word, and mother church. Most early leaders of the church were dedicated to singleness and this long held the cultural high ground. In medieval Europe, civil rulers, far from worrying about a growing number of these nonreproductive citizens, esteemed them. Briefly, during the Crusades, some feared an imagined foreign fecundity and lamented that “When we conquer their lands we do not have people to populate them.”^{vii} But the esteem of nonreproductive singleness endured and was not shaken until after the rise of nationalisms.

Modern Natalism

The modern decline of fecundity began in rural France after 1800 and spread across Europe and the USA. As death rates fell, high fecundity was not pragmatic for families. But nations worried about rivals and national identity, and natalism emerged. In the USA it receded after the Great Depression. When in the 1980s a new Protestant natalism was born its character was different, renouncing interest in ethnicity or nationalism. Advocates who mention an extrinsic goal hope to strengthen Christianity or a denomination, but often it is construed simply as faithfulness.^{viii} Starting inside the homeschool movement, it has gained popularity at the fringes of many churches. It was noticed by the *New York Times* in 2004 as a “spiritual movement” called “natalism ... sweeping across the United States.”^{ix} CBN in 2006 interviewed supporters of “a new demographic movement – Natalism,” and one responded that “because we’re Christians, we believe our commandment is to be fruitful and multiply ... big families are what God would have us to do.”^x

Protestant natalism is not monolithic. Only a minority are legalists; a larger number are nonlegalists who preach the blessings of more offspring. An example of legalism is Charles Provan’s influential 1989 book. For him, creation reveals child-bearing as “the natural function of women” and “be fruitful and multiply” is “the first command to a married couple” so those choosing to beget “less children than possible” are disobeying God, and blessing means “the more the better.”^{xi}

Legalist natalism has been pastorally critiqued,^{xii} but I am equally alarmed by nonlegalist versions. Citizens of the USA and UK have high ecological footprints, and growth in those populations multiplies impact on a world already exceeding biocapacity.^{xiii} Nor is it helpful

nationally, given that the aggregate US footprint has overshot national biocapacity since 1972 (and the UK is worse). However, the narrow interest of a denomination's numerical growth may gain from natalism. An analysis of social survey data compared five possible causes of the 20th century change in "mainline" and "conservative" denominations' shares of US Protestantism. It found that "higher fertility and earlier childbearing among women from conservative denominations explains 76% of the observed trend for cohorts born between 1903 and 1973," and was more significant than moves or conversions.^{xiv} In a context of rivalry between denominations, or a wish to strengthen Christian presence in culture wars, natalism can seem attractive.

A new constitution for the Southern Baptist Convention, called the Great Commission Resurgence (GCR), warns in its tenth and final clause that "Too many Southern Baptists have embraced unbiblical notions about marriage and family. Too often we believe that ... smaller families are more 'responsible' than large families."^{xv} The lead author, interviewed after the GCR's launch in 2009, observes "You can almost document the decline of baptisms within the Southern Baptist Convention as the decline in the number of children that Baptists have." This happens because "we have bought into the mindset of the modern world ... that less children is ... better" but Psalm 128 indicates "God blesses the one who has a large number." He sees it as a component of church growth for "if you have one child as opposed to four, five or six, then you have a much smaller initial mission field."^{xvi}

Most natalists cite Genesis 1:28, Psalms 127 and 128, and other scriptures, but some also draw on Christian tradition, and the historical figure most often quoted is Martin Luther. In his short book *Provan* deploys fourteen long quotations from Luther, and websites such as "Lutherans and Procreation" similarly cite Luther.^{xvii} Historically sophisticated work is done by Allan Carlson, who cites Luther seventeen times in one article.^{xviii} Luther's writings do urge (almost) all to marry young, and since the main regulators of birth rates in Europe in his time were age at marriage and the percentage never married, that was natalist in effect. Luther however had different motives.

