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# A Table Talk of Terror: Luther, Parental Discipline, and Family History

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**T**he obituary for my great-great-grandfather the Rev. Carl Lohrmann (1847-1935) included the following passage about piety and discipline:

In spite of a meager income the parents strove to provide for their large family to the best of their ability, and above all else were determined to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Sin and misdemeanor were severely punished. Luther's words were frequently quoted: "Rather would I have a dead son than a wayward one." But in spite of all severity the Word of Christ dwelt in the home. Morning and evening devotions were held with greatest punctiliousness. Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs resounded in the home. Both parents were fervent in prayer.<sup>1</sup>

It seems strange that the punishment of sins and a violent saying from Luther—"Rather would I have a dead son than a wayward one"—should have been so important for the family that they were mentioned in the obituary, which was likely written by one of Carl's children.

As a descendant of Carl and a church historian, I have three questions for this obituary. First, is this an authentic Luther citation? Second, how did my great-great-grandfather Carl come to learn it? Third, what impacts might it have had on families like ours across the generations?

In pursuing these questions, I am inspired by the work and witness of Gwen Saylor. Her focus on faith and domestic violence, as well as her teaching of resources like Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*,<sup>2</sup> have influenced my approach to church history and the Lutheran tradition. This article also builds upon the work of Victor Vieth, whose steadfast efforts to end child abuse and protect children in church settings have included study of Martin Luther's childhood experiences of trauma and abuse.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Obituary for the Rev. Carl Christian Johann Lohrmann. [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/144805504/carl-christian\\_johann-lohrmann](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/144805504/carl-christian_johann-lohrmann). Accessed 3 January 2023.

2. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

3. See, for instance, Victor Vieth, "Until the Blood Ran: A Call

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**T**here are many assumptions about Luther and the tradition that do not hold up under close examination. In the case of the ugly saying, "Rather would I have a dead son than a wayward one," an investigation of its origins can shed light on its place in Luther's life and the Lutheran tradition.

## Question one: Origins and authenticity

My vocation as a church historian sometimes includes the task of separating fact from fiction when it comes to the life of Luther and other important aspects of the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> There are many assumptions about Luther and the tradition that do not hold up under close examination. In the case of the ugly saying, "Rather would I have a dead son than a wayward one," an investigation of its origins can shed light on its place in Luther's life and the Lutheran tradition.

First, this passage does not come from the published works of Luther's lifetime. Luther himself did not put it in print as a saying he wanted attached to him. Instead, it appears in the collections of Luther's Table Talk (*Tischreden* in German; *Colloquia* in Latin) that started to be published twenty years after the reformer's death.<sup>5</sup>

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to Re-Appraise the Experience of Child Abuse in the Life and Works of Martin Luther," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (Oct 2020): 60-73.

4. See, for instance, Martin J. Lohrmann, "This Is Not Martin Luther," *Lutheran Quarterly* 33 (Winter 2019): 434-437.

5. *COLLOQVIA, Oder Tischreden Doctor Martini Lutheri* . . . , edited by Johannes Aurifaber (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Schmid, 1567) [Hereafter Aurifaber], 60r. See also, *COLLOQUIA, MEDITATIONES, CONSOLATIONES, CONSILIA, IUDICIA, SENTENTIAE, Narrationes, Responsa, Facetiae, D. Mart. Luth. piae & sanctae memoriae, in mensa pran-dii, & coenae, & in peregrationibus, ob-seruata & fideliter*

**A**s biographical records of Luther's life, the Table Talk are notoriously unreliable. In contemporary scholarship, the most trustworthy of these table conversations are those that have additional validation; for instance, they might have been written in dated notebooks that give helpful context, or two people might have written matching versions of the same story.

