

## From Sacrifice to Sacrament: A Christocentric Theology of the Cross Justifying the Sacramental Status of Protestant Marriage

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### **Abstract:**

*Marriage largely remains excluded from the acknowledged list of sacraments within Reformed Protestantism. This historical posture stems from sixteenth-century doctrinal controversies where Reformers, notably Luther and Calvin, redefined the concept of sacrament, limiting it to the two rites explicitly instituted by Christ : Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, contemporary theologians have increasingly challenged this exclusion, arguing that marriage, as a divinely willed and blessed union, merits reintegration into a revitalized understanding of sacramentality. Protestant scholars have proposed sophisticated models for inclusion, often relying on a Trinitarian and Christocentric interpretation of the conjugal mystery. This study adopts a distinct approach, centering reflection on the Cross of Christ and His earthly ministry as the supreme revelation of Divine Love. Employing the hermeneutical insights of Paul Ricœur and the dogmatic structure of Karl Barth, the investigation explores how Christ's sacrificial love profoundly grounds a theology where marriage functions as a visible sign of Grace and a genuine locus of Divine Presence. The argument hinges specifically on the theological density of John 3:16 and the Christological mandate of Ephesians 5:25. It has been demonstrated that, through a theology of the Cross centered on the incarnational ministry of Jesus, Christian marriage is legitimately recommended as a sacrament within the Reformed context. Matrimony embodies a dynamic of self-giving, redemption, and Trinitarian communion, perfectly mirroring the covenantal union between Christ and the Church. The doctrines of Solus Christus and Christus in medio serve to underscore the implicit sacramental character of marriage: it is an act rooted in biblical Revelation and the Divine Will. Ultimately, the sacramental revaluation of marriage affirms its triple dimension : it manifests the image of God, His presence, and the fulfillment of His salvific will in the daily experience of the faithful. Through a new Theology of the Cross focused on the broken Body of Jesus Christ, this thesis advocates for the sacramentality of Protestant marriage – a position faithful to the spirit of the Reformation yet enriched by a profound, contemporary reading of Revelation. Marriage is thereby established as an essential channel of grace, a primary space for sanctification, and a living testimony of Christian faith.*

### **Keywords:**

*Sacramentality, Christocentric, Trinitarian, Agapē, Reformed*

## I. Introduction

The non-recognition of marriage as a sacrament persists within the majority of Reformed Protestant traditions worldwide. This exclusion originates in the foundational theological disputes concerning the very definition of a sacrament—debates that precipitated the schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the 16th-century Reformers. This rupture led to the establishment of Protestantism, which ultimately retained only two sacramental rites : Baptism and Holy Communion.

Contemporary theologians and analysts of ecclesial sociology have, however, proposed a crucial re-evaluation of marriage's sacramental status (D'Angelo, 2017). Through rigorous historical and biblical examination, a strong case has been made for reintegrating matrimony into Protestant sacramental theology. Scholars have critically engaged the traditional arguments against recognition, instead developing models that integrate elements of Trinitarian theology and revisit core Reformation postulates (Jensen, 2012). The notion that marriage functions as a vocation towards mutual sanctification—a sacrament of mutual sanctification—has been strongly defended (Willimon, 2014 ; Lahadinirina & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2025).

These seminal works have successfully opened new avenues for reflection and proposed alternative approaches, driving the common objective of rehabilitating the sacramental character of marriage within the Protestant tradition.

A fresh perspective is now offered, grounded in a theological contemplation of the Cross of Christ, the ultimate manifestation of Divine Love. This approach requires a reformulation of the Theology of the Cross, centering the discussion on the salvific ministry articulated in John 3:16 (New International Version Bible, 2011). This theological focus illuminates the profound dignity of Protestant marriage, demonstrating that it merits full integration into the established category of Protestant sacraments.

The primary objective is to highlight, based upon these central tenets of Christian faith, the intrinsic spiritual significance of Protestant marriage and firmly establish its rightful claim to full sacramental inclusion.

## **II. Research Methods**

The present research is founded upon two distinct yet complementary methodological frameworks. A detailed analysis of theological factuality, inspired by Karl Barth's monumental *Church Dogmatics* (2023), establishes Divine Revelation as the core event underpinning all theological inquiry. This approach is coupled with the structural hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur, detailed in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (2007), which distinguishes literal textual explanation from profound symbolic and narrative comprehension.

The theological reflection commences with an exhaustive reading of John 3:16 (Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 2023). This foundational verse, summarizing Christ's redemptive mission, serves as the major hermeneutic key for discerning the economy of salvation and the essential nature of Divine Love. The premise is that this Love manifests fully in self-giving unto the Cross, consistent with Ricœur's interpretive trajectory (2007).

