

## Sixteenth Century Reformers' Arguments Against Mandatory Celibacy

The injustice of mandatory celibacy has been addressed by previous generations. Most clearly, the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers attempted to point out the problems mandatory celibacy was causing the church and advocated for the marriage of priests. They saw marriage as God's divine plan and it could never be prohibited by papal or council decree. This issue was addressed in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article 23. Regarding problems mandatory celibacy created, the reformers state:

*Among all people, both of high and low degree, there has been loud complaint throughout the world concerning the flagrant immorality and the dissolute life of priests who were not able to remain continent and who went so far as to engage in abominable vices. In order to avoid such unbecoming offense, adultery, and other lechery, some of our priests have entered the married state. They have given as their reason that they have been impelled and moved to take this step by the great distress of their consciences, especially since the Scriptures clearly assert that the Lord God instituted the estate of marriage.*

The reformers argued not only from scripture, but also from tradition. They point out that married priests were allowed in the early church. Tragically, they were forced into celibacy toward the end of the eleventh century:

*It can be demonstrated from history and from the writings of the Fathers that it was customary for priests and deacons to marry in the Christian church in former times. Paul therefore said in I Timothy 3:2, "A bishop must be above reproach, married only once." It was only four hundred years ago that the priests of Germany were compelled by force to take the vows of celibacy. At that time there was such serious and strong resistance that an archbishop of Mayence who had published the new papal decree was almost killed during an uprising of the entire body of priests. The decree concerning celibacy was at once enforced so hastily and indecently that the pope at the time not only forbade future marriages of priests but also broke up marriages that were long standing. This was of course not only contrary to all divine, natural, and civil law, but was also utterly opposed and contrary to the canons which the popes had themselves made and to the decisions of the most renowned councils.*

As if to predict the future, they refer to mandatory celibacy contributing to a shortage of ordained clergy:

*How would the marriage of priests and the clergy, and especially of the pastors and others, who are to minister to the church, be of disadvantage to the Christian church as a whole? If*

*this hard prohibition of marriage is to continue longer, there may be a shortage of priests and pastors in the future.*

During 1530 when the Augsburg Confession was written, some priests had left monasteries to marry. They maintained that vows couldn't abolish a command of God, which allowed marriage. They declare that scripture posits the law forbidding marriage as a doctrine of the devil:

*It is therefore deplorable that Christian marriage has not only been forbidden but has in many places be swiftly punished, as if it were a great crime, in spite of the fact that in Holy Scripture God commanded that marriage be held in honor. Marriage has also been praised in the imperial laws and in all states in which there have been laws and justice. Only in our time does one begin to persecute innocent people simply because they are married – and especially priests, who above all others should be spared – although this is done contrary to not only divine law but also to canon law. In I Timothy 4:1,3 the apostle Paul calls the teaching that forbids marriage a doctrine of the devil... Just as no human law can alter or abolish a command of God, neither can any vow alter a command of God.*

The reformers reasoned that the action of a pope or council could never nullify the word of God, which allowed clergy to marry. Church tradition claims to be rooted in scripture. Yet, in this case, it clearly is not.

Like previous generations, in today's reformation many men and women experience anguish as their views are discarded, their consciences repudiated, and, shaming voices proclaimed their ordinations a mistake. With their shunning and departure, the church continues to become more Roman and less Catholic.