Luther's reasons for exalting marriage

In the 1520s Luther campaigned against vows of celibacy. Pastorally he was concerned for consciences tied by regretted vows, those pressed by parents into religious houses, and young adults who had been devoutly impetuous, for "God wants no forced service ... They should be released because man is not created for celibacy but to multiply."^{xix} Theologically he regarded vows as the mainspring of a culture of salvation by works.^{xx} He observed that one attractor to vows was the bad reputation of marriage for "every day one encounters parents who ... deter their children from marriage but entice them into priesthood and nunnery, citing the trials and troubles of married life."^{xxi} His remedy was to praise marriage as a better vocation so "our poor youth may not be ... misled by falsely glorified chastity."^{xxii}

Luther was also pastorally concerned about young people who delayed marriage or stayed single. He wrote that "a young man should marry at the age of twenty at the latest, a young woman at fifteen to eighteen" for at this age a youth "feels the burning of the flesh."^{xxiii} His concern was not to maximize reproduction but to protect young people from

falling into sin. He regarded marriage as the antidote to fornication, “a hospital to the sick, so that they do not fall into greater sin,” and he preached at a wedding “we must lift this estate even higher, praise and honor it even more.”^{xxiv} Luther judged that one issue deterring people from marriage was the prospect of offspring, so he addressed that as part of his promarriage teaching.

“For this is what they commonly say. ‘Why should I marry a wife when I am a pauper and a beggar? I would rather bear the burden of poverty alone.’ ... But this blame is unjustly fastened on marriage and fruitfulness. ... For if you had trust in God’s grace and promises, you would undoubtedly be supported.”^{xxv}

Luther accepted the traditional ban on contraception, so unlimited reproduction was inevitably part of marriage. He was also concerned that married couples should not limit offspring because childbearing and rearing had a vital positive function in his vision of parenthood as a vocation of neighbour oriented works replacing self oriented asceticism.^{xxvi} In a wedding liturgy Luther describes marriage as “a penitential institution in which the wife freely accepts the pain of childbirth ... and the husband the pain of daily labor and worry over his family’s well-being.”^{xxvii} Commenting on Genesis 3 he notes that God’s curses are designed to help the soul by hurting only the body. Apart from death, these curses only become fully operational in parenthood.

God turns eternal punishment into a temporal and physical one ... It is said as though they should all become pregnant. ... [but] everybody shies away from marriage because they might have grief with the bearing of children ... If you do not take a wife and eat your bread in the sweat of your brow, God will take his punishment from your body and lay it upon your soul. This is not a good exchange.^{xxviii}

Those who avoided or limited reproduction would miss these means of grace. Luther lamented “most married people do not desire offspring. Indeed, they turn away from it and consider it better to live without children, because they are poor ... this is especially true of those who are devoted to idleness and laziness.”^{xxix} Luther had attacked monastic life for idleness that bred sloth and other sins, and he wanted marriage to be a better discipline, turning the necessity of marital reproduction to spiritual benefit.

A law of nature against singleness?

Luther *seems* to claim that Scripture, creation, and medical wisdom indicate that everyone must reproduce, except “eunuchs” and those in whom God has performed a miracle of alteration. Luther argued that “woman is not created to be a virgin, but to bear children” and this applied to “all of them, with no exceptions.”^{xxx} He asserts that:

You can neither escape nor restrain yourself from being fruitful and multiplying; it is God’s ordinance and takes its course. Physicians are not amiss when they say: if this natural function is forcibly restrained it ... becomes a poison ... Hence we see how weak and sickly barren women are. Those who are fruitful, however, are healthier, cleaner, and happier. And even if they bear themselves weary—or ultimately bear themselves out—that does not hurt. Let them bear themselves out. This is the purpose for which they exist. It is better to have a brief life with good health than a long life in ill health.^{xxxi}

Luther's concern here is the adult's health, not the quantity of output, but he does portray reproduction as universal purpose. Although he esteemed celibacy in early Christian history, he often portrayed *contemporary* singleness as more theoretical possibility than real option. He claimed that it was vanishingly rare, "not one in a thousand," a notion linked to his belief that "the world ... has deteriorated from day to day until our times, in which live the dregs ... of the human race."^{xxxii} To three diehard nuns in 1524, Luther argued that their way of life must be false for "Scripture and experience teach that among many thousands there is not one to whom God gives the grace to maintain pure chastity."^{xxxiii}

