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Loving Enough to Discipline

2017–18 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

Studies in pastoral theology using C.F.W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

LEADER'S GUIDE

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References in Walther:

Articles 39–43 [*Church Discipline, Brotherly Admonition, Why Public Church Repentance Is Necessary, Who Can and Cannot Be Excommunicated, and Readmitting People Who Have Been Excommunicated*]

To the circuit visitor or discussion leader: Please impress on the pastors the necessity of reviewing the introduction to the book (vii–ix) in advance. Your discussion will be more fruitful if the group has a better grasp of the original setting of the book, Dr. Walther’s

intent and methodology, and how his extensive quotations illustrated how earlier generations applied Lutheran doctrine in their contemporary context. Help the pastors see the link between doctrine and practice (i.e., doctrine implies pastoral practice and practice is doctrine pastorally applied). There is likely more material in this study than can be reasonably covered in the average circuit meeting. You may wish to indicate in advance which of these questions will be prioritized for your discussion.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Church discipline probably doesn’t strike us as an exciting topic in our day, but Walther exhibits here a true love for the souls entrusted to a pastor’s care. Such love has always been difficult — a cross that comes with the vocation of pastor and baptized believer — but it is love devoted to the well-being of the soul in peril and the health of all the flock.

Walther notes that church discipline is not a mark of the church. It is enough for the church’s unity to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments according to our Lord’s Word. But church discipline is helpful to the

well-being of a congregation, and it is of great benefit. As with most things, there are ditches on both sides of the road that call for intentional care and wisdom. Being too eager to discipline can be destructive of both the soul in peril and the congregation, yet failing to discipline also harms both the soul in peril and the congregation.

May the Lord bless us with wisdom and true love for our neighbor as we study church discipline and serve the flock purchased with the blood of Christ Jesus.

ARTICLE 39: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

“The preacher has the duty not only to dispense the means of grace to his congregation as a teacher but also, as watchman, bishop, shepherd, overseer, etc. of the congregation, to see to it that the Word of God is obeyed in everything and thus that the Christian discipline commanded in God’s Word is exercised with it” (p. 373).

Walther offers passages from six New Testament books to support his thesis, listing first Matt. 18:15–17. Read Matt. 17:22–18:35. Note the context of our Lord’s teaching here to understand our Lord’s intent in giving us church discipline. In Matt. 17:22–23, Jesus gives His second Passion prediction. He teaches that He does not need to pay the temple tax, but does anyway so as not to offend. Then the disciples ask who is the greatest in Christ’s reign; at every Passion prediction, there are strange reactions like this one from Jesus’ followers. Our Lord’s answer is to place a child before them as the greatest. We’re all to become little

children. A child is greatest because a child is needy. He can only receive. Jesus’ teaching about greatness continues with other needy ones: the one lost sheep, the brother who sins “against” you and the brother who repents. He concludes this section with the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant as a clear warning that the goal is always the restoration of sinners.

Jesus mentions “little ones” three times in Matthew 18. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin [be scandalized], it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (vv. 5–6). “See that you do not despise one of these little ones” (v. 10). “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (v. 14). It is evident that the goal in discipline is never the destruction of a little one, but

preventing scandalizing, providing true care and seeking to keep little ones from perishing.

If the greatest is the neediest, that is, the child, the lost sheep and the one who has sinned against you, then what does this tell us about the work of seeking after the lost sheep and the trapped sinner?

Walther warns about both overzealous introduction of discipline and indifference toward church discipline.

Comment 1: The Duty of the Preacher with Regard to Introducing Church Discipline

In his first comment, Walther urges caution.

1. Why is fully implemented church discipline not a necessary mark of the true Church? What are the marks of the Church (374)?
2. Read the Luther quote in the middle of Page 374. What ban does he, Jonas, Bugenhagen and Melancthon use? How would this apply today?
3. Read Luther's letter to the Hessian theologians on Pages 374–375. What is Luther's warning? What is Luther's advice on how to move forward?
4. Read the first full paragraph on Page 375. What is the highest law? What is essential for a congregation? What dangers are there in compelling congregations into church discipline? How does a pastor prepare a congregation for the proper exercise of church

discipline? When would it be wisest to prepare a congregation?

