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# God's Gift of Marriage

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## 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).

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### LEADER'S GUIDE

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## References in Walther:

Articles 19–26 [Walther's title: Marriage and Divorce]

*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.

*NOTE:* Concordia Publishing House is offering a 20 percent pastoral discount to purchase Walther's *Pastoral Theology*.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

At first blush, one might be tempted to see much of Walther's counsel on marriage as antiquated, as so much has changed in society to the detriment of marriage. Yet perhaps the loss of certain practices signals that we have lost appreciation for some aspects of marriage; if that is

true, then perhaps their review will help us appreciate what marriage is intended to be. Much remains relevant, and the following study is thus offered to sharpen the pastor's practical disposition with regard to his care in matters of marriage.

## ARTICLE 19: THE PREACHER HAS A THREEFOLD OBLIGATION WITH RESPECT TO THE MARRIAGE OF CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERS

As Walther begins his discussion of marriage, he establishes the pastor's role.

1. What is the threefold obligation of the pastor with regard to marriage?
2. According to Walther, what is the one reason why a preacher becomes involved in marital issues (p. 236)? In contrast, what are popular perceptions of pastoral involvement in marital issues that he should avoid?
3. Going back to the threefold obligation, how does each of these relate to the one reason for the pastor's involvement?

*To the leader:* The reason for the pastor's involvement is the conscience. The pastor is about the care of souls. He is not a marriage counselor or an arbitrator, but he is a *Seelsorger* who correctly applies the Word of truth to individual souls. To put it another way, his goal is not to save the marriage, but to ensure that husband and wife stand

repentant and righteous before God (which may very well bring healing to the marriage).

Properly understood, the minister's threefold obligation is about maintaining a clean conscience. He will join in marriage "only those whose marital union does not conflict with any human (i.e., civil) or divine law," lest individuals suffer a bad conscience because their most intimate human relationship makes them guilty of violating the law. He will carry out the ceremony in a proper way, lest consciences are wounded by doubt about the legitimacy or sanctity of the marriage. Finally, he will "watch that the marital bond is not dissolved contrary to God," for the devastations of divorce often leave souls in a wasteland of guilt and shame, convinced that they are forsaken by God.

## ARTICLE 20: A PREACHER MUST OBSERVE CIVIL MARRIAGE LAWS

This is a straightforward note that the preacher should know the laws of the state and “act in accord with them insofar as they do not oppose the Word of God” (238). For Walther, it was the “Test Oath” of Missouri (see 238, footnote 2); today, there looms the possibility that pastors might soon be legally required to perform marriages for same-sex couples. Thus, we come to a rather pragmatic question for discussion:

1. If the state should mandate that all pastors and congregations conduct same-sex marriages, are you and your congregation prepared? Do you have plans and policies in place?

2. Is there a point when pastors and congregations may refuse to conduct and host *any* wedding, offering only the blessing of a civil marriage performed by the state?

**To the leader:** The real possibility of such a mandate makes it imperative to prepare now. As pressure from state and society grows on the church, decisions and practices will vary as Christians seek to honor God in a hostile world. Where Scripture is not clear, Christians should act in a way that preserves a good conscience, confident of God’s favor in Christ, regardless of the suffering imposed by the world.

## ARTICLE 21: DEGREES OF RELATIONSHIP THAT FORBID MARRIAGE

Article 21 may seem like a quaint relic for curing insomnia in our present day. However, there is some helpful stuff to be mined here. While society’s greatest concern with incestuous relationships today appears to be the genetic well-being of offspring, Article 21 gives other reasons for maintaining degrees of separation between husband and wife.

1. What are the reasons for maintaining these degrees of separation (241–246 *passim*), and how might they help people better understand marriage today?

**To the leader:** Reasons include:

- A recognition of natural law (241): The fact that all “civilized peoples” object to incestuous marriage is a testimony that there is a God whose law is for all, a law recognized by many nations. We should regard the current deconstruction of marriage not only as an attack on marriage, but upon God’s order and law. Marriage is the estate given by God as the foundation of society before the fall into sin. Where it is rejected, it will lead to more than mere widespread immorality: It will place society on a self-destructive trajectory, one that will also oppose the Lord and His Church.
- A recognition that marital love is different from friendship (241): Though Crusius (quoted by Walther) is writing to a different point, marriage has been reduced in our present time, in the words of one federal judge, to “the name that society gives to the relationship that matters most between two adults.”<sup>1</sup> When the marital bond, sealed and strengthened by sexual union, is con-

fused with the *philia* love of friendship, the uniqueness of each is devalued. Rather than distinct relationships, they are seen as the same thing, differing only in intensity. In that case, the meaning of both friendship and marriage is lost.

- The common good of society (242), because marriage unites different families. This is a salient point in our romantic, individualized age where marriage is thought to be only about two people. In marriage, *a couple pledges their fidelity to one another for the sake of their children, their respective families, their congregation and the community. They do not just maintain their marriage for personal happiness, but for the common good.* This service to the common good is included in the phrase, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (243).
  - The preservation of order and authority (242, 246): Because God has established order and authority in the family, the institution of marriage ought not conflict with this order. Rather, one’s conduct in marriage and family should honor God’s ordering for both.
2. Because of the practice of a widower marrying his deceased wife’s sister, Walther counsels pastors that “it is very important for a preacher to give his congregation in good time thorough instruction about the degrees of relationship that forbid marriage” (249). Today, instruction about divorce is similarly necessary. Why might pastors be afraid to address the topic, and how might one approach it constructively?

<sup>1</sup> *Perry v. Brown*, 671 F.3d 1052, February 7, 2011, 36. Quoted in Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 65.