In general, Luther's method was "to take everything to its logical limit" and his style hyperbolic.^{xxxiv} His presentation of a law of nature compelling youthful marriage is hyperbole, as is evident where apparently contradictory statements appear. In the *Estate of Marriage* he states that anyone "who refuses to marry must fall into immorality. How could it be otherwise, since God has created man and woman to produce seed and to multiply?" But a few pages later he writes that "I do not wish to disparage virginity ... Let each one act as he is able, and as he feels it has been given to him by God. I simply wanted to check those scandalmongers who place marriage so far beneath virginity."^{xxxv}

When the Benedictine house at Oldenstadt was disendowed its Abbot wrote to Luther asking if they could stay as monks under a modified Rule. Luther replied affirmatively in February 1528 and added that if only earlier monasticism had been practised in this "spirit of freedom" he would have stayed a monk himself.^{xxxvi} He later preached about "young people" that if they "are able to live chastely without marriage, let them by all means have the benefit of continence and do without a wife."^{xxxvii} In 1538, discussing a letter from nuns, Luther said that "One should allow such nuns to stay" and that he felt similarly about all well-ordered houses, adding "Nor have I proposed anything else from the beginning."^{xxxviii} Luther's earlier statements were polemical hyperbole.

Patriarchs saved through childbirth?

Luther in preaching the Old Testament looked for models of faith, and in Genesis that was oriented to promises of descendants. Genesis 3:15 foretold Messiah's birth, and Luther thought Adam and Eve understood and were justified by faith in this first gospel. Linking this with 1:28 Luther saw divine purposes converging on childbirth:

[Adam] understood that he was to produce offspring, especially since the blessing ... had been reaffirmed in the promise of the Seed who would crush the serpent's head. ... Adam did not know Eve simply as a result of the passion of his flesh; but the need of achieving salvation through the blessed Seed impelled him too.^{xxxix}

Reading Genesis 4:1 as "Eve said, I have acquired the man of the Lord," he suggested that Eve mistakenly assumed that her firstborn was the Saviour.^{xl} But the Messiah would be born someday and Adam communicated this gospel,^{xli} so all the patriarchs and their wives knew the prophecy and laboured to make it happen. Luther linked this with a theophany promising descendants to Abraham (Genesis 15:4), for "Moses implies in a hidden fashion that this passage includes the promise about the spiritual and heavenly Seed, while previously he is speaking solely of physical descendants."^{xlii} Luther explained that the "material blessing concerning ... the descendants of Abraham" was "like a shell; but the

essential part of the nut ... is Christ and eternal life” and so “this temporal blessing is now at an end. For the shell has been opened and broken.”^{xliii} These reasons for an imperative to biological reproduction terminate after the Messiah is born.

Luther aimed to do edifying literal exegesis of Genesis, and reads the protagonists’ motives and actions either as exemplars of virtue or paradigms of repentance.^{xliv} The rivalry of Leah and Rachel to bear Jacob’s children (Genesis 29:16-30:24) with its mix of deception (29:25), polygamy, favouritism (29:31), jealousy, concubines, drugs (30:14), and payment for conjugal relations (30:16), had often been treated allegorically but Luther stuck with literal exegesis. A repentance motif was not applicable since at the low point (29:31) God has pity on Rachel’s distress and the story then advances to successive triumphs with no divine word against motives or methods. Rachel must be a hero of faith, and some quotations used by Provan come from Luther’s preaching on this story:

saintly women were not lustful but were desirous of offspring and the blessing. For this was the cause of envy in Rachel, who, if she had been like other women whom our age has produced in large numbers, would have said: “What is it to me whether I bear children or not? ... But Rachel demands offspring so much that she prefers death to remaining sterile.”^{xlv}

One defect of Provan’s use of Luther is that he omits Luther’s explanation that:

There was no small reason for this desire, for Jacob undoubtedly proclaimed to both [wives] that he had the promise that the Blessed Seed would be born from him, and because of this proclamation the desire for acquiring offspring was kindled, especially in Rachel.