To the leader: Just as we prepare for a fire or storm when there isn't a fire or storm, the wisest time to prepare a congregation is when there isn't a major case before the congregation so that the teaching can be clear and objective.

Comment 2: The Necessity of Church Discipline

In his second comment, Walther argues that church discipline is not an indifferent matter.

1. Read the quotes from both the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and the Smalcald Articles in the middle of Page 376. What do our Confessions say that we will do? What are the challenges today in using the "minor, that is, the true Christian ban"?
2. Luther makes a helpful distinction between *life* and *doctrine* (that is, teaching). Why is the ban for sins of doctrine of such importance to Luther? What do we lose if we lose the ban over doctrine (376–377)?
3. Dannhauer offers an analogy between failing to maintain a home and failing to practice church discipline (378). Does this seem like a rather modern observation? What are the dangers of both extremes: overzealously implementing discipline or doing nothing? How has your congregation or another congregation you know of benefited from or been handicapped by discipline or the lack of it?

ARTICLE 40: BROTHERLY ADMONITION

"The necessary foundation for true Christian church discipline is for the order of brotherly admonition prescribed by Christ in Matt. 18:15–17 not to be violated in any way, neither by the individual members of the congregation nor the congregation as a whole nor even by the preacher himself" (379).

Comment 1

Walther ends the first comment on brotherly admonition with wise advice: "If a preacher wants to introduce Christian church discipline in his congregation in accordance with the prescription of Christ, then he must begin by introducing Christian, brotherly admonition" (381). What are some ways to introduce brotherly admonition in a congregation?

1. Luther urges each Christian to admonish and warn his neighbor trapped in sin (379). What's the benefit of such warning? Why do we avoid warning our neighbor according to Luther (379)? Is Luther correct?
2. Luther's teaching on the Eighth Commandment from the Large Catechism is quoted on Page 380. What are you to do if your brother sins? What are you to do if another tells you of someone else's sin? What are you called to do if the brother will not repent?

Comment 2: The Preacher Cannot Excommunicate Unilaterally

1. In 1 Cor. 5:1–2, 13, St. Paul addresses the congregation at Corinth to excommunicate the man who has his father's

wife. Walther observes several points here: To whom does Paul write about the matter? Does Paul directly excommunicate the man? Who is to excommunicate the man? Why is he to be delivered to Satan (1 Cor. 5:5–6)?

2. “It brings disgrace upon the preacher if he gives an open ear to gossip” (381). Comment on Walther’s observation.
3. What is the role of the congregation and the role of the pastor in excommunicating (384)?

Comment 3: Manifest Sins Should Not Necessarily Be Admonished Privately First

1. While it is true that sins manifest to everyone may be rebuked publicly, as did St. Paul in correcting Peter (Gal. 2:13–14), and there may be unusual cases in which it is necessary to go directly to public admonition, Walther still urges caution: “As always, so here, too, love is nevertheless the highest law. If, therefore, love for a person who has fallen demands first admonishing him in private despite the fact that his case is public, then immediately making use of the right to rebuke publicly the one who has fallen publicly would be a serious injustice” (385). How might a public admonition push one caught in sin into greater trouble? How might a public admonition help an individual or a congregation?

2. Discuss Hartmann’s counsel and how it applies in our contemporary congregations (the last quote under Comment 3).

Comment 4: The Correct Manner for Brotherly Admonition

1. Walther presents Hartmann’s 18 rules for brotherly admonition. Do these seem useful and down-to-earth for our day? Why or why not?
2. Numbers 8–12, 15, 17 and 18 demonstrate that there is an art to Christian brotherly admonition. What have you learned through your experience that applies to these rules? With whom could you consult to get insight on how best to handle a particular admonition? Would you be willing to help counsel brother pastors or members?
3. Does rule 13 give us the freedom to report, for example, child abuse to law enforcement without first giving brotherly admonition?
4. In Article 1, the character of the pastor is essential; here in brotherly admonition the character of the admonition is also vital. What could be added or subtracted from Dannhauer’s list (387–388)?

