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Catechesis: The Quiet Crisis
William E. Thompson

Like many young pastors upon their ordination and installation, I had a firm confessional resolve and a definite direction for ministry which were mandated by my ordination vows. Because of this confessional resolve, I chose to begin my Sunday-morning Bible class with a study of the Augsburg Confession. I felt that it would offer an opportunity to deepen the understanding of the faith which was known through Luther's Small Catechism as well as expose the congregation to another of our church's confessions. It did not take long for me to realize that the faithful members of this study-group did not have Luther's Catechism as a basis on which to stand. They had either forgotten through disuse what they had learned of the Catechism or they had simply never been taught the Catechism in the first place. I then asked for a show of hands by those members of the class who had learned the Catechism before confirmation. To my shock, only two out of a group of about twenty-five had been catechized with the Small Catechism. The common reference-point which I naively assumed would be there in any congregation to which I was called was not there.

Since that time I have struggled to answer why this state of catechesis exists in our church. At the outset I must acknowledge the insights of many brothers in the ministry who have helped me in this struggle.¹ A Lutheran laity unfamiliar with the Small Catechism seems odd, especially in the LCMS, which historically has prided herself on the purity of her confession. In Lutheranism worldwide there are currently many questions concerning the church and ministry which are being discussed. Two aspects of the church and ministry which have always served as unifying forces in our church are her hymnbooks-agendas and her catechisms. There is currently much diversity and a great deal of discussion about hymnbooks-agendas. However, while there is great diversity in catechetical approach, there is little discussion of it. The situation is puzzling, since there are many parishes with a catechetical history similar to mine. I submit that we are in a catechetical crisis, a crisis which is being silently ignored. This essay attempts to define and address this crisis in the context of pastoral practice. We shall address the place and shape of catechesis in the life of the church both now and, in a general way, historically in evangelical Lutheranism.

I. The Nature of the Crisis

A. The Church Today versus the Church Catholic

Luther's Small Catechism is no longer the basis of catechesis in our church. Where it is in use, it is usually in either a manner which was never intended or in a form which makes it unrecognizable. Thus, not only is the Christian understanding of the church lost to the priests of God but so also is the Christian world-view. We have a vocational crisis.

It is a characteristic of our age to believe that we can constantly create something which is new and improved. Eugene Peterson has noted that one of the prominent ways in which our generation displays its sinfulness is that it is adolescent and a-historical. The two are complementary. Adolescence is characterized by unrealistic and misdirected expectations, impatience, a high degree of self-centeredness, a fragile ego, and the firm conviction that anything historical could not possibly be of any use today. When this thinking comes into the church, there are disastrous consequences. The church is by definition and essence historical, that is, catholic and apostolic. Wilhelm Loehe, writing in the middle of the last century, comments: "Perhaps you say, 'That is nothing new.' But I have not said that it is something new. Great thoughts are not born in the last hour of the world; the Lord grants them to His Church from the beginning. Novelty and falsehood are synonymous when they apply to things which one cannot really comprehend. Every novelty in religious matters deserves suspicion . . . One may know things all one's life without understanding them."³ Yet, the church today is highly influenced by our adolescent, a-historical culture. We are not good at heeding the admonition of the writer to the Hebrews to "honor our fathers in the faith." We do not take the care of St. Paul, who handed over only that which he received from the Lord. Each pastor does what he wishes. The adolescence of our culture has filled the church. If the current program is not working, we latch on to the next one. Each one promises success, which, of course, is measured by the twentieth-century marks of the church-numbers, money, emotion, and the social satisfaction of the customers. We have arrived when we can begin to create our own

fads to attract and keep the "crowds."

Addressing catechesis in a churchly way involves honoring our fathers in the faith. Significant portions of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, are catechetical in nature. Catechesis is the subject of some of the earliest extant documents that we have of the life of the early church. Most believe that *The Didache*, one of the earliest such documents (usually dated between 80 and 120 A.D.), is a catechetical document perhaps used in the churches planted by Paul. In addition, there is a rich body of catechetical work to be studied in the church fathers, both of the East and West, perhaps the most thorough being Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*. A study of this literature is beyond the scope of this essay. However, for evangelical Lutherans, the author of our Catechism must have the main voice in the discussion here.

B. Luther's Catechesis versus Catechesis Today

One of the first questions which I asked myself when I taught catechism for the first time (both adult and junior) was why Luther did not write a catechism like the ones which are produced *ad infinitum* today. The approach today is to have a set number of lessons in a book with each lesson covering a different topic or doctrine. In this way we can be sure we will cover all that needs to be covered and at the same time know how long the classes will take from start to finish. Some curricula include worksheets and tests for use in the class for evaluation of progress and reinforcement of the lesson. Examples on the junior level from Concordia Publishing House are *The Concordia Catechism Series*, *The Living Word*, and *Growing*. For adults there are Abdon's *Living Discipleship*, Ginkel's *I Have Good News for You!*, Riess' *What Does the Bible Say?*, Thiess' *Life with God*, and others. Luther certainly was capable of producing such a thing, yet he did not. At first I thought it was due to the primitive printing conditions. Yet research has led me to conclude that Luther could have produced charts and books of the twentieth-century form with the technology available to him if he had wanted to do so. The answer, interestingly, comes from Luther himself in the Prefaces to the Large and Small Catechisms.