Within this unified framework, a structured analysis of Trinitarian Agapē will be undertaken within the context of salvation history. The manifestation of the Father's sacrificial Love, revealed in the sending of the Son and actualized by the Holy Spirit's power, will then be examined through the specific, systematic lens provided by Barth's theological structure (2023). Particular attention must be directed towards two foundational biblical passages.

### **2.1 The pierced side : John 19 :34**

The Crucified Body of Christ, pierced by the soldier's lance, yielded an immediate outpouring of blood and water (John 19:34, Louis Segond Bible, 1910). While Christian theology frequently interprets this event as symbolic of the established sacraments (Baptism and

Eucharist), the present investigation insists upon the real presence of the Crucified Body as the culmination of Divine Love's self-revelation.

The Cross stands as the locale where the love of God reaches its paroxysm, where the Son is delivered in absolute obedience to the Father's will (Von Balthasar, 1980/2004). This precise moment of Christ's manifest, transfixed body reveals the ultimate depth of the Trinitarian gift. The supreme reality of the Word of God made flesh, bearing the truth of divine grace within itself, is affirmed by Karl Barth in his definitive Church Dogmatics (Barth et al., 2004).

## **2.2 The normative love: Ephesians 5:25**

The salvific Love emanating from the Cross acquires normative significance for the theology of marriage: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," (Ephesians 5 :25, Louis Segond Bible, 1910).

Christian marriage transcends mere civil or moral institution ; it becomes the manifestation of God's Love. It serves as a concrete place of mediation for Trinitarian Love, configured precisely in the image of Christ's self-giving for the Church, viewed through a renewed hermeneutical perspective (Ricœur, 2007). The Reformed approach to the sacraments must remain open to a living interpretation of revelation, perpetually rooted in Scripture and in the present action of God (Leith, 1981/2007).

The overarching objective of this study is, therefore, to elaborate a renewed theology of Protestant sacramental marriage that respects the Reformed heritage while profoundly deepening it in the light of Christological Revelation.

## **III. Results and Discussion**

A profound re-evaluation of Protestant marriage's sacramentality is necessitated. From the perspective of the Cross of Christ, Christian matrimony is strongly affirmed as a sacrament. Three primary arguments support this theological assertion.

### **3.1 A theology of the cross manifests marriage's sacramentality**

The incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ must be central to any sacramental theology. Historical analysis reveals that many Protestant theologians primarily focused on the symbolic elements issuing from the crucifixion. The blood and water that flowed from the Savior's pierced side (John 19:34, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021) were often interpreted symbolically: the blood signifying Holy Communion and the water associated with Baptism (Barth, 1956/2004). This dual interpretation historically reinforced the limitation of sacraments to these two rites within the Protestant tradition (Augustine, 1989/2002; Calvin, 2009).

Adopting a Christocentric perspective inherent to the Reformed tradition, theological reflection must place the incarnate ministry of Christ at the core of all sacramental theology (Ricœur, 2007). This requires an insistence on the corporeal reality of the Crucified Christ (Barth et al., 2004). Two core principles structure this vision: Solus Christus (Christ alone as unique mediator) and Christus in medio (Christ at the center of faith and God's love for humanity).

In this light, the broken body of Jesus on the Cross becomes the definitive location of propitiation and the ultimate manifestation of Divine Love. This single act reveals the entire logic of Divine salvation—an incarnate, suffering, and redemptive Love (Moltmann, 1993). This broken body symbolizes the grace of God enacted within marriage.

### 3.2 Christian marriage is founded on love, God's manifestation and law's fulfillment

Scripture itself asserts that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021), establishing this Love as the very essence of Divine Law, evident in both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant instituted by Christ. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ's fulfillment of neighborly love does not annul the Law but completes it in a new dimension of freedom and responsibility (Bonhoeffer & Bethge, 2010). The Cross represents both the cessation of the Law as an external requirement and its internal fulfillment through Divine Love, which emerges as the fundamental ethical principle.

Christian marriage, as presented in Ephesians 5:25 ("Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"), is thus inscribed within this dynamic of redemptive Love. Conjugal affection surpasses mere human emotion to become a participation in Trinitarian Love. The marriage relationship constitutes a space where the Holy Spirit continually operates, forming and transforming spouses in the image of Christ (Jensen, 2013). Therefore, in a renewed Reformed theology, marriage can be perceived not only as a moral institution but legitimately as a visible sign of invisible grace, mirroring the Divine Covenant, much like the accepted sacraments.

### 3.3 The Cross as the Supreme Revelation of Divine Love

John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021), is a central declaration affirming that the gift of the Son is an act of Divine Love, freely consented to for the salvation of the world. Consequently, the Cross is affirmed as the supreme revelation of God's Love for humanity.