ARTICLE 41: WHY PUBLIC CHURCH REPENTANCE IS NECESSARY

“Those who, after a public, serious fall into sin or error, appear repentant — either immediately or even after experiencing the final admonition by the congregation — should not be excommunicated. However, they should remove the offense they have given as much as possible through a public apology or so-called church repentance and thus reconcile themselves with the congregation which they have offended (Matthew 18:15; 5:23–24; Luke 17:3–4)” (389).

Comment 1: Public Church Repentance Is Not a Punishment

First, it’s important to note carefully that this is about *public* repentance for public sins, not private or unknown sins.

Second, the goal of public repentance is to restore “the relationship of trust with his brothers which was disturbed by the fall into sin” and to avoid giving the impression that “the members can live in sins and disgraces without repentance but still remain members” (389–390). As St. Paul teaches in 1 Tim. 5:20, “As for those who persist in

sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”

Walther lists three parts of Public Church Repentance: 1) a public confession of sins; 2) an incidental public punishment of sins (which appears to mean the shame of having to confess publicly); and 3) a public apology to the offended church.

Reflection:

I can think of only three cases of public apology that I either directly or indirectly observed. In all three cases, the apology was voluntary and was extremely helpful to the congregation and — somewhat surprisingly — to the penitent and the penitent’s family. One example that Dr. Ken Korby told was of a young woman who was pregnant while not married. Before the congregation knew of her pregnancy, she had privately confessed and received absolution from Dr. Korby. He then suggested that he publicly announce that she was forgiven of all her sins and then tell the congregation the good news that a baby was on the way.

She agreed. He did so, and the congregation welcomed her with open arms and rallied behind her and her mother.

Do you know of any cases of public repentance? How do current social customs complicate or facilitate the sensitive implementation of public repentance?

Comment 2: From Whom Public Church Repentance Should Be Required

1. Walther advises that not all public sins, but only some, should require public confession. Which sins are these? What's the goal of the public repentance (391–392)?
2. He gives particular attention “to engaged couples who have lived with each other in a marital fashion.” It is important to note that engagement then was something quite different than it is now. (See 255–259 and 260–263.) Note the distinction Gerhard makes between cohabitation of “betrothed couples” and fornication. How does that inform our care of cohabiting couples to restore their relationship with the Lord, the Church and each other? Why can we not just ignore cohabitation? (See Ezek. 3:18–20.)

Comment 3: Those Who Apologize Publicly Should Not Be Suspended from Communion

Our concern is for the conscience of the penitent and so those who repent should be absolved and received immediately as Nathan did with David and Paul urged the Corinthians. Why could a delay of absolution and reception be of great danger to the penitent?

ARTICLE 42: WHO CAN AND CANNOT BE EXCOMMUNICATED

See the list of six qualifications for excommunication and the nine reasons why someone may not be excommunicated.

To the leader: It might be helpful to carefully read aloud the six qualifications for excommunication and then the nine reasons for not excommunicating and reflect on these. At first, it might seem obvious that one shouldn't excommunicate a dead person, but such errors have arisen in the church's history. Such intentionality and clarity can be helpful as a reference during a time of crisis.

Comment 4: No Church Repentance for Sins Committed Elsewhere

In our day, when many things become public through social media, this becomes complicated. But Walther is opposed to requiring a public apology in a different community from where the public sin occurred. He does quote Benedict Carpzov regarding an offense that was committed elsewhere but has become known: “Then my advice would be for the people only to be assured publicly from the pulpit, without a public apology by the guilty person, that he has repented and to be warned that they may not take offense” (394). What would be the dangers and benefits of such public assurance in cases when the sin is known?

Comment 5: The Form of Public Apology

Walther advises that three things determine the form of the apology: 1) the severity of the offense; 2) the character of the one who has fallen; and 3) the level of knowledge of the congregation. Discuss how these three principles could inform responsible pastoral practice today.

He also urges caution against two possible errors: First, “that those who have fallen do not regard so-called church repentance as something that replaces true repentance of the heart, even though the former should only be external evidence of the presence of the latter and without it is an empty illusion. [Second] Everything that could give the idea that church repentance is a *punishment that expiates* guilt should be all the more carefully separated from it to the extent possible” (397).

Comment 1: Who Is Subject to Church Discipline

1. Every brother — the lowest as well as the highest.
2. A brother who is insane.
3. A brother who is a member of the visible church.
4. A brother who is alive.
5. A brother who is an impenitent sinner.

