
A Review of A. G. Roeber, *Hopes for Better Spouses: Protestant Marriage and Church Renewal in Early Modern Europe, India, and North America*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. 317 pp. \$29.00.

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Although many credit the Protestant Reformers for restoring the church to a biblical view of marriage, one prominent historian has recently suggested that their work was left unfinished. In *Hopes for Better Spouses: Protestant Marriage and Church Renewal in Early Modern Europe, India, and North America*, A. G. Roeber, a professor of history at Penn State University, argues that Martin Luther's writings on marriage led to centuries of confusion and conflict on the subject.

In Luther's day, skepticism regarding marriage was rampant in both the church and the state. According to Roeber's reading of Luther, the German Reformer struggled to articulate the goodness of marriage in this context because he wanted to avoid labeling marriage a sacrament, as the Roman Catholics argued. Furthermore, Luther was ambiguous about who exactly had the final word in defining marriage, at times calling it a "worldly" affair under the control of the state and at other times referring to it as a "godly estate" that answered to the church (24). This tension in Luther's definition of marriage set the stage for the controversies that followed.

When his successors such as Philip Melancthon and Philipp Jakob Spener failed to bring clarity to the subject, subsequent generations of Lutherans became embroiled in conflicts related to marriage. From arguments over polygamy to disputes about the regulations for wedding celebrations, Roeber traces how "the ambivalent standing of marriage . . . spread like a cancer" throughout Lutheranism, but especially within pietist circles (95).

This ambiguity eventually plagued the mission efforts abroad as Protestant missionaries began to advance in the early eighteenth century. Roe-

ber argues that the specific issues in India, which included the question of whether missionaries could marry local converts and what to do with converted males who had multiple wives, pushed the issue "toward the official legal and theological teaching that marriage was solely a civil matter" (126).

In North America a similar shift occurred. Roeber notes that the conversations on marriage "largely succumbed to pragmatic concerns for property succession, the legal dimension of the relationship between spouses, and a reaffirmation of the husband's authority" (238).

In the end, Roeber argues that marriage became firmly situated under state control and Luther's vision for spousal relations grounded in the mysterious relationship of Christ and his church was all but lost. Thus, Roeber concludes, "Despite the Reformers' claim to have recovered the ancient Christian church from Roman innovation, they had failed, on the subject of the spousal relationship, to make their case" (278).

Some Missing Pieces

At times, it appears as if Roeber sees a final dichotomy between a vision for marriage that includes sanctification, friendship, and equality and one built on hierarchy that answers to the state. He seems to suggest that marriage must necessarily be one or the other, as if total equality within the relationship is the only path to true friendship and a pursuit of holiness. For example, he states that the early pietists faced a difficult dilemma: "either emphasize order and proper subordination in marriage as a mirror of a much-needed order in society and the state, or encourage the view of the spousal relationship as one of mutuality and spiritual help

between the partners” (31). As he fleshes out these two positions in the following pages, Roeber hints that only a quasi-sacramental view of marriage that yields equality between the spouses can lead to a truly healthy friendship. To put it another way, he suggests that there is no hope for better spouses among marriages built on a traditional distinction of roles.

However, subordination within the marriage relationship is not mutually exclusive to friendship and sanctification. An 18th-century theologian who typified the balance that seemed to elude the German pietists described by Roeber was the British Baptist pastor, Andrew Fuller (1754–1815). Fuller preached toward maintaining a distinction of roles in the home, while also arguing that the wife is to be “treated as a friend, as naturally an equal, a soother of man’s cares, a softener of his griefs, and a partner of his joys.”¹ There are times in Roeber’s presentation that he does not leave room for such a position to exist. While Fuller was not a German pietist, he is an example of a Protestant from that time period who bridged the gap between Roeber’s two general categories, illustrating that the dichotomy may be less clear than it is sometimes presented in *Hopes for Better Spouses*.

Some Lessons to Learn

Nonetheless, Roeber’s extensive collection of data establishes a convincing argument that Luther’s ambiguity on the subject of marriage presented a persistent problem for his theological heirs. His lack of clarity opened the door for his followers to reinterpret it again and again under the pressures of their own day.

Such a history recommends the necessity of clear arguments for theological convictions, lest visionary ideas be watered down in the centuries to come. This is a helpful reminder for conservative thinkers today who are struggling to address an evolving culture on this very subject. If a biblical understanding of marriage is to survive to the next generation, modern theologians must not only address contemporary aberrations of human sexuality, but also set forth a compelling vision for what God has intended marriage to be.

Some readers may wish that Roeber would have included more contemporary application in his presentation. Indeed, the church is still hoping for better spouses and many are turning away from the traditional definition of marriage to find the kind of relationship they desire. Roeber has suggested some application of the book in an online blog, in which he writes, “The scope of this book—intentionally comparative and transformational—speaks directly to the challenges of global Christianity in the twenty-first century and to the ongoing debates about what marriage has meant—and continues to mean—to both Christian and non-Christian populations.”²

In particular, Roeber points out how his work provides “a historical perspective on what is now at stake as ‘global south’ Christians appear to be diverging steadily from many European and North American Protestants’ willingness to expand the understanding of marriage to include same-sex relationships.”³ This work could have been strengthened by insights such as these throughout the story or perhaps a closing section that synthesized the lessons that can be learned from this bit of history.

These critiques aside, A. G. Roeber has provided a fascinating study on marriage in German pietism, which should be read by any who are interested in the subject. His attention to detail, vast array of sources, and willingness to trace the complex controversy through centuries and across continents make this a compelling work. The resulting study will be of interest to sociologists, historians, ethicists, and theologians, but it also deserves the attention of thoughtful Christians. Roeber has uncovered an important story in this work and there are many lessons that the contemporary church can learn from it.

ENDNOTES

¹Andrew Fuller, *Discourses on Genesis* in *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845; repr. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), 10.

²A. G. Roeber, “Marriage and Protestant Hopes, Then and Now,” [on-line]; accessed 5 November, 2013; <http://eerdword.wordpress.com/2013/07/10/marriage-and-protestant-hopes-then-and-now-by-a-g-roeber>.

³Ibid.