This perspective aligns with Luther's critique, voiced in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518/2008), which contrasts the theology of glory (seeking God in external power) with the theology of the Cross (discovering God in self-humiliation and self-giving). The true theologian comprehends that the Cross reveals God as truly present in abasement and love. Similarly, Calvin underscored the Cross as the convergence point for Divine justice and mercy: "When the cross of Christ is contemplated, a shining mirror of God's ineffable love toward us is beheld" (Calvin, 1541/2006).

The focus must not be relegated to secondary elements, such as the mockeries, the wounds, or the water and blood, but must rest on the broken body of Jesus. Christ willingly offered his life, as affirmed by Mark 10:45: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This free and complete gift of his person constitutes the ultimate testimony of Divine Love (Barth, 1953/2004).

The sacrificial Love of Christ forms the foundation of Christian marriage. Barth explains that Paul's parallel in Ephesians 5:25—"Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"—establishes that marriage is not merely a social institution, but a covenantal community reflecting the love of God manifested in Christ (Barth, 1951/2005). Since God is Love, Christian marriage, founded on this true Love, becomes a locus of Divine Presence. It not only reflects God's image (Genesis 1–2) but also manifests Trinitarian Will and Communion within the conjugal covenant (Bonhoeffer, 2015). For these reasons, marriage is legitimately perceived as a Protestant sacrament.

The preceding arguments and perspectives compel a profound reconsideration of marriage's status within Reformed Protestant theology. Far from being reducible to a mere civil contract or social ceremony, Christian marriage must be viewed as a genuine sacrament. This

affirmation is grounded in a Christocentric and Trinitarian vision of the Cross of Jesus, whereby matrimony concretely manifests Divine Love, Will, and Presence among humankind. Marriage thus fulfills a triple sacramental dimension : it is the image, presence, and will of God (Barth, 1956/2004). Consequently, the recommendation for its full acknowledgment as a sacrament is robustly justified, though such a conclusion naturally invites further theological discourse.

One primary reason for the historical separation between the Catholic and Protestant Churches was the persistent debate over the very definition of a sacrament. This definitional controversy was further extended by Reformers such as John Calvin (2006) and Ulrich Zwingli, among others (McKim, 2007), who sought to redefine the term, inadvertently diminishing the spiritual dignity God conferred upon marriage at creation.

### 3.4 The Implicit Sacramental Status of Marriage

"It is not good that the man should be alone," declared the Lord God at the creation of humanity (Genesis 2:18, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021). This statement holds profound significance, being the sole instance in the entire creative work where God pronounces a condition "not good." Solitude is thus deemed an incomplete state, a deficiency to be rectified by conjugal union. If God Himself declared that solitude is "not good," the subsequent minimization of this Divine reality by the church—through the acceptance of marital dissolution (Jensen, 2013)—is questionable. How can the practice of separation be justified when the Divine Word affirms, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6)?

This contradiction serves as the starting point for this discussion, leading to five essential points for theological consideration:

a. God considered humanity's integral unity

God originally instituted marriage with full knowledge of humanity's integral unity—body, soul, and spirit—for God is Omniscient (Barth, 2005 ; Jensen, 2013). The Lutheran view, which reduces marriage to merely a "rampart against sin," is insufficient (Calvin, 2006 ; McKim, 2007). Marriage was instituted for more than sin deterrence; it engages the totality of the person in a union blessed by Divine Grace. The Scripture states, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord" (Proverbs 18:22, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021). Marriage is a Divine gift, a visible and tangible aid essential for traversing earthly life. Furthermore, life presents manifold difficulties—spiritual, psychological, and physical—and God's consideration for the integral human being necessitates marriage as a holistic solution.

b. Lutheran criteria for sacraments are not absolute scriptural dogma

The conditions proposed by Luther for a rite to be deemed a sacrament—Divine institution, visible sign, and promise of grace—are not explicitly enunciated in Scripture. These criteria reflect a human theological construction (Ryrie & Doriath, 2014) rather than clear, unequivocal biblical prescriptions (Hoose, 1998 ; Barth, 1956/2004). Therefore, these criteria are legitimate subjects for re-evaluation and refinement in the light of theological evolution and Revelation. A redefinition of the Protestant sacrament should be considered from a Christocentric viewpoint, aligning more coherently with the Reformed tradition. Such a new Theology of the Cross is compatible with the doctrines of Solus Christus, Christus in medio, and the Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda (Church Always Reforming) (Luther, 1518/2008 ; Calvin, 1541/2006 ; McKim, 2007).

