The Bridal-Mystical Motif in Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther

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This article discusses Martin Luther’s appropriation of the tradition of bridal-mysticism, and contrasts it with that of Bernard of Clairvaux. According to Bernard, through the power of divine grace, the human person and God both come to find each other objects of mutual desire. By contrast, Luther, in Freedom of a Christian (1520), uses the bridal motif to describe the divine-human relationship as one of promise and trust. In this, the Reformer both appropriates and significantly reinterprets the bridal-mystical motif in accordance with the claims of his newly-minted Reformation theology of justification through faith.

Over the last few decades scholarship on the Reformation has emphasised the continuity between Martin Luther and earlier traditions of the Christian Church. This is in many ways helpful, not only because it repudiates the vision of Luther as a heroic individualist overthrowing arbitrary authority (more an ideal of the Enlightenment than of the early modern period), but also because it leads to an appreciation of


1 See, for example, Heiko Oberman, The dawn of the Reformation: essays in late medieval and early reformation thought, Grand Rapids, Mt 1992; Steven Ozment, The age of reform, 1250–1550: an intellectual and religious history of late medieval and Reformation Europe, New Haven, 1981; and David Steinmetz, Luther in context, Grand Rapids, Mt 2002, and Luther and Staupitz: an essay in the intellectual origins of the Protestant Reformation, Durham, NC 1980.
the catholicity of the Reformation. In fact, this understanding is a return to how Luther and many of his contemporaries saw the reformation of the Church.

In particular, scholars have emphasised that Luther and the other Reformers sought to retrieve elements of the earlier church tradition. Nevertheless, this appropriation of the earlier tradition was always a critical one. On the one hand, the magisterial Reformers believed that the Holy Spirit had not forsaken the Church, but is ever present and active through the Word and the sacraments. On the other hand, humans are fallen and therefore remain fallible even under the influence of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the early Reformers viewed their continuity with the great tradition of the Church as something dialectical.

In the context of dialectical continuity, this article will discuss one particular aspect of Luther’s appropriation of earlier church tradition, namely, the tradition of bridal-allegory and mysticism. An examination of the history and shape of the tradition will culminate in a brief description of the bridal-mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux in his sermons on the Song of Songs and in his On loving God. Bernard primarily appropriates the bridal-mystical motif to describe the relationship between God and humans as one of mutually desiring subjects. God, through his love and grace, makes human beings desirable objects. Through the power of divine grace, human beings respond by finding God to be the fulfilment of their innermost desires.

By contrast, in his early work, Freedom of a Christian (1520), Luther uses the bridal motif to describe the divine-human relationship as one of promise and receptivity to that promise, rather than desire and responding desire. As a result, Luther reveals his dialectical continuity with the earlier church tradition. On the one hand, the Reformer uses a familiar patristic-medieval image of Christ as bridegroom to describe his understanding of justification and the Christian life. On the other hand, this motif is significantly reworked in order to fit Luther’s reconceptualisation of the

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2 Historically, Lutherans have defined the catholicity of the Church in terms of time (the endurance of the true Church in all ages) and agreement of doctrine: Augsburg Confession. art. vii; Johann Gerhard, Exegesis XXV: on the Church, trans. Richard Dinda, St Louis 2010, 279–80.

3 The most significant examples of this within the Lutheran Reformation are Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, trans. Fred Kramer, St Louis 1971–86, and Johann Gerhard, Confessio catholica, Jena 1654–6.


5 Two major examples of Luther’s attempts at maintaining continuity with the earlier tradition come in ‘Concerning rebaptism’, LWxl. 225–62; WA xxvi. 144–74. See also his ‘On the councils and the Church’, LWxli. 3–178; WA i. 509–653.
divine-human relationship in terms of faith as receptivity to the real presence of Christ in the Word of God.

