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God's Gift of Marriage

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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References in Walther:

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

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?

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?

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?
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?

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?
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?

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?

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)?

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?

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)?