c. The Term "Sacrament" Possessed a Different Original Meaning

The word "sacrament" derives from the Latin *mysterium* and *sacramentum*. Tertullian first used it in a Christian context. *Mysterium* signifies a deep, inscrutable mystery, while *sacramentum* refers to a Roman soldier's oath, a solemn offering, or a pledge before an authority (Nous, 1997 ; Ryrie & Doriath, 2014 ; Calvin, 2006). The term signifies a mysterious commitment made before a superior authority. Although this term may not perfectly convey the Church's desired meaning, it was conventionally adopted to denote the miraculous salvation accomplished by God in Christ, notably manifested through Baptism and Holy Communion (Ryrie & Doriath, 2014 ; Calvin, 2006).

Given God's declaration in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone," a Divine command given without mediation, the denial of marriage's sacramental status is problematic. Marriage is the oldest Divine institution, desired for humanity's well-being (Deheuvels & Paya, 2016 ; Wright, 2003). Therefore, a posture of humility before God's supremacy is required, opening oneself to the inherent grandeur of marriage. Marriage is a spiritual treasure for those called to this vocation (Wright, 2003), possessing an implicit sacramental character.

d. Love is the supreme grandeur and the foundation of christian marriage

It is out of Love that God saved humanity in Christ (John 3:16, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021). Love is essential to the believer's life (Hoose, 1998 ; Deheuvels & Paya, 2016), as God Himself is the perfect example (Barth, 1956/2004 ; Jensen, 2013). Love is the source of peace and happiness; Christ's love reconciled humanity to God. Paul exhorts the Church on the paramount importance of love: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021). This love is taught by Jesus: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, 2021). Eros love within Christian marriage is transcended into *Agapē* love through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christian marriage is the union of two believers; Christ is amidst this micro-church (Schwöbel, 1995). Therefore, marriage is a sphere of Divine intervention, where God's grace and salvation reside (Jensen, 2012).

e. The new vision of the theology of the cross aligns with reformed doctrine

This theological reflection fully aligns with the fundamental principles of the Reformed Protestant doctrine: *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) and *Christus in medio* (Christ in the center). *Solus Christus* asserts that Christ alone mediates salvation, serving as the exclusive center of Divine grace. This principle does not reduce human realities like marriage but reconfigures them based on Christ. Christian marriage finds its ultimate meaning not in a social institution but in the very person of Jesus Christ. Barth insists on this *Christo*-centrality, stating that all human reality finds its truth in its correspondence to the Revelation in Christ (Barth et al., 2004). Thus, marriage is called to be a place where Christ's Grace manifests concretely in a couple's daily history, as a vocation received in obedience to the Word of God.

The formula *Christus in medio* introduces an essential relational and ecclesial dimension to marriage's sacramental understanding. Christ's presence is promised where two or three are gathered in His name (Matthew 18:20). Marriage thus becomes a micro-church, an incarnate form of ecclesial communion. Christoph Schwöbel asserts that every human relationship, to be theologically just, must be conceived from the perspective of the Trinity, where alterity and reciprocity are constitutive (Schwöbel, 1995). Antonios Kaldas underscores that Christ is not

merely an external witness but the living center of the conjugal union, which becomes a liturgical space where the Divine Presence is celebrated (Kaldas & Attia, 2017). Consequently, Christian marriage transcends a simple contract; it is a living, sacramental sign in the Reformed sense, representing the presence of the mediating Christ and the Triune God within the human community. This understanding necessitates a reevaluation of marriage as a visible sign of invisible grace, according to a renewed sacramental logic contextualized in contemporary Protestant theology.

#### IV. Conclusion

Christian marriage, within Reformed Protestant theology, merits a profound sacramental reevaluation founded upon a renewed and biblically faithful comprehension. This sacrament transcends reduction to a mere civil contract or human institution; instead, it powerfully reveals God's Presence, manifests Divine Agapē Love, and fulfills the redemptive will of the Triune God in the lives of believers.

By recovering the theological richness of conjugal union—specifically, the integral unity of the person, the application of renewed criteria for sacramentality, the deeper meaning of the term "sacrament," and the foundation of Divine Love—the Church can restore marriage to its rightful place in both its spiritual life and mission.

Such a critical reconsideration opens the way for a renewed witness to the power of the Gospel in contemporary society, inviting believers to fully embody God's grace within this covenantal relationship. Consequently, marriage is no longer limited to a social institution; it becomes a genuine channel of sanctification, commitment, and testimony to the Christian faith: a bona fide Protestant sacrament.

While other pertinent perspectives exist for advocating the inclusion of Protestant marriage as a sacrament, the theological vision presented remains highly relevant and contemporary within the Protestant context.

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