

The Saxon Visitation (1528): Insights for Contemporary Lutheran Church Life
LCSA Pastors' Convention
Cyara, South Africa
August 31-September 2, 2010

May God, the Father of all mercy, grant us through Jesus Christ, his dear Son, the spirit of unity and the power to do his will. Even though the finest spirit of unity prevails among us we still have our hands full to do good and be established by the power of God. What would happen if there were disunity and disagreement among us? The devil has become neither pious nor devout this year, nor will he ever be so. So let us be on guard and anxious to keep (as Paul teaches) the spiritual unity in the bond of love and peace (Eph. 4:3). Amen” –Luther, “Preface to the Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors” AE 40:273

Introduction

The practice of visitation might be said to reach back to the New Testament church where after the Jerusalem Council Paul says to Barnabas “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing” (Acts 15:36). The term “visitation” became current in the 9th century but the practice goes back earlier into the 5th century where bishops were expected to make official visits to examine, inspect, teach and if necessary correct errant practices in parish life. A model for such visitation can be found in the 10th century in a handbook prepared by the abbot of Regino of Prüm written at the directive of the Archbishop of Trier, included an inventory of ninety-six items of inquiry centering around overall conditions of parochial life, the integrity of clerical life, and pastoral care.

By the late Middle Ages, the practice of visitation had gradually declined. Early in the 15th century, Jean Gerson delivered a passionate plea for churchly reform including a scheme for the visitation of parishes. “Thus, while sixteenth-century reformers claimed in their pronouncements to have revived a long-defunct ancient practice, they could, in fact, build their own visitation procedures on tried and established precedents.”¹

On June 24, 1524, Elector John the Steadfast (1468-1532) wrote to Luther suggesting a visitation: “May God hear our complaint, but there are too many enthusiasts, and these are causing us plenty of trouble up here. But in my opinion there would be no better way of quieting things down than for you to take some time to travel from one town to another in this principality and to see for yourself (as Paul did) what kinds of preachers are serving the faithful in the towns. I believe that among us here in Thuringia you could hardly do a more Christian task. Whichever preachers proved unsuited you could then remove with the help of the authorities.”² An early attempt at a visitation was made just after the beginning of the year in 1525 when Elector John commissioned Jacob Strauss,

¹ Gerald Strauss, “Visitations” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* – Volume e edited by Hans Hillerbrand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 238

² Cited from WA BR 3:310/44ff in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530* trans. E.Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 485.

the pastor in Eisenach and a ducal councilman Burkhard Hund of Wendheim to visit the congregations in and around Eisenach. Hund was unable to participate in the visitation leaving Strauss on his own. The first effort proved futile. A second attempt was made in March of the same year with the visitor provided with documentation authorizing the work. Another visitation was undertaken on May 2, 1525 by Pastor Nicholas Hausmann in Zwickau.

Believing that poor ecclesiastical supervision had been responsible for the growth of abuses in the pre-Reformation church, Luther recognized a need for evangelical oversight exercised through visitation. Worried about the chaotic conditions in the Saxon congregations, Luther urged the Elector John to see to take measures to ensure stability and good order in the religious and social life of his territory³. In 1527, John issued *Instructions and Order for Dispatching Visitors*, a catalog of items to be investigated by teams of four appointed visitors. Yet this document proved insufficient for the task.

Melanchthon then set about drafting *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors*. This document would provide a theological platform for the visitations. John Agricola (1492-1566)⁴ objected to this document, believing that Melanchthon was conceding to the Romanists. In November of 1527, Luther would bring Agricola and Melanchthon together to attempt to reconcile their competing positions on the relationship of repentance and faith which was at the heart of Agricola's objection to Melanchthon's document. Further consultation and correspondence would lead to revisions and a final draft of the articles for visitation but not without questioning on a temporary allowance of communion under one kind⁵ and marriage matters by the Elector.

