
Pro Rege

Volume 18 | Number 1

Article 3

September 1989

As For Me and My House (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Bussema, Ken (1989) "As For Me and My House (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*:

Vol. 18: No. 1, 24.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol18/iss1/3

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Book Reviews

As For Me and My House, Walter Wangerin, Jr. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987). 252 pp. \$14.95. Reviewed by K. Bussema, Professor of Psychology.

Sharing stories of his courtship, engagement, and marital struggles, Wangerin examines the question of the biblical meaning and requirements of the marriage covenant. In an engaging and at times poignant style, the author weaves together his own marital journey, pastoral vignettes, and discussions of the biblical meaning of covenant, one flesh, and forgiveness. The result is a personal, practical, and thoughtful guidebook for "crafting our marriage to last."

Asking the question, "When does the marriage begin?" Wangerin sets out to develop his view of marriage as a covenant. Marking the beginning of marriage with the vows, the author goes on to outline what he believes to be four significant characteristics of the marriage covenant. Reflecting God's covenanting with his people, the marriage covenant requires total and timeless commitment, faith, and forgiveness. Although all four aspects are emphasized throughout the book, Wangerin pays particular attention to forgiveness. As we recognize the reality of our sinfulness and our inability to live up to the ideals of our marriage covenant, forgiveness becomes "the single most significant tool for healing the troubles which marriage shall surely breed between us" (24).

Following the vows, the real work of marriage begins. In the section titled "Early Marriage Work," the author describes the tasks of realization and mutualization. Essentially Wangerin explores here the power and the problems of expectations. Following a fairly common understanding, Wangerin describes marital troubles as stemming from not getting what you expected and not expecting what you got. The danger in these expectations is that partners are often tempted to manipulate or bargain with their spouse to get what they want, rather than to work towards oneness. Newly married couples may have some difficulty relating to Wangerin's discussion here. It probably takes some years of lived marital experience to look honestly at oneself and one's spouse. Yet, the message here is important. The reality of marriage is that spouses have to continually work at accommodating each other, while keeping self-interest and manipulation from pulling them apart. Eventually and predictably we all fail and sin enters into the marriage covenant. Dealing with the subsequent hurt, anger, and disappointment requires learning the meaning and method of forgiveness.

Using a personal example and a thorough discussion of the biblical material on forgiveness, Wangerin walks the reader through six steps of forgiveness. These steps are difficult and painful, but necessary for the life of the marriage covenant. In my judgment, Wangerin explains well the process of forgiveness and offers a useful set of guidelines. One difficulty I had, however, was that in both his personal example and his analysis Wangerin's view of forgiveness appears too one-sided. In most marriages there is not a clear-cut pattern of one violator and one wronged, but rather a complex intermingled process of actions, motives, feelings, and reactions. In my experience, forgiveness needs to be a mutual process, with giving and receiving on both sides. Wangerin's six steps of forgiveness also struck me as too rational and unemotional. He seems to disregard the emotional intensity and irrationality that is also a very real part of human relationships.

The final part of learning to craft a lasting marriage involves attending to the basic tasks of covenant keeping. Wangerin's list of tasks is not new nor different from many other similar lists. The tasks examined include these: being truthful and dependable, sharing work, communicating, caring for one another, and showing appreciation. In addition, the author devotes a chapter to avoiding adultery and advising the adulterer. Here again, the advice is sound, but doesn't adequately address the emotional undercurrent. Wangerin also provides a brief outline of a confrontational approach to responding to spouses who are physically abusive or chemically dependent. I think this material stretches the book too far and is too general to be helpful for these very complicated and emotionally loaded situations.

Overall, Wangerin's guidelines for crafting a lasting marriage are biblically sound and would provide a good springboard for discussion between spouses whose marriage is sound and are interested in pulling closer together. The advice is reasonable and practical, but that is also the book's greatest weakness. Wangerin's discussion of marriage and its tasks strikes me as overly rational and programmable. Crafting a marriage that lasts, and especially rebuilding a marriage that is faltering, also requires attending to the depth, the mystery, the conflicts, and unreasonableness of two becoming one.