1. Catechesis and the Christian Life in General

For Luther, the Catechism is a prayer-book, not merely a book of doctrine. The Catechism is an enchiridion, a handbook, for living the baptismal life. Catechesis is a training in living as a baptized child of God, not just an accumulation of facts. The central error that we have made in catechesis is to treat it as an academic process rather than as a patterning of living in our baptism. We have treated the Catechism as a textbook rather than a prayer-book. Consequently, many adults, including pastors, view the Catechism as a book for children and not for us, as if it were a book like other school-books – something to be tolerated until graduation and then discarded. This problem is further compounded when pastors who do seek to use the Catechism concentrate on explanations of the Catechism rather than on the Catechism itself. If we speak of the "catechism" to parishioners who have actually studied the Catechism, most have in mind the synodical explanation, not the Catechism itself (i.e., the last 180 pages of the "Blue Catechism," not the first 35). Neglect of the Catechism was a problem already at Luther's time. He writes in the Preface to the Large Catechism:

To our regret we see that even many pastors are neglectful of the Catechism, despising both their office and the Catechism itself . . . As for myself, let me say this: I, too, am a doctor and pastor. In fact, I am as educated and experienced as any of those who have all that nerve and brazen self-confidence. Yet I continue to do as a child does that is being taught the Catechism. Mornings and whenever I have time I recite word for word and *pray* the ten commandments, the creed, etc. I must still study and *pray* the catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I would like, but must remain a child and student of the catechism. This I do gladly. But those who think they have mastered it in one reading need not anticipate failing; they have already failed. What they do need is to become children again and start learning their abc's, which they falsely imagine they long ago had under their belts.⁴

Luther stresses three aspects of catechesis: doctrinal content, specificity of words, and the shape of the baptismal life, that is, the

practice of the faith. Modern catechetical material sometimes retains the emphasis on doctrinal content while all but ignoring Luther's choice of words and displacing the baptismal life to a mere chapter among many. This approach results in a confusion of the Christian vocation. It disjoins the doctrine confessed from the life lived.

The genius of Luther in writing the Catechism is the integration of the three aspects of catechesis around the hub of justification by grace through faith (the *Hauptartikel*). This approach is seen in the overall structure as well as the structure within each part of the Catechism. The six chief parts form the shape of living the baptismal life – all centered in the promises of Christ. Part One, the Ten Commandments, diagnoses the disease – our sin (law). Part Two, the Creed, proclaims the cure – the work of Christ (gospel). Part Three, the Lord's Prayer, is the response of the faithful heart to this salvation. These three parts Luther considered the absolute minimum for the training of a Christian. These three parts teach the shape of the baptismal life of repentance. The final three parts, dealing with absolution and the sacraments, teach how this life is created and nurtured by God. The baptized live by daily contrition and repentance as shaped by Parts I-III, always making use of the gifts described in Parts IV-VI. This connection is tied together in Part V and in the Christian Questions and Answers, where we are directed to examine ourselves according to the Ten Commandments and so confess our sins before we receive the absolution and the blessed body and blood of Christ. The connection is made explicit in Part IV where we answer that baptizing with water signifies a life of daily contrition and repentance. This life of the baptized is a life which is actually practiced and lived. It forms, not only our understanding of the church, but also our world-view. This shape of the life of the baptized is what Luther says in the Preface to the Large Catechism that he never learns as he ought.

The true shape of the baptismal life is a distinctively Lutheran and scriptural one. In the structure of the Catechism we see law and gospel rightly ordered and distinguished, the response of faith (prayer) rightly taught (that is, based in God's word), and the sacraments in their central actuality in the life of the baptized. The doctrine of the gospel is presented in its completeness with the chief

article, justification, at the center. The life of the baptized shaped by the Catechism is one which extols the gifts of the Lord rather than the works of man.

The structure of the Catechism also serves to pronounce the *damnamus* on false confessions. Both the Roman and the Reformed confusions of law and gospel can be addressed on the basis of their action in the life of the believer. Attaching the role of the sacraments to the law, rather than the gospel, causes the obscuring of the gospel in the life of the church. Finally, these changes strip the merits of Christ and the righteousness of faith from the center of the life of the church and substitute works of the law in various forms. The specific details of each heterodox teaching is addressed within each part.

The life of the baptized is also seen within each part of the Catechism. The basic structure is simple. God speaks and we speak back to Him what He has spoken to us. This pattern is not present merely because it provides a good didactic structure. It is present to shape our lives of prayer. Prayer is always an answer. God has the first word and we speak back to Him in the words which He has given us. Luther and others before and after him in the evangelical tradition never divorced the baptismal life of repentance and prayer from the word of God and the article of justifications.⁵ God must always have the first say in our relationship with Him and we respond in the words which He has given us.