Childbirth in Genesis is also a sign of grace and forgiveness. Provan, arguing against self-limiting one’s reproduction, claims that “God views childlessness or less children than possible as a negative occurrence, something which he uses as a punishment,” and then quotes Luther’s observation that Old Testament people “regarded childbirth as a great sign of grace [and] ... barrenness is a sign of wrath.”^{xlvi} Luther here is discussing Genesis 17:10 where God “applies the law of circumcision to this so-called lewd member, which has to do with ... propagation” and he links this to Genesis 3:15 where “the woman’s members ... were not condemned to sterility.” That was a reassuring sign for “if God had merely wanted to be angry and to punish and not also to forgive and have compassion, He would have said: You shall remain barren.” By this sign “Eve gained the sure hope of salvation, inasmuch as both a holy Seed had been promised and the blessing of giving birth and of multiplying had remained.”^{xlvii} This reassurance is desired by later Old Testament saints as a sign that God is not angry and persists in His covenant promise to Abraham. For Christians there is a different reassuring sign, the Cross.

Preservation in the shadow of apocalypse

The abiding purpose of reproduction appears in Genesis chapter 1, and is the same as in other living creatures, the preservation of the species. To modern ears the words increase and multiply bring to mind the rapid rise in population experienced in the 20th century, but to Luther they signified maintenance and preservation. He wrote that children are born “so that the human race is maintained,” and stated that it is the same ordinance in humankind as

in all species for “the body of a Christian must fructify and multiply just like that of other human beings, birds, and all the animals.”^{xlviii} Luther did not imagine that all species increase *absolutely* in successive generations. It was common knowledge then that populations did not do that. Rather, the words signify continuing reproductive effort to replace the inevitable regular losses to death. “For when God once said: Be fruitful, that Word is effective to this day and preserves nature in a miraculous way.”^{xlix}

Temporal maintenance of the species is a virtue. Luther suggested that “Lot’s daughters thought: ‘God does not want to destroy the human race; He wants to preserve it. But now there is nobody left besides our father’ ... Thus it is nothing but genuine concern for preserving the human race that troubles the saintly girls” and this explains (but does not excuse) their incest.¹ In a wedding sermon Luther observed that without marriage “the human race would go out of existence.”^{li}

This applied also at the national level. Luther commented on a law in Deuteronomy that “It is fair that a bridegroom be granted a year with his bride ... that the commonwealth may increase through progeny and families.”^{lii} He pleaded that “Marriage should be treated with honor; from it we all originate, because it is a nursery not only for the state but also for the church.”^{liii} But neither nation nor religion is blessed by mere biological increase. Luther wrote that “it is not enough, however, merely for children to be born” but parents must “raise children to the service, honor and praise of God and seek nothing else out of it, which unfortunately seldom happens.”^{liv}

Reproduction was not a means to aggrandizement. Natalism is a long-term project, but Luther’s future horizon was short, and he expected a human future measured in years or decades but not centuries.^{lv} He was however determined to “spite the devil” by amending church and society,^{lvi} and this interim ethic left room for a worldly pragmatism desiring sufficient reproduction to maintain society. Anyone concerned for the commonwealth amid premodern mortality would advocate high fertility. In his time over a third of infants died before the age of five, and there was significant mortality in every subsequent age cohort.^{lvii} When Luther was born in 1483 the Saxon population was lower than it had been two hundred years earlier. After 1300 population had fallen due to the “Little Ice Age” and then the Black Death, and had only begun increasing slowly around 1475.^{lviii} Long abandoned farmland was still being reclaimed in Luther’s youth,^{lix} and he was also aware of the New World, noting that “recently many islands and lands have been discovered.”^{lx} Luther’s praise of fecundity should be read in that demographic context.

Conclusion

Luther wrote more about fecundity than any other Protestant leader. There is material amenable to natalist use, though legalistic retrieval often misleads through neglecting the historical and hermeneutical context. Luther’s rhetorical law of nature compelling all to reproduce arose from pastoral emergencies of the 1520s. Insofar as Luther had any interest in demography it was merely a pragmatism desiring the maintenance of society. One sense in which Luther is a forerunner of modern natalism is that his rhetorical demolition of celibacy opened the door for its later emergence.