Scriptural commentary and the tradition of bridal allegory

The roots of bridal mysticism and allegory reach back into the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Probably the most famous example of bridal imagery for the divine-human relationship in the Hebrew Bible is found in the prophetic signs performed by the prophet Hosea in his coupling with the cultic prostitute Gomer (Hosea i–ii).\(^6\) The metaphor of Israel as YHWH’s bride is also found in other books of the Old Testament, notably in Ezekiel.\(^7\) According to these texts, YHWH’s relationship with Israel is pictured as a husband who remains faithful to his wife. However, this loyalty was not reciprocated by bridal Israel and therefore, as a jealous husband, YHWH sent his prophets to announce both his anger and his continuing faithfulness.

Moving to the New Testament, the metaphor of YHWH/Israel as groom/bride is extended by the letter to the Ephesians to Jesus (the incarnate YHWH) as the husband to his bride, the Church (i.e. the new Israel) (Ephesians v.21–32).\(^8\) Jesus’ death on behalf of the Church is the logical continuation and fulfilment of YHWH’s self-donation to Israel. YHWH’s faithfulness to both his promise of grace and judgement has, from the perspective of the New Testament authors, finally resolved itself in Christ’s death wherein both sin is judged and sinners are justified (Romans iii. 25–6; iv. 25).

Beyond arguing that the YHWH/Israel relationship as husband and wife had been extended, fulfilled and surpassed in Christ and his Church, Ephesians also lends something else to the tradition in stating: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church’ (Eph. v.31–2, ESV). In the minds of many of the patristic and medieval commentators this gave a clear and


binding precedent for the use of allegorical and typological interpretations of the male-female relationships throughout Scripture.

A prime example of this can be found in early Christian interpretation of the male and female figures in the Song of Songs. The tradition of allegorising the text as a prefiguration of Christ and the Church was established very early in the patristic era. Initially, the relationship was viewed primarily as something corporate, that is, Christ with the Church community, as opposed to the individual soul’s fellowship with Christ. In the third century Hippolytus of Rome produced a commentary in which he argued that the book was an allegory for the intersecting and complicated relationships among Christ, Israel and the Church. Origen and other interpreters of the period made similar judgements. By contrast, Gregory of Nyssa (probably borrowing from Platonic mysticism) interpreted the Canticle as an allegory of the pious soul that never ceases to ascend into God. Gregory’s reading of the work in many ways paralleled his treatment of Moses’s ascent of Sinai in his more famous Life of Moses.

Despite Gregory of Nyssa’s shift to a mystical-individualistic interpretation of the Song of Songs, the main reading in the Latin West prior to the twelfth century remained that of the tradition represented by Hippolytus and Origen, due to the influence of the Venerable Bede, who wrote a lengthy and very widely read commentary on the Canticle. During this

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same period there was also a minority tradition represented by Rupert of Deutz that interpreted the female figure in the Song as Mary. This was, of course, simply a variation on the old corporate interpretation, in that Rupert and others, following Ambrose of Milan, viewed Mary as an ideal type of the Church.

Bernard of Clairvaux’s bridal mysticism

In the twelfth century the old corporate interpretation of the Song of Songs began to wane under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). The Canticle stands as a major preoccupation of the mystic’s writings. Bernard wrote eighty-six sermons on the book over a period of eighteen years. These sermons are significant because, unlike the majority of earlier treatments in the medieval West, Bernard read the work as an allegory of the mystical ascent of the individual soul. It should, of course, be noted that Bernard does not exclude the corporate type of the Church.


18 Astell, Song of Songs, 42–72; Froehlich, ‘Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs’, 499.


21 McGinn, The presence of God, 164.

interpretation; rather he merely de-emphasises it by discussing it in only a few of his sermons. However, the majority of the mystic’s sermons on the Canticle focus on an individualist reading.