Early in 1528, the Elector would direct Luther to prepare a preface for the *Instructions*. Luther's preface begins with the recollection of various examples of visitations in not only the New Testament but also in the Old Testament. He recalls, for example, that Peter traveled among the Jewish congregations in Acts 9 while Barnabas and Paul visited the places they had preached in Acts 5. He notes that when the Apostles heard of how the Word of the Lord was received in Samaria, Peter and John were dispatched there. Luther sees examples of visitation in the Old Testament in the narratives of Samuel's travels to Ramah, Nob, and Gikal. Above all, Luther observes that Christ Jesus is the visitor *par excellence*: "More than any Christ has done this kind of work on behalf of all, and on this account possessed no place on earth where he could lay his head or which he could call

³ "Luther took the momentous step and –so he himself, at any rate, viewed it –told the princes that 'out of Christian love' he wanted certain persons appointed as visitors. He derives the office of the visitors from the original meaning of the term 'bishop' and archbishop" (WA 26, 197, 17ff). Although here, too, he considers the bishop the pastor (*Pfarrherr*), who 'should visit, look after, and supervise his parishioners' (*pfarrkinder besuchen, warten und auff sehen sol*), 'the archbishop should visit, look after, and supervise such bishops to see how they are teaching' –Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 372.

⁴ For a detailed treatment of the controversy with Agricola in the formation of the *Instructions*, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1530*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 264ff. Agricola would argue that repentance is the consequence of the preaching of the gospel., thus evaporating the realities of the law, wrath, and judgment of God.

⁵ The provision for communion under one kind was omitted in the second edition of the *Instructions* in 1538. Cf. Brecht, 266.

his own. This began even while he was in the womb, for he went with his mother over the hills to visit St. John (Luke 1:39)” (AE 40:269).

The ancient fathers, Luther observed, also practiced visitation. In fact Luther argues that the essence of the episcopal office is to visit and examine. To be a bishop is to be a supervisor or visitor. Archbishops supervise bishops. Bishops oversee the work of parish pastors. Yet Luther argues the office fell into abuse and misuse. Luther writes “The holy synods were forgotten. In brief that is what befell so worthy an office and nothing remained of it except the burdening and banning of people because of money, debts, and temporal goods and the making of a divine order out of the bellowing of antiphons and versicles in churches. No attention is paid to how one teaches, believes, loves, how one lives a Christian life, how to care for the poor, how one comforts the weak, or punishes the unruly. They are altogether officious and gluttonous fellows who destroy what belongs to the people and do worse than nothing for them. This office has fared like all holy and ancient Christian doctrine and order – it has become the farce and contempt of the devil and Antichrist with awful and terrible destruction of souls” (AE 40:270).

Luther seeks to retrieve this venerable office from political and economic mishandling. He sees it as a pressing need that the office be restored to its pristine spiritual purpose of service to the Gospel to counteract confusion, dissension, and abuses in the evangelical parishes of Saxony. To this end, Luther commends the Elector for re-constituting the practice of visitation as the fulfillment of the office of Christian love. Because this work is undertaken and guided by “love’s office,” the Elector may be confident that it is in conformity with “God’s will for the benefit of the gospel and the welfare of the wretched Christians in his territory” (AE 40:271).

By way of the preface, Luther gives his endorsement and approval to Melancthon’s *Instructions*. Observing that some have seen the *Instructions* as a recantation of evangelical teaching, Luther counters that he has carefully reviewed them and they are consistent with the aim of God’s Word. Luther envisions the *Instructions* not as a new form of the papal decree but “as a witness and confession of our faith” offered with the “hope that all devout and peaceable pastors who find their sincere joy in the gospel and delight to be of one mind with us will act as St. Paul teaches in Phil. 2[:2]. And will heed our prince and gracious lord.” (AE 40:272). Luther hopes that the *Instructions* will be received in the spirit and intention they are offered. Congregations and pastors should willingly and peacefully receive the visitors and subject themselves in a spirit of love and humility to their work. Those who refuse are to be recognized as self-centered and undisciplined who finally separate themselves from the evangelical cause and must be recognized as “chaff on the threshing floor.” Luther further adds that we “will not accommodate ourselves to them” (AE 40:273). The Elector, Luther says, even though he has no call to teach and rule in spiritual affairs must deal with these undisciplined people just as Constantine did not tolerate the political unrest created by Arius.