*To the leader:* Pastors are tempted to avoid this topic because so many parishioners have divorced and remarried, and the prospect of conflict is daunting. It is wisest for a pastor to remember that he is not there as an adjudicator, but as a curate of souls. Thus, for example, he might

preface his remarks by acknowledging that this is a delicate topic because the pain and failure of divorce leads to a bad conscience (which is why it is a touchy subject), and that he desires to speak of it in order to restore troubled consciences to the confidence of God's favor in Christ.

## ARTICLE 22: ENGAGEMENT AND SPECIAL CASES RELATED TO MARRIAGE

As romanticism has gained its hold on the culture, engagement is left to the couple alone, and the requirement of parental consent is now regarded as a peculiar custom of a bygone era. The meaning of engagement has been weakened. Where Walther calls it “the efficient cause of marriage” (261), it is now more of a declaration of intent to marry.

1. How might discussing parental consent help instruct a couple in the solemn responsibilities of marriage, and about honoring parents/in-laws after the wedding?

*To the leader:* The requirement of parental consent demonstrated that marriage was related to the greater family, not just the man and woman “in love” with each other. Premarital pastoral care should still include a discussion of parents' attitudes toward the upcoming

marriage, as well as the relationship of the couple to parents and in-laws following the wedding. Again, the pastor's ultimate concern is not harmony, but the conscience of husband and wife. Ongoing tension and trouble within the greater family is fertile ground for sin, guilt and shame.

2. Discuss: A couple requests that you perform their wedding, but one or both sets of parents oppose the union. How do you address the matter pastorally?

*To the leader:* Answers will vary; but again, the pastor will seek to apply the Word to each party, seeking reconciliation and consciences that are right with God. The parents' reasons may be legitimate, although Walther also concedes that parents may object unreasonably (270).

## ARTICLE 23: THE BANNS FOR THE ENGAGED

Banns have all but disappeared from church practice, and Walther notes that they are not a divine requirement. However, the practice yields some helpful teaching about marriage. What were the purposes of the banns?

*To the leader:* Although obviously an opportunity to register objections, the banns allowed a congregation

to rejoice in the couple's chastity and fortitude as they resisted premarital sexual activity. Thus, banns served as a reinforcement of the sanctity of marriage for all. Banns also gave the congregation an opportunity to pray for the couple, reinforcing that the couple was part of a greater community.

## ARTICLE 24: THE WEDDING OF YOUNG COUPLES

Article 24 provides fodder for a discussion of the place of weddings among other church rites and ceremonies.

1. For instance, it is not of absolute necessity that a marriage be blessed in the church (in order to be a marriage), yet such a blessing is necessary for Christians (276). Why?
2. Likewise, what is the reason for the subordination of the wedding date to the liturgical calendar (277), or

the omission of honorific titles during ecclesiastical acts (279)?

*To the leader:* Everything created by God is sanctified by His Word and prayer (1 Tim. 4:4–5). The blessing of a civil wedding both acknowledges that it is God's gift and assures the couple that their union has God's blessing. The blessing also properly orders the marriage in God's design, for it was not originally intended to be an institution apart from His Church. Likewise, the subordination

of wedding dates to the liturgical calendar, though not a divine command, teaches that marriage is a gift for this life, subordinate to Christ and His grace. The omission of honorifics likewise teaches that all are equal before

God, no matter their station here. In our present age, the enforcement of such practices may well not be a hill on which to die, but recalling them helps illustrate the relationship of marriage to redemption in God's order.

## ARTICLE 25: DIVORCE ON ACCOUNT OF ADULTERY

Article 25 is surprisingly brief, with Walther reserving objections and complications for Article 26.

1. Even when one party is clearly guilty of adultery, how is the pastor supposed to present himself to both (280)?
2. Should a pastor ever approve of divorce? Rather than approval, what words might he use when speaking of a divorce that follows the sin of adultery?

*To the leader:* Seidel advises that the pastor never “play the judge,” for then he has aligned himself with one party against the other. He is a pastor, and his goal is to care for the souls of both the sinner and the one sinned against. A pastor should not express approval of divorce — in doing so, not only does he take on the role of judge, but he is perceived as speaking in the stead of Christ. Rather, he acknowledges that divorce happens and seeks to apply God's Word so as to reconcile consciences to God.

## ARTICLE 26: DIVORCE ON ACCOUNT OF MALICIOUS DESERTION

In contrast to Walther's (and Luther's) time, the state no longer has an interest in investigating accusations of adultery or malicious desertion. Too often, the roles of judge, lawyer and therapist are all expected of (applied to) the pastor, with the expectation that he can divine the perfect ruling for a given situation.

Within Walther's comments, it is clear that situations are often murky. Even Luther makes exceptions, once allowing that an adulterer may remarry if he cannot remain continent (45:33); and while Luther permits divorce because of violence (291), Gerhard seems to disagree (293). What comments in Article 26 provide helpful counsel for pastors who are addressing the messiness of divorce? For example, what is the distinction made in Comment 1 (283) that may be helpful? What is the reason for the wife separating if her faith is in danger (291)? What distinction does Baier make (296), and is this helpful for pastoral care? What is König's reason for dissolving an incestuous marriage entered by ignorance (299)? What final counsel does Luther offer in Comment 16 (300)?

*To the leader:* As Walther and his cited experts seek to navigate difficult waters, it is clear that they seek both to honor the estate of marriage and to care for the sinners within it. The distinction between *getting* a divorce and *suffering* a divorce (283) may be helpful in caring for a troubled soul, and the distinction between tolerance and dispensation (296) may be helpful for a pastor's reasoning. Some practices are better than others, and some evils are less evil. The pastor will do his best to uphold the institution of marriage for the sake of all, even as he cares for the consciences of individuals in need (290). The benefit of consultation with other pastors (300) cannot be emphasized enough.