This subgenre of Luther literature became popular when several of his former students, colleagues, and assistants shared and collected notes that they had kept as personal mementos of their treasured time at Luther's table.<sup>6</sup>

Johannes Aurifaber was the first to publish these collections of Luther's sayings in 1566. He intentionally presented Luther as a sage who dispensed wisdom from the intimacy of an idealized proto-Protestant home. This resulted in editorial decisions by Aurifaber and others that emphasized presumed moral value over historical accuracy.<sup>7</sup> Theodore Tappert, editor of the Table Talk volume for the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, put it this way: "Aurifaber was interested in making public those conversations which might 'satisfy the spiritual hunger and thirst' of readers and might furnish them with 'instruction and consolation.'"<sup>8</sup>

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copies made in turn from these copies, with all the slips, misreadings, and attempted improvements that usually accompany such repeated copying."<sup>9</sup>

The moralizing literary context of the terrible passage about preferring a dead child to a disobedient one is evident in its heading: "The Discipline and Punishment of Children Is Necessary."<sup>10</sup> After introducing the story of a conflict between Luther and his oldest son, Hans, the text continues:

I would rather have a dead son than a disobedient one. Paul has not said in vain (1 Tim 3:4) that a minister should be the sort of man who heads his household well and successfully trains his children so that others are edified thereby and not scandalized. We who are placed in prominent positions serve as an example to all, and our degenerate children are a scandal to others. But the rascals want to use our privileged position as a license to sin. Even if my son frequently sins, I never or rarely hear of it; and we experience the truth of the proverb: The evil deeds of our own household we ourselves are the last to find out. We do not hear about it until everybody has peddled it on the streets.<sup>11</sup>

Matching the goals of the early Table Talk to present Luther as a dispenser of homespun wisdom and piety, this passage moves from a specific parent/child conflict to commentary on 1 Timothy 3 about the need for uprightness in a church leader's household. It then concludes with a piece of parental advice: *Ergo castigandus est, et illi non connivendum* ("Therefore, one should punish him and not turn a blind eye").<sup>12</sup>

In its literary context, this passage offers guidance for early Lutheran views of parental discipline, as indicated through the moralistic heading, hyperbolic speech, biblical commentary, and aphoristic conclusion.<sup>13</sup> Concerns about the details of the domestic quarrel or the level of violence in Luther's speech are secondary in comparison to the "moral of the story," namely, the fundamental need for parental discipline. The abstraction of this passage into universal parenting guidance is visible in how one editor removed the name of Luther's son, Hans, so that the story could apply to any child.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the moralizing setting of the Table Talk, did Martin Luther really say such a thing? Ernst Kroker, who edited Table Talk for the modern scholarly Weimar edition of Luther's works, included this passage in volume 5 of the *Tischreden* in a section

*trans-scripta* / TOMUS PRIMUS, edited by Heinrich Peter Rebenstock (Frankfurt am Main: 1571) [hereafter, Rebenstock], 135-136. See also, Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 volumes (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912-1921) [hereafter WA TR], 5.489.

6. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, volume 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1967) [hereafter LW 54], 54: X.

7. See, LW 54: XV-XIX. See also, Ingo Klitzsch, "Luther's Table Talk" in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 347.

8. LW 54: XIV.

9. LW 54: XVI.

10. WA TR 5.489, 21, "Der Kinder Zucht und Strafe ist nöthig."

11. *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 145. A separate translation of this passage also appears in Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Personal Luther: Essays on the Reformer from a Cultural Historical Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 149.

12. WA TR 5.489, 19 (number 6102); Rebenstock, 135-136. Translation by Martin Lohrmann.

13. WA TR 5.489, 21, "Der Kinder Zucht und Strafe ist nöthig."

14. WA TR 5.489, 22.

he described as “not belonging to the original sources”<sup>15</sup> due to its lack of corroborating material. Although some scholars have taken issue with Kroker’s methods,<sup>16</sup> I agree with him in viewing this passage as one that falls well short of contemporary standards for evaluating the historicity of Luther’s works. To answer my original question for this section, I would say “probably not.” I put very little stock in it as an authentic saying or sentiment of Martin Luther. Even if he did say this or something like it, I do not believe he would have wished it to stand as a public piece of parental advice. As we will consider below, however, texts like these have enduring lives and power of their own, beyond what a historian working with primary sources might want to be the case.

### Question two: Continuing influence

Writing in 1919, Kroker’s lengthy preface to volume 5 of the Weimar edition of Table Talk explained why passages like the one under discussion should be read with skepticism about their historical accuracy. Table Talk stories were edited, embellished, re-arranged, and sometimes invented outright to fit an image of Luther that a later generation wanted to promote.