The Instructions

Melanchthon includes eighteen items in the *Instructions*: The Doctrine, the Ten Commandments, True Christian Prayer, Tribulation, the Sacrament of Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, Christian Penance, Christian Confession, Christian Satisfaction for Sin, the Human Order of the Church, Marriage, Free Will, Christian Freedom, the Turks, Daily Worship in the Church, the Christian Ban, the Office of Superintendents, and Schools.

Melanchthon seeks to use the *Instructions* to catechize the evangelical doctrine and aim for its pastoral application in preaching and the care of souls. Thus Melanchthon begins with a discussion of the necessity that both repentance and faith be preached. Faith cannot be divorced from repentance. Without the preaching of repentance the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins will not only ring empty, it will lead to a carnal security. So evangelical preachers are to preach the law in all of its potency so that people are brought “to repent and grieve over their sins and to fear the judgment of God” (AE 40:275). This preaching condemns gross and outward sins but Melanchthon reminds his readers that both John the Baptist and Christ do not neglect “the greatest and most important element of repentance,” namely the condemnation of a false holiness which puts its trust in human merit or worth.

Clearly Melanchthon is addressing the antinomian teaching of Agricola when he says that some have taught repentance follows faith. The law is preached not to make men righteous but to reveal and crush sin only where this takes place will the Gospel be heard as the good news that sinners are justified by faith apart from the works of the law. The section on “the doctrine” is a brief lesson in the necessity of the right distinction of the law from the Gospel.

The dual theme of repentance and faith is carried forward in Melanchthon’s section on the Ten Commandments. As though the law comes knowledge of sin, the commandments are to be preached to specifically condemn various vices such as adultery, drunkenness, envy, hate, and the like. The commandments are not only to be explained. Preachers are to tell their hearers of how God threatens to punish sins, recalling biblical examples, so that they might learn to fear God. Such preaching is to produce repentance, that his contrition and grief over sin and true fear of God. Melanchthon says that preachers are “to teach the people diligently that this faith (saving faith) cannot exist without earnest and true contrition and fear of God” (AE 40:276).

Melanchthon only provides explicit treatment of the first and second commandments in this section. He is more concerned to lay out a paradigm for teaching the commandments rather than for providing the more detailed exposition of individual commandments as Luther will come to do in the *Large Catechism*. Here he wishes to outline instead the threefold pattern of the Christian life: repentance, faith in the forgiveness of sins, and the doing of good works. Good works are to be done because they are pleasing to God and beneficial to the welfare of the neighbor.

The nature of the Christian’s life of good works is taken up in the next section under the title “True Christian Prayer.” This section anticipates Luther’s treatment of the Lord’s

Prayer in the *Small Catechism* even as it echoes elements from Luther's earlier sermons on prayer⁶ for here Melanchthon accents the fact that genuine prayer is anchored in the divine commandment and promise. God has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us.

Since God has promised to hear the prayers of His people, Christians should not be frightened away from praying on account of their sins. God gives freely for Christ's sake therefore believers are invited to make their supplications with boldness and without doubt. Christians are to be taught that God hears them for the sake of Christ and not because of formulaic repetition. Christians are to be instructed to pray for both spiritual and temporal things without setting a time or place for God's fulfillment.

Then Melanchthon picks up other aspects of the Decalogue. Christians are to be instructed in the hearing and learning of God's Word under the rubric of the third commandment. Obedience to parents and governing authorities is enjoined by the fourth commandment. Prayers are to be made for civil authorities and taxes are to be paid. Christians are to live in such a manner "that the holy gospel is not slandered and disgraced as happens in the case of those who claim in the name of the holy gospel to be free from tithes and other temporal burdens" (AE 40:287).

The life of good works will include tribulation. Pastors need to be capable of teaching their people how to face tribulation in body and soul. Melanchthon notes that pastors should teach their people that tribulations are sent by God to "admonish us and awaken us to patience" (AE 40:287). Christians are to be tutored to have confidence in the divine promises and call upon God in the midst of these troubles, knowing that the devil in tribulation attempting to bring the Christian into shame and misery.

Sections follow on baptism and the Lord's Supper. Infant baptism is affirmed. The benefits of baptism are to be taught so that people understand the gifts God bestows in baptism and value baptism not only as a point of initiation for children but a gift for the entire life of the Christian. Melanchthon urges the use of German in the baptismal order so that the people may understand the word and prayer. There need be no quarrel over the chrism for the real anointing is not done with oil but by the Holy Spirit.