Turning to sermons themselves, it is immediately clear that Bernard views the problem of sinful humanity as fundamentally one of desire. For Bernard, the desire of the male and female figures in the poem must be read as a description of the proper desires experienced by the human soul when it loves God and moves away from earthly things. The creature must learn to withdraw itself from earthly distractions in order to desire the divine mystery above all things. In the first stage of this process, the soul must become humble and learn to rely on God’s grace:

Humility therefore prepares a person for grace. Divine grace is necessary because it enables human beings to love God as the supreme object of desire. Grace does not compel, but rather shapes human perceptions and capacities. As a result, the human subject comes to recognise that God is a supremely worthy subject of desire. By receiving such grace, we are made capable of returning love to God, that is, the very thing which he has given to us: ‘No-one can doubt that the soul is first loved, and loved more intensely, by the Word; for it is anticipated and surpassed in its love.’ This grace entered into the created realm through the incarnation and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Bernard understands

\[\text{Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermones in Cantica Canticum xiv.3–8, in On the Song of Songs, trans. Killian Walsh, Kalamazoo, Mi 2005, i. 101–4; Opera omnia, ed. Jean Mabillon and J. P. Migne, Paris 1862–3. PL ii. 840–3. Bernard here describes the Church as the bride of Christ and contrasts it to what he considers to be the apostasy of the Jews.}\]

\[\text{Allen, ‘Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermons’, 408–9; Kling, The Bible in history, 106–7; Tamburella, ‘Bernard of Clairvaux’, 94.}\]

\[\text{Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermones in Cantica Canticum xxxiv.1, On the Song of Songs, ii.160–1; Opera omnia, ii. 950–60.}\]

\[\text{Cristiani, St Bernard of Clairvaux, 150–2; Evans, Bernard of Clairvaux, 37–41; Gilson, Mystical theology, 70–2; McGinn, The presence of God, 191; Sommerfeldt, Spiritual teachings, 64–6; Tamburella, ‘Bernard of Clairvaux’, 94.}\]

\[\text{Evans, Bernard of Clairvaux, 89–94; Gilson, Mystical theology, 78–84; Kling, The Bible in history, 108–9; McGinn, The presence of God, 193–4; Sommerfeldt, Spiritual teachings, 27–30.}\]

\[\text{Evans, Bernard of Clairvaux, 89. This leads to a discussion of the topic of grace and free will. Bernard’s ideas on this subject may be found in Tractatus de gratia et libero arbitrio, ad Guillelmum sancti theoderici abbatem, Opera omnia, i.1001–30.}\]

\[\text{Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermones in Cantica Canticum, bxxxi.6, On the Song of Songs, iv. 186; Opera omnia, ii. 1184.}\]
the Song of Songs i.1 (Vulgate: ‘osculetur me osculo oris sui’) as allegorically referring to the Trinity’s self-communication in the incarnation\(^{30}\) and the coming of the Holy Spirit.\(^{31}\)

As mutually desiring subjects, the soul and God become entranced with one another through the process of mystical ascent.\(^{32}\) In order to make itself attractive to God, the soul cooperates by adorning itself with the fruits of virtue through the power of grace. Bernard uses the poetical image of a bridegroom anointing his bride with perfumed oils as an allegory for the soul’s movement from vice to virtue.\(^{33}\) The three perfumes with which the soul adorns itself are contrition, devotion and works of true piety: ‘There is the ointment of contrition, that of devotion and that of piety.\(^{34}\) The first is pungent, causing some pain; the second mitigates and soothes pain; the third heals the wound and rids the patient of the illness.’\(^{35}\) Ultimately, true piety makes the bride desirable to the bridegroom:

But there is another ointment, far excelling these two, to which I give the name loving-kindness \(\text{or } pietatis=piety\) \ldots It bears the power to heal, for ‘Happy the merciful; they shall have mercy shown them’ [Matthew v.7]. A collection therefore of manifold miseries on which the eye rests with loving-kindness \(\text{or } pietatis\), represents the ingredients from which the best ointments are made, ointments that are worthy of the breasts of the bride and pleasing to the senses of the Bridegroom \(\text{‘Igitur multae miseriae collectae atque oculi pietatis inspectae, ipsae sunt species, ex quibus unguenta optima componuntur sponsae digna uberibus, sponsi sensibus grata’}.\)

In another work, \textit{On loving God}, Bernard uses the image of a bride adorning her place of habitation with sweet-smelling flowers to express the idea that the human subject must make itself desirable to God: ‘The heavenly Bridegroom \textit{enjoys so much those perfumes} that he enters willingly and often the chamber of the heart that he finds decked with these flowers and fruits.’\(^{37}\)

\(^{30}\) Bernard of Clairvaux, \textit{Sermones in Cantica Canticum} ii.3, \textit{On the Song of Songs}, i. 10–11; \textit{Opera omnia}, ii. 789.