However, because a person would have to read Kroker’s long preface to this critical edition of Luther’s works to learn that these are unreliable sources, the few recent scholars who have cited this passage have not questioned its authenticity.<sup>17</sup> As it has been for centuries, this passage continues to be presented uncritically as depicting an actual moment in the relationship between Luther and his son, Hans, in which the reformer wished his son were dead. From a historical perspective, it would be more accurate to describe the passage as a stylized early depiction of Luther’s view of parental discipline rather than a firsthand journalistic report of his parenting. That subtle distinction, however, is far less powerful than the fact that this saying has been accepted as a true word of Martin Luther for several centuries.

Over time, Table Talk continued to grow in influence as sources of biographical information. They gained new academic status when Johann Georg Walch included them in his monumental collection of Luther’s writings in the 1740s.<sup>18</sup> Walch’s choice was repeated with the similarly influential “Erlangen edition” of Luther’s works of the mid-1800s.<sup>19</sup> Through such esteemed sources, the highly stylized Table Talk became part of the historical record of Luther’s life. As a sign of how well known and accepted these

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sayings were at the time, a great Luther scholar of the nineteenth century, Julius Köstlin of the University of Halle, retold the story of Luther wishing his son, Hans, were dead in his chapter on the reformer’s family life in volume two of his influential Luther biography, published in 1875.<sup>20</sup> Neither popular nor scholarly audiences had reason to think that the Table Talk stories were any less authentic than Luther’s published writings, handwritten letters, lecture notes, or transcribed sermons.

As a native German speaker who came to the United States from Mecklenburg with his family in the 1850s, Carl Lohrmann (1847-1935) would have had ample opportunity to learn Luther’s sayings. Having felt a call to ministry early in life, Carl attended the St. Louis seminary of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod from 1863 to 1868. There he could have had access to several printings of Table Talk, including the Walch edition, the Erlangen edition, and an influential 1844 version.<sup>21</sup> Within the following decades, the saying that found its way into Carl’s obituary also appeared in a pocket-sized 1878 version of Table Talk<sup>22</sup> and the 1887 reissue of the Walch edition of Luther’s works by the Missouri Synod’s Concordia Publishing House.<sup>23</sup>

Since the late 1800s, academic research on Table Talk has challenged the reliability of passages like this one. But does it matter? We have seen how the story of Luther saying, “I would rather have a dead son than a disobedient one,” has long been accepted as genuine where it appears in scholarship. It is included without qualification in the confidently titled collection *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*.

20. Julius Köstlin, *Martin Luther: Sein Leben und Seine Schriften*, vol. 2 (Elberfeld: Friderichs, 1875), 477.

21. *D. Martin Luther’s sämtliche Schriften*, Vol. 22, edited by Karl Eduard Förstemann (Leipzig: Gebauersche Buchhandlung, 1844), 202.

22. *Dr. Martin Luthers Tischreden oder Colloquia...*, ed. Friedrich von Schmidt (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., [1878]), 73-74.

23. *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, Vol. 22, ed. Johann Georg Walch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1887), 170.

15. WA TR 5.XLIV and XL. The section is designated “Tischreden aus Anton Lauterbach’s Sammlung B.”

16. Klitzsch, “Luther’s Table Talk,” 348.

17. For instance, *What Luther Says*, 145; William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home: An Application of the Social Ethics of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 28; Karant-Nunn, *The Personal Luther*, 149.

18. *Dr. Martin Luthers sowol in Deutscher als Lateinischer Sprache verfertigte und aus der letzteren in die erstere übersetzte Sämtliche Schriften*, Volume 22, ed. Johann Georg Walch (Halle: Joh. Justinus Gebauer, 1743) [Hereafter Walch], 255.

19. *Dr. Martin Luther’s vermischte deutsche Schriften*, Vol. 57, edited by Johann Konrad Irmischer (Frankfurt a. M. and Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer, 1854), 262-263.

That book—first published in 1959 and still in print over 60 years later—shows in its subtitle that it remains true to Aurifaber’s original goal of presenting Luther’s words for the sake of moral edification, especially in the home.

Regardless of the authenticity of this specific saying, it contains the rhetorical shock value, biblical piety, and worldly pragmatism that might make it sound and feel like something a brash reformer like Luther could have really said. In this case, the Luther of legend has been indisputably more influential than the historical Luther, whose published works about parenthood are more circumspect and careful to emphasize parental love. In that light, it is potentially more problematic that people can imagine Luther happily uttering such a violent thing about his son than determining whether or not he actually said it.