Drawing on the words of institution from the Synoptic Gospels and I Corinthians, Melanchthon directs pastors to teach the people that the true body and blood of Christ are present in the bread and wine not by virtue of priestly power but on account of the institution of Christ. The sacrament is not to be received as ordinary food. The people are to be taught to receive the Sacrament under both kinds for no one may alter the last will and testament of the Son of God.

⁶ See Luther's "An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen" -1519(AE 42:15-81) and "On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession" -1519 (AE 42:83-94)

In this sermon, Luther sets forth an evangelical approach to prayer that centers in God's promise and command. Recognizing the abuses that had accumulated around the blessing of the field associated with Rogate (the 5th Sunday after Easter), Luther uses this occasion to teach that prayer is a gift of God to be exercised by faith alone. Also see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology* trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 343-354.

Yet Melanchthon urges consideration of weak Christians. While the teaching of communion under both kinds is to be taught clearly and without compromise, pastors may be allowed to commune these weak believers with only the Lord's body for a time. Melanchthon notes that it would be "uncharitable" and "even un-Christian" to force these people to receive the sacrament in both kinds or to withhold it altogether less they be made to sin. However such is not the case with the obstinate that know the doctrine but reject it. These are to be allowed to go their own way. This section stirred some objections from the Elector but Luther insisted on keeping in the *Instructions* in line with his principle that only the Word of God, not legislation of practice would change spiritual conditions.

Several points are made regarding the proper preparation for the Sacrament. First, the pastor is to instruct the people as to what the Sacrament is and warn them against abusing in such a way to profane the body and blood of the Lord (I Cor. 11:27). Second, the pastor is to examine all communicants, inquiring of their understanding of the Sacrament. Those who show no contrition and are living in open sin are not to be admitted. Melanchthon goes on to speak of the right remembrance of Christ in the Sacrament, asserting that it is "Not that the outward reception will comfort the heart, but it is a sign of the comfort and of the forgiveness of sins. This sign encourages the heart to believe that God forgives a penitent his sins" (AE 40:293). In this the Sacrament is to be preached. Forgiveness comes not through an outward act of eating and drinking but through faith. Melanchthon concludes this section by linking faith and love in the Sacrament. Those who partake together of the Lord's body and blood are one with each other as "one loaf" and are not to harbor envy or hate toward the fellow communicant.

Next, Melanchthon includes an article on true Christian penance which he counts as a third sacrament⁷. Once again Melanchthon warns against a carnal or fleshly security which overlooks ignores contrition by speaking of sin in spacious and generic categories. It is not simply "to know oneself" (AE 40:295). One must know one's sin. That is, one must have "contrition and sorrow over it and sincere fear of the wrath and judgment of God" (AE 40:295). Preachers must preach the law with such incisiveness that "a person fears all his good works and understands that he sins even in his good works" (AE 40:295). Genuine penance consists of two parts. First, is contrition and sorrow *coram deo*. The second part of penance is faith that sins will be forgiven on account of Christ. Faith without contrition is presumption and carnal security.

From this vantage point, Melanchthon moves to contrast true Christian confession with papal confession. Evangelical confession is urged. Once again Melanchthon insist that "no one should be allowed to go to communion who has not been individual examined to see if he is prepared to go the holy sacrament" (AE 40:296). One is not to go the

⁷ For an overview of the practice of confession and absolution in the Reformation, see Ronald K Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004

sacrament as a matter of custom without knowing why he needs the sacrament. The goal of the examination is repentance and faith in the words of the absolution. In contrast to papal confession which adds satisfaction to contrition and faith, Melanchthon points to the atoning work of Christ who has made satisfaction for our sins in our place.

The human order of the church is a secondary matter governed by the Apostle's words in I Corinthians 14:40 that "All things shall be done in order in the churches." Holy days are not abolished but are kept in Christian freedom so that the Gospel might be proclaimed and taught. But they are not matters which should fragment the church. Church order is differentiated from secular government. Masses and vigils for the dead are not to be continued for the Sacrament of the Altar is not for the dead but the living.