\(^{34}\) Kling, \textit{The Bible in history}, 110.

\(^{35}\) Bernard of Clairvaux, \textit{Sermones in Cantica Canticum} x.4, \textit{On the Song of Songs}, i.63; \textit{Opera omnia}, ii. 820–1.

\(^{36}\) Bernard of Clairvaux, \textit{Sermones in Cantica Canticum} xii.1, \textit{On the Song of Songs}, i. 77–8 (emphasis added); \textit{Opera omnia}, ii. 828.

\(^{37}\) Bernard of Clairvaux, \textit{De diligendo Deo} iii.8, in \textit{On loving God: an analytical commentary with an analytical commentary by Emero Stiegman}, Kalamazoo, Mi 1995, 10; \textit{Opera omnia}, i. 979 (emphasis added).
The pious soul gradually moves itself towards full union with God through mystical contemplation assisted by the Holy Spirit. The viator little by little discovers that earthly things do not satisfy the deepest longing of the soul: ‘Thus the restless mind, running to and fro among the pleasures of this life, is tired out but never satisfied.’ Finally, the soul finds God, who ‘satisfies with good things, he incites to good, maintains in goodness, anticipates, sustains, fulfills. He makes you desire, he is what you desire’. On the path to mystical consummation, a person moves from sin to the final fulfilment in heaven through four stages of love. The first is the state of sin, wherein (echoing Augustine’s amor sui) Bernard describes the human person as loving him- or herself alone. The second stage occurs when humans come to love God, but only for their own benefit. God is invoked in times of trouble and becomes a reliable object of trust. Frequent interaction with God and his grace leads to the recognition of how ‘sweet’ (i.e. desirable) God is and this becomes the catalyst for the third stage: loving God for God’s own sake. This does not mean that we neglect social ethics in favour of the love of God. One also loves the neighbour because by loving God one comes to love what he loves. The fourth stage is described as a continuation and fulfilment of the third. It represents the soul’s rapture in its final experience of heavenly bliss. In this stage, the soul is engulfed and saturated with the divine being in such a manner that it will simply have no other experience than the love of God.

38 See summary in Cristiani, St Bernard of Clairvaux, 152–5; Evans, Mind of St Bernard, 118–20.
39 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo vii.18, On loving God, 21; Opera omnia, i. 985 (emphasis added).
40 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo, vii.21, On loving God, 24; Opera omnia, i. 987 (emphasis added).
42 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo viii, On loving God, 25–7; Opera omnia, i. 987–9.
43 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo ix.26, On loving God, 27–8; Opera omnia, i. 989–90.
44 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo ix.26, On loving God, 28; Opera omnia, i. 990.
45 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo x.27, On loving God, 29; Opera omnia, i. 990.
46 Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo x.27, On loving God, 29; Opera omnia, i. 990.
In discussing Martin Luther’s use of the bridal-mystical motif in his work *Freedom of a Christian* (1520), the main aim is to compare and contrast Luther’s use of the motif with that of Bernard. In so doing the question of historical influence will mainly be left to one side. Indeed, as any historian is aware, influence is one of the most difficult things to demonstrate. In this particular case, there is both a suggestion of influence, and barriers to establishing a clear and direct relationship between the two figures. First, it is abundantly clear from numerous scholarly treatments that Luther was very familiar with Bernard’s writings. In particular, Luther was familiar with Bernard’s sermons on the Canticle. Franz Posset has recently emphasised this familiarity and argued strongly for a relationship of influence. In favour of this thesis, he points to Melanchthon’s later claim that an elderly monk’s use of a quotation from Bernard had first impelled Luther toward his great reformational insight. Although an interesting suggestion, this cannot be pursued here, and it should also be emphasised that Luther was acquainted with the teachings of a number of other mystical and spiritual writers of this period who had ideas similar to those of Bernard. In fact, it seems that early on Luther read a variety of mystical


writings. The Reformer’s early fascination with the mystical text *Eyn theologia deutsch* has been well documented. In light of the presence of these other influences and the difficulties of showing precisely what was in Luther’s mind when he wrote *Freedom of a Christian*, the focus here will be on comparing and contrasting structural similarities and differences between Luther and Bernard in their appropriation of the bridal-mystical motif.

