An innovative historiographic trend over the last two generations has been to display the continuities between the late Middle Ages and the Reformation era. Even though the year 1500 still stands as a dividing line between the pre-modern and modern periods in the European past, its fragility is increasingly visible to all. Little more than the entrenched departmentalization of academic institutions throughout the West holds this chronological marker in place. The reliance of Martin Luther’s theology on the thought of various predecessors is plain, as is, among much else, the encroachment of the state on the ecclesiastical sphere. Even efforts to impose greater moral discipline upon the laity began not later than the fifteenth century, along with more stringent regulations and rhetoric concerning the place of women in home and workforce. Yet the Reformation was a break with traditional religion – we sense it on every side. The time has come for a renewed critical reflection on the posited similarities between early Lutheranism and the Catholicism out of which it startlingly emerged.

The purpose of this essay is to argue that the construction of the Lutheran pastoral family during the sixteenth century and its elevation everywhere to a model of piety and decorum marked a radical break with the prevailing Catholic practice of concubinage. Priests living with their ‘cooks’ and ‘housekeepers’ and raising children with them was widespread as the Reformation began. The earliest Lutheran reconnaissance visitation, in the Ernestine administrative district (Amt) of Tenneberg in March 1526, makes this clear. In the dozen villages, two of which contained two parishes, ten of the fourteen clergymen either still had questionable women in their homes or professed to...
have recently married them. The men’s uncertainty about committing themselves to a condition from which they could not free themselves even if the Catholic Church were to recover from the Reformation challenge is demonstrated by the case of Herr Vincentius, pastor in Ulleben:

He has his cook. A year ago, when the peasants revolted, they said that they were going to marry and had the banns declared in Gotha. But after the peasants were pacified, he did not take her to church [for the wedding ceremony]. The people still regard her as a whore; but he says that he wants to marry her soon after Easter.

[Hat seyn kochin, vor eyn iar do die pauern auf stunde vorgeben sie zu ehlichen, lis sich zu gotha auf piten, do aber der pauern gestillt wurden, hat er sie bis her noch nit zu kirchen gefuret. Helt es das volck noch fur hurnbalk, doch wil ers bald noch ostern ehlichen.]

With the exception of the parish priesthood, monks, friars and nuns – all of whom took vows of celibacy – late medieval society was oriented towards and structured around marriage. For most purposes, the laity did not agree with St. Jerome that virginity was superior to marriage or even that a commitment to widowhood was better than remarrying. To be a fully participatory citizen, one was expected to have been Respectably wed even if currently widowed. No man could become a guild master without first giving written proof of his having been born within wedlock and without having married as soon as he gave formal evidence of his artisanal skills. The wedded pair together with their children and servants were the units out of which society saw itself as being constructed. Yet, in order to be approved of, bonds between women and men had to be established by means of ceremonies. These were far more social than ecclesiastical, for on the eve of the Reformation weddings did not absolutely require even priestly blessing, much less a longer ritual within a church. The couple’s betrothal bespoke their and their families’ consent, on mutually agreed terms, and this was already binding. Ordinarily, brides and grooms of whatever rank acted in keeping with their immediate relatives’ strategies as well as their own personal tastes.

Priestly concubinage violated the dominant mores. It was hypocritical in an age that took oaths very seriously. Clergymen’s failure to conform to prescribed patterns of negotiation and troth-plighting reminded the laity once again not only of the vulnerability of their