Both Latin and German are permissible liturgical languages but it is reasonable to use the vernacular so that the common people understand and are edified. Saints are honored when they are held up as a mirror of God's mercy and grace in Christ and when Christians exercise themselves in the faith and good works exemplified in their lives.

Marriage is to be honored as an estate instituted by God. Pastors are told to teach and act sympathetically in matters related to forbidden degrees of relationship in marriage. Christian liberty is to prevail but not in such a way as to invite each to satisfy his own feelings. Each is to behave in such a way that he may live with a clear conscience and serve the neighbor in love. The *Instructions* maintain that in cases where pastors are confused or uncertain in matters of casuistry they should seek the counsel of those who are more learned or let the cases go to the appropriate authorities⁸.

The *Instructions* take up the question of the freedom of the will as Luther's work against Erasmus had occasioned debate within the Evangelical camp⁹. Melanchthon affirms the

⁸ Civil laws rightly govern marriage. This is reflected in Luther's *A Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors* appended to the *Small Catechism* (see Kolb/Wengert, 367). Here Luther writes "'So many lands, so many customs,' says the common proverb. For this reason, because weddings and the married estate are worldly affairs, it behooves those of us who are 'spirituals' ('clergy') or ministers of the church in no way to order or direct anything regarding marriage, but instead to allow every city and land to continue their own customs that are now in use" (Kolb/Wengert, 367-368). See the fine treatments by Scott Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Autumn 2000), 335-350; James Nestingen, "Luther on Marriage, Vocation, and the Cross" *Word & World* (Winter 2003), 31-39; Oswald Bayer, "Luther's View of Marriage" in *Freedom in Response-Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies* (Cambridge), 169-182) and Carter Lindberg, "The Future of a Tradition: Luther and the Family" in *All Theology is Christology: Essays in Honor of David P. Scaer* edited by Dean Wenthe et al (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 2000), 133-151. Lindberg writes "Luther's application of evangelical theology to marriage and family desacramentalized marriage; desacralized the clergy and resacralized the life of the laity; opposed the maze of canonical impediments to marriage; strove to unravel the skein of canon law, imperial law, and German customs; and joyfully affirmed God's good creation, including sexual relations. In return, Luther was in such demand as a marriage counselor that he often complained of the burden imposed on him" (133).

⁹ See Luther's 1525 treatise on "The Bondage of the Will" (AE 33). Also see Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) and Hans Joachim Iwand, "The Freedom of the Christian and the Bondage of the Will" trans. Jacob Corzine in *Logia* (Eastertide 2008), 7-16.

freedom of the will in external works-works regulated by law and punishment. In these things which are “below” him, man is freedom. However the “righteousness of the flesh” which is a secular or civil righteousness is not the righteousness that saves. When it comes to the righteousness of faith or saving righteousness before God man is not free. He lacks the capacity to purify his heart. Without the Holy Spirit, the natural man cannot accomplish anything that is godly.

The section on Christian freedom is directed against antinomian mishandlings of the liberty granted by the Gospel. Positively Melanchthon states that Christian freedom is the forgiveness of sins granted by the Spirit without reference to human achievement. This freedom, he continues, means that Christ rules over the believer protecting him against the power of the devil. The proclamation of this liberty always is to carry with it a warning not to fall back into captivity to Satan and sin. Negatively, Christian liberty is not freedom from proper government and the payment of taxes. Melanchthon explains the application of Christian freedom in fasting and worship practices. The Christian is free from any obligation that would be imposed upon him with the promise of earning grace or meriting salvation.

A section on “The Turks” is an application of the teaching of the two governments. The government is given the power of the sword to defend, protect, and punish. Melanchthon dismisses outright any notion that Christians should not defend themselves against the Turk on the grounds that Christians are not to take revenge on enemies as seditious. Just war may be waged. Christians are to pray for God’s protection against this enemy even as they must be ready to defend their families against his assault.