It should first also be observed that *Freedom of a Christian* differs from Bernard’s works in that it does not directly touch on the interpretation of the Song of Songs. Luther’s own commentary on the Canticle came many years later (1530–1) and, in fact, took the very eccentric view (insofar as the history of exegesis goes) that the book was an allegorical description of the exercise of just and efficient government. That being said, Luther develops his doctrine of justification using the image of Christ as the bridegroom of the soul in a manner similar to the treatment that we find in Bernard’s sermons on the Song of Songs. For this reason, it is appropriate to compare *Freedom of a Christian* with Bernard’s use of the bridal motif.

Luther begins the treatise by telling his readers that the Christian is a ‘perfectly free lord of all, subject to none [and]…a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all’. Luther explains the first part of this description by noting that the proposition belongs to the reality of the inner person of the believer *coram Deo*. The inner person is humbled and made ready for the reception of passive righteousness first by the proclamation of the law: ‘[through the proclamation of] the commandments [the believer comes] to recognize his helplessness’. Recognising


See *LW*xxv. 191–264; *WA* xxxi. 586–769.

See *LW*xxvi. 344; *WA* vii. 21.

 signifies LWxxx. 348; *WA* vii. 23.
this leads the person into the state of being ‘truly humble and reduced to nothing’.\textsuperscript{56} Being empty, the inner person now may be filled with God’s own unilateral self-donation in Christ.

At this point it should be noted that both Luther and Bernard emphasise humility (\textit{humilitas}) as the necessary preparation for the reception of God’s redeeming action.\textsuperscript{57} In fact, this similarity might be due to direct influence. Franz Posset and Theo Bell have both called attention to the fact that the young Luther was familiar with, and in fact copied, several sentences from one of Bernard’s major sermons on humility into his copy of Anselm’s \textit{Opuscula}.\textsuperscript{58} This is highly suggestive, but clear influence cannot be proved.

Luther’s emphasis on humility goes back to the 1510s and was part of the larger mystical theme of \textit{odium sui}, which figured prominently in his theology during this period.\textsuperscript{59} Early in Luther’s career, this theme was integrated into the framework of a mystical theology of the love and desire of God, wherein the human subject hates him or herself as an earthly object in competition with God. In this treatise, though, the theme of humility appears to be transformed into the biblical call for repentance and receptivity towards divine favour.

Despite the similarity between Luther and Bernard regarding the need for humility, from here onward the two greatly diverge. Since Bernard (as most medieval authors) understands grace as a kind of divine assistance that helps to empower human moral achievement, humility can be nothing but a stepping stone toward superior and more attractive performative righteousness. Earlier, we observed that this takes the form of virtues with which the soul cooperates in adorning itself. By contrast, Luther sees humility and passivity as the terminus of the relationship. The humility of repentance means becoming passive and receptive by recognising one’s status as a creature and sinner. \textit{Coram Deo}, it is not a first stage in becoming active, it is rather an end in itself.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} LW xxxi. 348; WA vii. 23.
\textsuperscript{57} See comparison in Posset, \textit{Pater Bernhardus}, 219–23.
\textsuperscript{59} This theme is present throughout the Romans commentary of 1515–16 and as late as the Ninety-Five Theses. In Thesis iv Luther writes \textit{odium sui} as being the content of true repentance, which continues throughout earthly life: ‘Manet itaque pena, donec manet odium sui (id est penitentia vera intus), scilicet usque ad introitum regni celorum’: WA i. 233. For a discussion of this theme in the young Luther see Oswald Bayer, \textit{Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie}, Göttingen 1971, 104–6; Leif Grane, \textit{Modus loquendi theologicus: Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie (1515–1518)}, Leiden 1975, 71–5; Lowell Green, \textit{How Melanchthon helped Luther discover the Gospel: the doctrine of justification in the Reformation}, Fallbrook, CA 1980, 62–78, 95–7; Steinmetz, \textit{Luther and Staupitz}, 78–92; and Wicks, \textit{Man yearning for grace}, 60–94, 114–16.
\textsuperscript{60} It is for this reason that Posset’s claim of a general unity in the questions of faith, grace and works is not entirely convincing: \textit{Pater Bernhardus}, 185–97.
Being made passive, humble and aware of the impossibility of self-justification, the human subject now suffers God’s proper work through the proclamation of the Gospel. Through this, God works faith. By faith, the believer receives the fullness of Christ’s righteousness through the Word. In the word of promise, Christ utterly surrenders himself to the believing person. Just as there is an exchange of goods when a man and woman are married, so too there is an exchange of realities between Christ and the believer:

Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own ... Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are the bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his.

It should be noted that not only the bridal motif, but also Luther’s accompanying image of exchange, has a long history going back to Augustine. The conceptualisation of salvation as an exchange of realities can also be found in Irenaeus’ remark that ‘He [Christ] ... become the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the son of God.’ Beyond this, within the Reformer’s immediate environment the idea of exchange between Christ and the soul through unio mystica was also ...
used by German spiritual authors and in the theology of his superior in the Augustinian order, Johann von Staupitz. Nevertheless, it should be observed that within these authors the accent lies very heavily on the soul being transformed and conformed to Christ, and not vice-versa.

As it is clear from the passage cited above, both Luther and Bernard use the bridal image to describe the relationship between Christ and the individual believer. Obviously, this does not exclude for Luther (nor does it for Bernard) the use of the image in discussing Christ’s corporate relationship with the Church as well. A believer always lives out his or her life in the assembly of the Church gathered around Word and sacraments, as Luther emphasises in his sacramental writings. It is, none the less, interesting that in this particular context the Reformer individualises the metaphor in the same manner as Bernard.

This being said, the relationship between God and humans portrayed here is utterly different from Bernard’s. The Reformer does not describe the divine-human relationship in terms of desire, but rather in terms of the trusting subject’s reception of its object of trust. The trusting subject looks not to a supremely desirable object, but instead to the absolutely trustworthy promisor made manifest in the flesh of Christ. The image of marriage therefore works as an analogy for Luther not because it represents a fulfilment of one’s greatest longings, but because it represents the total surrender of the bridegroom to the bride. For this reason, the fulfilment of the relationship between God and humans occurs through the word of proclamation. God-in-Christ holds nothing back from the believer, giving him or her his full self-donation in the promise of the Gospel. As with Bernard, the divine-human relationship of love is only gradually realised here before the final fulfilment in heaven. It is an incremental ascension, a movement from potency to act.

Luther does, of course, also mention that the bride brings a dowry to the marriage. He nevertheless preserves the bride’s passivity by making her gift not a positive contribution to the relationship, but rather the unpleasant baggage of sin and death. As bridegroom of the soul, Christ takes all this upon himself. Therefore, in describing the redemptive relationship between Christ and the soul, Luther makes Christ active and the soul passive. Nor is this reception of the bride’s goods merely fictive. It should be noticed in the lengthy passage cited above that Luther insists that the believer’s sin really belongs to Christ. Luther echoes this same sentiment in his commentary on Galatians of 1531 when he writes: ‘all the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murder, adulterer,

Steinmetz, Luther and Staupitz, 29–30, and Misericordia dei, Brill 1968, 90–1.
robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world... He is a sinner. 68

