

Debates on definition of marriage nothing new, church historian asserts

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WACO—Legislators and judges in the United States who struggle to define marriage find themselves in the unlikely company of 16th century reformers and their Pietist Protestant heirs, church historian A.G. Roeber believes.

A.G. RoeberSome Americans forget disputes about marriage have raged in Europe and beyond more than four centuries, said Roeber, professor of early modern history and religious studies at Penn State University. He addressed an audience at Baylor University, where he spoke at the invitation of the school's Institute for Studies of Religion.

Martin Luther wanted to elevate marriage to a "primary estate" at the center of both church and society, based on his view of the family as "the little church," Roeber said. However, Luther's reluctance to view marriage as sacrament, in contrast to Roman Catholic teaching, muddied his efforts to exalt marriage.

"There was an unresolved tension in Luther's theology of marriage," Roeber said.

Furthermore, he noted, Luther wrestled with how to reconcile his views on mutuality in marriage, based on the New Testament model in Ephesians 5, with his insistence on male authority in church and state.

Roeber saw that tension evidenced in subsequent theological statements by Pietist Protestants who were "reluctant to define marriage as sacrament

but eager to understand it as more than simply a secular contract.”

On the one hand, he noted, they taught an ideal view of marriage as a picture of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. On the other hand, they knew from personal experience the reality of married life often failed to match that model.

Luther’s spiritual heirs found new challenges when they sought to spread their faith—including their views on Christian marriage—through missionary outreach, particularly in India and among transplanted Europeans in North America, he added.

Today, at a time when many Christians in the Global South hold to a traditional understanding of Christian marriage, some North American Protestants seek to expand the definition to include same-sex unions, he observed.

And debates in the public square about the subject are nothing new, he added.

“There is no way in which marriage has ever not been political,” he said.