“Daily Worship in the Church” provides general rubrics for matins and vespers. Instructions are given for preaching on Wednesdays and Fridays. Preachers are counseled in the selection of appropriate texts for the right proclamation of repentance and faith. Catechetical preaching on the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord’s Prayer is urged for the sake of the children and unlearned. There should also be preaching on baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and marriage. Festivals are to be celebrated without superstition. The Latin introits, the *Gloria Excelsis*, *Halleljuah*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, and simple sequences are recommended for high festivals. It is recognized that different forms of the Mass are in use and that this should not be a matter of agitation until greater uniformity can be achieved. Instructions are given for Christian burial¹⁰ and practices surrounding childbirth.

¹⁰ The Reformation transformed death and dying See Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519-1528)* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007) and Neil R Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter: Writings on Death* (Leiden: Brill, 2007),

Melanchthon then moves to a discussion of “The True Christian Ban.” After a brief defense of right use of excommunication, Melanchthon rather abruptly takes up a treatment of the custom of ringing church bells, attempting to forestall unnecessary controversies and dispelling superstitious beliefs.

“The Office of Superintendent” is the pastor given responsibility in the region for the oversight of other clergy assuring that they preach God’s Word correctly and rightly administer the sacraments. Instructions are given for the discipline of preachers who err in doctrine or lead an ungodly and offensive life. The superintendent is to examine candidates for ordination so that the churches are spared from incompetent pastors.¹¹

A final section outlines the place of the school. After giving a rationale for education, namely, that young people are equipped for faithful service in church and state, Melanchthon goes on to provide a curriculum in three divisions embracing both spiritual and secular courses for study.

The Visitation

A general visitation of Saxony would commence in 1528 and continue with interruptions to 1531. The territory was divided into a number of circuits to be visited by teams composed of lay officials (jurists) and theologians. Armed with the *Instructions*, the visitors were to take stock of both spiritual and economic conditions in the region, working for unity in doctrine and practice between the churches. The practice of visitation would continue with a second round in 1533-1534. A third general visitation was taken in 1555. An attempt was made after the death of Elector August to advance Calvinistic theology in Saxony by the counselors who surrounded Christian the First, August’s young son and successor. After Christian’s death in 1591, his cousin, Duke Friedrich Wilhelm restored Lutheran theologians to their positions and commissioned the Wittenberg theologian Aegidius Hunnius (1550-1603) to compose articles of visitation to restore the theology of the Formula of Concord to the Saxon church.¹² This was done in the next year, in 1592. The practice would be incorporated in various territorial church orders and continue as a feature of Lutheran ecclesiastical life.

The Catechisms: A Fruit of the Visitation

Luther’s own catechisms may be seen as a response to three events: (a) The request of Pastor Nicholas Hausmann for a catechism to use in the instruction of the “common folk” in 1524; (b) Controversy between Agricola and Melanchthon on the place of the law in the Christian life; (c) a remedy to the maladies diagnosed in the Visitations of 1528. The

¹¹ “For the need of examination before a pastor is installed into office as well as the need of it in the further course of official activity is inextricably bound up with the specific duty to teach”-Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 351

¹² For the text of “The Saxon Visitation Articles of 1592” see Robert Kolb and James Nestingen (editors), *Sources and Context for the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 256-261. These Articles were appended to the *Book of Concord* and were part of the visitation tradition that shaped the practice in the early Missouri Synod.

impact of the Saxon Visitations is seen in Luther's preface to the Small Catechism: "The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version. Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the Gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing their freedom" (Kolb/Wengert, 347-348)

Luther saw the Catechism as a book to be used in home and congregation. "While Luther addressed the catechisms to pastors, he still envisioned the head of the household as the primary teacher."¹³ James Nestingen observes "The *Small Catechism*, in chart and pamphlet form, quickly became one of the most important documents of the Lutheran Reformation. It moved the village altar into the family kitchen, literally bringing instruction in the faith home to the intimacies of family life."¹⁴ⁱⁱ The careful literary craftsmanship evidenced in Luther's nuanced phrases and his repetition of key words would make the Catechism a useful tool for reinforcing the evangelical message that the laity were hearing from Saxon pulpits as God's Word echoed in ordinary households.