Comment 2: Which Sins Are Subject to Church Discipline

Sins either *against you* or *in front of you* — that is, sins that are evident with public proof. Walther quotes Dannhauer with a list of such sins.

Comment 3: Procedure if Excommunication Is Contested

1. If there is one member blocking an excommunication, without reason or merely to object to God’s Law, he is to be corrected and perhaps excommunicated. But under no circumstances is an excommunication to be carried out without the unanimous agreement of the congregation.

One can imagine quite a heated meeting if one member objects without reason or is simply rejecting the clear Word of the Lord. What attitude would the pastor and congregation want to have in meeting with this objector?

2. Matters of Excommunication Should Not Be Handled According to Moral Conviction

If some members cannot be persuaded that the sinner deserves excommunication by God’s Word, then this proves that excommunication cannot occur.

How would you advise a brother pastor if such a thing occurs at his congregation?

Comment 4: Procedure in Unclear Church Discipline Cases

Walther advises consulting with “neighboring or otherwise experienced ministers of the Church.” Pastors today tend to want to go it alone, but we need each other and the wisdom of our brothers. Who would you recommend consulting? How can you encourage brother pastors to ask your advice?

Comment 5: Excommunication Is to Be Imposed by the Entire Congregation

Johann Gerhard writes, “The most serious actions in the church may not be undertaken without the consent of the entire ecclesiastical body But what can be more serious and what pertains more to the Body of the church than to cut off a member from the Body” (410)?

Comment 6: Announcement of Excommunication

Even the announcement of excommunication that Walther cites prays, “May the almighty, merciful God bring him (or her) to recognition of his (or her) sin, create true contrition in him (or her) and prompt the improvement of [his or her] life” (412).

To the leader: It would be helpful at this point to read and consider “Excommunication from the Holy Christian Church” from Page 35 of the *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*.

Comment 7: Conduct Toward One Who Has Been Excommunicated

Walther quotes Balduin: “Yet one should not lay aside goodwill toward them, but have sympathy with their suffering, admonish and (as circumstances dictate) comfort them, and pray for their conversion and therefore show in everything that we desire for them to be saved” (412).

How might you suggest that we “show in everything that we desire for them to be saved”?

Comment 8: Precise Minutes Should Be Taken of Excommunication Proceedings

This is so that the congregation can prove to other congregations that they ought to respect the excommunication, which again, is so that an unrepentant sinner cannot manipulate the system and avoid repenting.

ARTICLE 43: READMITTING PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN EXCOMMUNICATED

If a person who has been excommunicated asks the preacher for absolution and *reinstatement* into the congregation, then the preacher should notify the latter of this request. If the congregation then unanimously declares that it is satisfied and fully conciliated by the repentant confession and conduct of the one returning, then the preacher is to carry out the resulting reinstatement through a *public* notification of the return and reconciliation which have occurred,

or through absolution in the public worship gathering and by communing the one who had been excommunicated (2 Cor. 2:6–11).

Comment 1

Martin Chemnitz proves, as follows from 2 Cor. 2:6–11, that this all used to be done this way in the apostolic congregations.

1. Read 2 Cor. 2:6–11.
Read also the second full paragraph on Page 415.
2. How, do you imagine, would that vote have gone? How has it gone for you when someone you have admonished has repented?

Comment 2: Formula for Readmitting Penitent Excommunicated Persons

Walther gives here the Saxon General Articles reinstatement. Notice the encouragement to the whole congregation to pray for the penitent.

To the leader: It would be helpful at this point to read and consider “Restoration to the Holy Christian Church” from Page 37 of the *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*.

Comment 3: Penitent Excommunicated Persons Are Not to Be Punished

Comment 4: Procedures with Excommunicated Persons

Look especially at the citation from earlier in Walther’s *Pastoral Theology* that gives practical advice on how to care for an excommunicated person who is severely ill. See the second paragraph on Page 229.

IN CONCLUSION

Reflect together on how this text still applies in the exercise of pastoral care and church discipline — in terms of the attitude, approach, motivation and methodology by which pastors approach congregants and Christians approach one another:

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1–2).