What can Luther speak into discussions about natalism and population today? The demographic context has changed. In 1500 the world's population was 450 million; today it is 6,750 million. UN forecasts for 2050 range between 8 and 10.4 billion, and "realization of these projections is contingent on continued declines in fertility."^{lxvi} According to the UN this is desirable because "slower population growth and investments in reproductive health, HIV prevention, education and women's empowerment, reduce poverty."^{lxvii} The projections depend on (already low) fertility falling further. The UN's "constant fertility" scenario (if birth rates stayed just as they are now) is that population would exceed 11 billion by 2050,^{lxviii} but natalists call for birth rates to rise. For those today seeking to follow Luther's interim ethic for preserving society, I suggest that his neighbour-oriented vocation, and his critique of greed, point toward moderation as a better way.

Endnotes

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 - ii. Beryl Rawson, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 100; Daube, *Procreation*, 31.
 - iii. Ryan Byrne "Lie Back and Think of Judah: the reproductive politics of pillar figurines," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67.3 (2004), 137-151: 143.
 - iv. Byrne, "Think of Judah," 145.
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 - vi. Jeremy Cohen, *'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it': the Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 68, 134, citing Tosefta 8.4.
 - vii. Peter Biller, *The Measure of Multitude: Population in Medieval Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 242.
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 - xiii. Justin Kitzes et. al. "Shrink and share: humanity's present and future Ecological Footprint," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 363 (2008), 467-475: 468.
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 - xvii. <http://lutheransandcontraception.blogspot.com/>
 - xviii. Allan Carlson, "Children of the Reformation," *Touchstone* (2007), 20-23. Carlson also cites Luther in "Freedom, Authority, and Family," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 20.3 (1981), 195-199; and in "Be Fruitful and Multiply: Religious Pronatalism in a Depopulating America," *This World*, 21 (1988), 18-30.
 - xix. LW 44:216; 39:296; 43:87.
 - xx. LW 44:24, 262, 290, 301; Dorothea Wendebourg, "Luther on Monasticism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19.2 (2005), 125-152: 133.

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- xxi. LW 45:22, 37, 390; cf. Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 44-45.
- xxii. LW 28:5 (from his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7).
- xxiii. LW 45:48; *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, edited by Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149.
- xxiv. *Luther on Women*, 153.
- xxv. LW 5:332 (quoted in Provan, 6).
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- xxvii. Ozment, *Fathers*, 8.
- xxviii. *Luther on Women*, 23 (WA XXIV).
- xxix. LW 5:363 (quoted in Provan, 34).
- xxx. *Luther on Women*, 140 (WA XI).
- xxxi. LW 45:45-46 (*Estate of Marriage*, 1522).
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- xxxv. LW 45:45-47.
- xxxvi. Wendebourg, "Monasticism," 142-3. Owen Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168.
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- xxxviii. LW 54:312 (*Table Talk*, 30 September 1538).
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- xl. LW 1:241. cf. Mattox, *Matriarchs*, 466.
- xli. James Nestingen, "Luther in Front of the Text: The Genesis Commentary," *Word & World* 14.2 (1994), 186-194: 190 citing LW 1:191; 6:227.
- xlii. LW 22:70; 2:236; 3:18; Mattox, *Matriarchs*, 61-62, 95.
- xliii. LW 3:149-150.
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- xlviii. LW 28:26; *Luther on Women*, 95 (sermon on 15 January 1525, WA XVII).
- xlix. LW 4:4.
- l. LW 3:280, 310 (commenting on Genesis 19).
- li. *Luther on Women*, 98 (wedding sermon, 4 August 1545, WA XLIX).
- lii. LW 9:241.
- liii. LW 1:240.
- liv. LW 44:12 (marriage sermon, 1519).
- lv. Parsons, "Apocalyptic Luther," 628.

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- lvi. Heiko Oberman, *The Reformation: roots and ramifications* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 35.
- lvii. Ozment, *Fathers*, 101.
- lviii. Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14-15.
- lix. Livi Bacci, *Population*, 42, 88.
- lx. LW 16:135 in a footnote translating WA X.I.I, 21; cf. Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 16.
- lxi. United Nations, <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/trends.htm>
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- lxiii. United Nations, *World Population Prospects: the 2008 Revision*, (2009), *Highlights*, x.
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