The Catechism provided a basic summary of Christian doctrine along with a template for teaching. Luther's pattern for catechesis outlined in the Preface to the Small Catechism: (a) Avoid changes or variations in the text; (b) After people have learned the text, teach them to understand it; (c) Once people have been taught the shorter catechism, take up the longer catechism (Kolb/Wengert, 348-349). Luther intended the Small Catechism to be a handbook for Christian doctrine, a prayer book, and a book for the on-going Christian life.¹⁵

The theological structure of the Small Catechism is geared to the proper distinction of law and Gospel. Luther departs from the traditional, medieval ordering of the chief parts as Lord's Prayer, Creed and Ten Commandments. He explains his rationale for the sequencing of the Decalogue, Creed, and Our Father: "Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself a sinful and wicked person.

¹³ Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 95

¹⁴ James Nestingen, *Martin Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 76

¹⁵ The catechism looks at the concrete daily life of the simple Christian taking both calling and estate into consideration and understands them as the place in life God "gave us in the coordinate system of natural/creaturely, societal/social, as well as historical/cultural, relations" – Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Ten Commandments*, trans. Holger Sonntag. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 20. In this way the catechism teaches and exercises Christians in faith and love. "The catechism desires to instruct for this purpose, not only as a doctrinal, confessional book but also a book of prayer and comfort" (Peters, 20).

The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine-grace-which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Prayer teaches all this namely, through the fulfillment of God's commandments everything will be given him. In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible" (AE 43, 4).

The core theological themes expressed in the visitation articles are expressed in the *Small Catechism*. The structure of the Catechism itself follows the threefold shape of the Christian life: Repentance, faith, and godly living. The Decalogue is preached to bring out about repentance. The Creed is the summary of the Trinitarian gospel that creates faith. The Lord's Prayer is voice of faith. The sacraments strengthen faith. The daily prayers and table of duties are about the godly life, the vocation engendered by the Gospel as faith is active in love, calling upon the name of the Lord and serving the neighbor in the stations of life. Even as the Saxon Visitation served to diagnose the maladies of parish life in early Lutheranism so the Luther's Catechisms, both Small and Large served to address these deficiencies and guide both pastor and people to congregational, family, and personal life lived under the cross and in the hope of the resurrection.

Some Items for Discussion and Deliberation

- How might the practice of visitation best be implemented to serve the spiritual needs of pastors and congregations in the LCSA?
- Both Melancthon and Luther stress not only the centrality of preaching but also its content (repentance and faith). It has been observed that Luther did not set out to reform the church but to reform preaching. God's Word is rightly preached when the law is properly distinguished from the gospel so that sinners trust in the righteousness of Christ alone for salvation. How might visitation serve to strengthen preaching in our midst? Would you be intimidated by having your bishop or dean listen to your preaching and offer constructive criticism?
- The visitation conducted by the bishop and/or deans should serve as a model for the way pastors visit the homes of their congregants. How is the pastoral visitation different than a social visit?
- We have observed the connection between visitation and catechesis. How might the practice of visitation help us reclaim the centrality of the *Small Catechism* as a handbook for Christian doctrine, prayer, and life?
- Obviously visitations are always contextual. Luther and Melancthon knew of the social and spiritual circumstances of Saxon and designed the articles accordingly. While the Lutheran practice of visitation should begin with the catechetical core, what additional items should be included in visitation in the southern Africa context?
- Hans Joachim Iwand writes: "An evangelical church that views the teaching of the righteousness of faith as self-evident – but about which no one should trouble himself further because other issues are more important – has in principle robbed itself of the central solution by which other questions are illuminated. Such a church will become increasingly more splintered and worn down. If we

take the article of justification out of the center very soon we will not know why we are evangelical Christians or should remain so. As a result, we will strive for the unity of the church and will sacrifice the purity of the gospel; we will have more confidence in church organization and church government and will promise more on the basis of the reform of Christianity authority and church training than either can deliver. If we lose our center, we will court pietism and listen to other teachings and we will be in danger of being tolerant where we should be radical and radical where we should be tolerant. In short, the standards will be lowered and along with them everything that is necessary and correct in the reforms that we sing about will be incomprehensible.”¹⁶ How does the righteousness of faith (i.e. justification by faith alone) keep us from expecting either too much or too little from the practice of visitation?

For Further Study

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VIII. 24. 2010

¹⁶ Hans Joachim Iwand, *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther*, trans. Randi H. Lundell (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Press, 2008), 16

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