Again, this is a rather significant difference from Bernard. Bernard’s bride brought something desirable to the marriage. She adorns herself with the perfumes of good works and the sweet-smelling flowers of virtue. In fairness to Bernard, the contribution of the bride came about because of divine assistance. Nevertheless, it is ultimately the bride’s active righteousness that makes her an attractive object coram Deo. This is not merely a feature of Bernard’s thinking, but also the description of unio mystica that is to be found in other spiritual authors popular during this period. 69 Steven Ozment observes that this deviation from the earlier tradition was not lost on Luther’s contemporaries. He quotes the Dominican inquisitor Jacob Hochstraten who writes:

[Luther] lists no preconditions for the spiritual marriage of the soul with Christ except only that we believe Christ... and trust that he will bestow all [that he promises]. Not a single word is said about the mutual love by which the soul loves Christ... nor do we hear anything about the other divine commandments, to which the keeper of which eternal life is both promised and owed. What else do those who boast of such a base spectacle do than make of the soul... a prostitute and an adulteress, who knowingly and wittingly connives to deceive her husband [Christ] and, daily committing fornication upon fornication and adultery upon adultery, makes of the most chaste of men a pimp? As if Christ does not take the trouble... to choose... a pure and honorable lover? 70

In other words, according to Hochstraten, for the mystical marriage to work, the believer must possess enticing virtues to attract Christ. Christ could never be drawn to the soul if it were not first made attractive to him.

Conversely, according to Luther, not only is the believing soul unattractive to God (i.e. it is filled with sin and death), but Christ himself is unattractive to the believer. Having taken weakness, sin and death upon himself, Christ is not and cannot be desirable to fallen humans who seek glory and personal righteousness. In Freedom of a Christian, this point is more implicit than explicit. However, in Luther’s earlier work, the Heidelberg disputation (1518), 71 he clarified this point insofar as he states: ‘Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are

68 LW xxvi. 277; WA xl/1, 433 (emphasis added). For a systematic description of Luther’s position in the Galatians commentary see Tuomo Mannermaa, Christ present in faith: Luther’s view of justification, Minneapolis 2005, 13–16.

69 Ozment, Homo spiritualis, 73–9.


71 LW xxxi. 35–70; WA i. 350–74.
nevertheless really eternal merits.’ Citing the prophecy of Isaiah liii, Luther notes that this is supremely true of Christ: ‘That the works of God are unattractive is clear from what is said in Isa. 53:2, “He [Christ] had no form of comeliness’.

Hence, Christ is unattractive to the believer and the believer is unattractive to Christ. This is, indeed, in keeping with Luther’s later observation that the object of faith must necessarily be hidden from the believer. God’s attractive grace and love are hidden beneath the ugliness of the cross. In Luther’s commentary on Galatians, he states ‘Thus faith is a sort of knowledge or darkness that nothing can see. Yet the Christ of whom faith takes hold is sitting in this darkness as God sat in the midst of darkness on Sinai and in the temple.’ Desire is always provoked and enticed by a vision of its object. Faith relies on a word contrary to vision. As a result, desiring the object of faith is automatically ruled out. Therefore, for Luther, the mystical marriage of Christ and the believer is predicated on the basis of hearing and faith and not on vision and works. It is through the Word alone that he communicates all his benefits: ‘this absorbing of the Word, [in faith] communicate[s] to the soul all things that belong to the Word’. By contrast, Bernard uses the language of beauty and vision. For this reason his theology is one of grace-inspired works. Put succinctly, love pursues by works, faith passively receives.

This, none the less, leaves open the question of the nature of human love and its proper object. It is interesting to note that in Freedom of a Christian Luther does not speak much about the love of God. Rather, he speaks of faith’s glorification of God in its proper identification of him as the ultimate object of trust: ‘Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. When this is done, the soul consents to his will.’ Similarly, in another treatise of this period, On good works (1520), when discussing the first table of the Decalogue, the best Luther can say about the love of God is that faith ‘makes me feel kindly disposed toward him [God]’.