### Question three: Real-life impacts

Part of the reason a violent saying like this might have survived over the centuries is that it is tempered by other statements and examples of Luther as a father that moderate its harshness. Without minimizing the strong language and the parental shortcomings evident in this particular Table Talk, Luther “loved his family unrestrainedly,” as Susan Karant-Nunn expressed in her careful—and frequently critical—study of Luther as a father.<sup>24</sup> Luther never acted upon this kind of violent language, although he seems to have been strict—and maybe even emotionally harsh—to his sons, especially his oldest son, Hans.<sup>25</sup> More frequently, Luther expressed love for his children, joy about being a father, and grief when they suffered. The larger context of Luther’s care for his children and the moralistic setting of Table Talk give reasons not to suppose that the reformer meant these words literally, should he have truly said them.

Even if they were proven authentic, Lutheranism is not a cult of personality. In its healthiest forms across the generations, Lutheranism has been a gospel-centered branch of the wider Christian church, with scriptural foundations expressed in shared statements of faith like the Augsburg Confession, Luther’s catechisms, and the Formula of Concord. Luther’s personal views are not Holy Scripture. They can and ought to be dismissed or renounced when they do not share the love of God in Christ Jesus. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America did precisely this with its 1994 apology for anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in a document titled “A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community.”<sup>26</sup> In short, the words “Luther says” are not self-authenticating. It would be a violation of Luther’s own theology of justification and the Word of God if they were.

In addition to gainsaying Luther’s many words of love for his

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family, this statement about wishing for the death of a wayward child directly contradicts Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, which includes the father’s passionate words, “let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:23-24). When compared to a God who welcomes wayward children out of pure and unmerited love, there is no reason to validate words of Luther that obscure God’s grace, mercy, and salvation for children, including lost or disobedient ones.

In the case of my family, I can see how the tension between love and discipline resulted in generational pain that left feelings of ambivalence. Carl Lohrmann’s obituary said, “In spite of all severity the Word of Christ dwelt in the home.” Punishment, sin, and severity do not describe an entirely loving family experience, even if accompanied by daily devotions. A similar tension is evident in recollections that my grandfather Hugo Lohrmann wrote about his childhood: “Parents were quite strict, had to be with such a ‘large gang’ of us. But there was plenty of love to go around.”<sup>27</sup> Here again, strictness and love were connected closely, a model that Hugo himself then lived into with his ten children in sometimes hurtful ways.

While I am sure that many families of diverse backgrounds have experienced similar dynamics in the relationship between love and discipline, it is interesting to see how closely my great-great-grandfather Carl and my grandfather Hugo followed the pattern presented in Luther’s Table Talk. Shaped as we are by our family histories, I hope that four or five generations has been enough time for great-great-grandpa Carl’s appreciation of Luther’s saying to have run its course and for new, more gracious models of parenting to arise. I am grateful to my parents that they cared about being present for me and my siblings in positive ways. For myself, as a father of three, I want most of all to let my children know that they are loved beyond measure.

24. Karant-Nunn, *The Personal Luther*, 151.

25. Karant-Nunn, *The Personal Luther*, 148-154.

26. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community,” Revised Version (ELCA, 2021) [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Declaration\\_Of\\_The\\_ELCA\\_To\\_The\\_Jewish\\_Community.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Declaration_Of_The_ELCA_To_The_Jewish_Community.pdf). Accessed 3 January 2023.

27. “The Autobiography of the Rev. Hugo C. Lohrmann,” dated March 16, 1977; family collection.

## Conclusion

In her teaching and church leadership, Gwen Saylor called attention to challenging biblical texts about religious violence and to painful social realities such as discrimination and domestic abuse. Confronted with disturbing parts of the Bible or the Christian tradition, Dr. Saylor taught me and many others not to run from such passages or gloss them over but to let them push us into deeper truths about love, courage, and compassion. Her focus on these issues led me to take this ugly saying attributed to Luther in my great-great-grandfather's obituary seriously instead of ignoring or minimizing it.

Whether or not Luther said this himself, I find the saying from Luther's Table Talk abhorrent and put no value in it. While boundaries and consequences for children help them stay safe and learn to treat others well, I cannot begin to sympathize with or justify Table Talk's violent views about a child's waywardness. There is too much violence and hurt in this world—including violence against children—for such words to have a place in our churches, neighborhoods, and homes. Knowing that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), we entrust our dear ones to the care of a heavenly Parent who continuously leads and guides all of us into abundant life.

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