Though it is impossible to complete an exhaustive study of this period of Luther’s theology here, it is at least clear that in these two major theological treatises what appears to be a conscious de-emphasis on the believer’s love for God can be observed. The robust ‘We should fear and love God, etc.’ of

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72 LW xxxi. 44; WA i. 356 (emphasis added).
73 ‘Non est ei species neque décor’: ibid. (emphasis added).
74 LWxxvi. 129–30; WA xi/1, 228–9 (emphasis added).
75 LWxxxi. 349; WA vii. 24.
77 LW xxxi. 351; WA vii. 25 (emphasis added).
78 LWxiv. 30; WA vi. 210 (emphasis added).
the later catechisms is absent. Rather, Luther seems to suggest that the first table of the law is fulfilled by faith and the second by love.\textsuperscript{79} It is very hard to think that Luther intends to rule out the love of God entirely, especially in light of the many biblical statements regarding the love of God that he would later employ in his catechetical writings. Perhaps it might be speculated that Luther deemphasised the human love of God in \textit{Freedom of a Christian} because of the way in which the earlier tradition had used it as the basis of the divine-human relationship. Of course, since Luther does not make his motives explicit, there cannot be absolute certitude on this point. None the less, such a judgement fits well with Luther’s other theological decisions.

If Luther’s intentions are read this way, then his description of love’s function in the Christian’s life represents a significant reorientation of the tradition. Whereas the earlier tradition, represented by Bernard, saw earthly things as a distraction from the love’s proper object (namely God), Luther holds that love’s proper orientation is, in fact, towards an earthly object, namely the neighbour: ‘This is truly Christian life. \textit{Here faith is truly active in love} [Galatians v.6], that is, it finds expression in works of freest service, cheerfully done, with which a man willing serves another [i.e. the neighbour] without hope of reward.’\textsuperscript{80} In fact, throughout the latter half of the treatise, which deals with social ethics, the presence of the word ‘love’ is as conspicuously present as it is absent in the discussion of the divine-human relationship. The love that serves the neighbour is not predicated on his or her status as a desirable object, but rather is disinterested. Love of the neighbour results from an overflowing of the love donated to the Christian by God-in-Christ. Possessing the fullness of all that is Christ’s, there is nothing left to desire, pursue or grasp.

Of course, for Bernard also, the believer should love his or her neighbour. Nevertheless, for the mystic the basis for the Christian’s love of the neighbour is the fact that God loves the neighbour. Therefore, the desire to help the neighbour is derivative of one’s proper orientation to God as the supremely desirable object. Desire for God makes one desire what he desires. For Luther, faith orients believers toward God-in-Christ, whereas love is primarily directed toward the neighbour: ‘We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and the neighbor. He lives in Christ \textit{through faith}, and in his neighbor \textit{through love}.’\textsuperscript{81} In this, the self becomes radically de-centered. Whereas the person under the power of sin and self-justification stood curved in on himself or herself

\textsuperscript{79} See Paul Hacker, \textit{Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther: der Ursprung der anthropozentrischen Religion}, Graz 1966, 166–74. Hacker detects this conceptuality of faith and love in all of Luther’s writing after 1520.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{LW}xxxi. 365; \textit{WA} vii. 34–5 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{LW}xxxi. 371; \textit{WA} vii. 38 (emphasis added).
(‘homo incurvatus in se’), now the believer lives a life externalised in the other: first in Christ through faith, then through the neighbour in love.\textsuperscript{82}

By comparing and contrasting Luther’s appropriation of the bridal-mystical motif with that of Bernard, we have observed several continuities and discontinuities. The most notable continuity between Luther and Bernard is the necessity for the human subject humbly to receive the bridal relationship. The major point of contrast between Luther and the earlier tradition is the manner in which the marriage image is appropriated in order to describe the structure of the divine-human relationship. Whereas Bernard describes the relationship in terms of love and desire, Luther primarily conceptualises the human subject as a trusting hearer and God as a promising speaker. Whereas Bernard thought in terms of mutual enthralment between God and humans, Luther thinks in terms of the bride’s (the believer’s) humble receptivity to the bridegroom’s (Christ’s) full self-donation through the word of the Gospel. Therefore, while standing in continuity with the earlier tradition, Luther’s use of the bridal motif demonstrates that a fundamental shift in orientation was already present in the early Wittenberg Reformation’s re-conceptualisation of the divine-human relationship.