2. Catechesis and Worship

Luther connected this relationship to the pattern of the Divine Service in his writings on it and on the Lord's Supper. That is, the service is *Gottesdienst* understood as a subjective, genitive, God's service to us. Delivery of His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation are primary in worship. Luther wrote hymns for each part of the Catechism to reinforce this connection to the Divine Service.⁶ In addition, the music which he chose and wrote for the Divine Service, as well as for the Offices of Matins and Vespers, was intended to continue the catechetical process. This unified approach was carried forward in the period of orthodoxy. Gunther Stiller has shown this fact in his penetrating work on the rich liturgical life in

Bach's Leipzig. Part of catechism for the young boys was to sing in one of the four *Kantoreien* on Sundays and festivals in the four city churches. The choirs all functioned *liturgically*, that is, they led the congregation in the singing of the liturgy and chorales as well as singing the cantata for the day. All participation was to proclaim God's word according to the confessional pattern of the Catechism.⁷

Luther himself in his treatise *The German Mass and Order of Service* clearly demonstrates the necessity of catechesis being one with worship. The integration of the two in a unified whole around the hub of justification by grace through faith is apparent. Also apparent is Luther's agreement with the ancient dictum, "lex orandi, lex credendi" – in effect, as one prays, so he believes, and as one believes, so he prays. After introducing the topic of the German Service, Luther writes:

First, the German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. Catechism means the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith. This is why the candidates who had been admitted for such instruction and learned the Creed before Baptism used to be called catechumens. This instruction or catechization I cannot put better or more plainly than has been done from the beginning of Christendom and retained till now, i.e., in these three parts, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father. These three plainly and briefly contain exactly everything that a Christian needs to know . . . And let no one think himself too wise for such child's play. Christ, to train men, had to become man himself . . . Otherwise, people can go to church daily and come away the same as they went. For they think they need only listen at the time, without any thought of learning or remembering anything.⁸

Note that Luther writes these words in a treatise on the Divine Service. He sees catechesis centered in and looking forward to the Divine Service. He also includes instruction to the parents on catechizing their children at home to be ready for the Divine Service. Luther sees here the life of the baptized in a totality. We

daily live lives of contrition and repentance in our baptism, always looking forward to the Divine Service.

Thus, the baptismal life has its center in the Divine Service, and its daily pattern is centered in the word of God as patterned in the Catechism. Each part of the Catechism is grounded in the word of God in this living pattern. The meaning and application of these words of God are never static but apply to us differently every day. It is the shape of the baptismal life lived daily. It breathes in us with God's words of law and gospel. Thus, Luther could say that we have no need to demand that the baptized receive Christ's body and blood or go to confession, since they will demand it by reason of their need.⁹ The baptismal life shaped by the Catechism is centered in the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation given in the sacraments. Thus, our lives are grounded in the article of justification, lived through the external means mandated by Christ, and protected from every form of enthusiasm.

This baptismal shape describes our Christian life. It describes our Christian world-view. It gives vocational certainty. Luther was deeply concerned with this vocational grounding. He expounds its shape in the Table of Duties, in his explanation of how one examines himself according to the Ten Commandments, as well as in the explanations in the Large Catechism, especially of the Fourth Commandment. It provides the scriptural directives for living our lives as the priests of God in the place and office where God has placed us. In today's confused world – where children are parents and parents children, where women are men and men women, where husbands are wives and wives husbands, and where everyone is a minister and ministers are organizers, entertainers, cheerleaders, and fundraisers – this vocational grounding is sorely needed.

II. Causes of the Crisis

Neither space nor time allows opportunity to describe further the richness of Luther's Catechism. We must ask ourselves how we have come to ignore, avoid, and neglect the Catechism today. It was not always so. There have been many who understood Luther's genius in writing the Catechism. Wilhelm Loehe, in the middle of the nineteenth century wrote, "The Small Catechism of Luther is a

confession of the church, and of all the confessions it is the one most congenial and familiar to the people. It is the only catechism in the world that one can *pray*. But it is less known than true that it can be called a veritable miracle in respect of the extraordinary fullness and great wealth of knowledge which is here expressed in so few words."¹⁰ Loehe wrote an explanation of the Catechism which was narrative in form and which focused on developing a life of prayer based on the text of the Catechism. The narrative explanations explained the Catechism word for word. Scriptural citations were also included in narrative rather than proof-texting form. This tradition was brought to America in the Franconian colonies of Michigan. Following the break with Missouri, the Iowa Synod theologian Johann Michael Reu carried this tradition forward.¹¹ Augsburg Publishing House still publishes an explanation of the Catechism by Reu which follows this pattern.¹² We in Missouri, at least in recent times, have lost this rich catechetical tradition. Our synodical explanation of the Catechism, in its dogmatically styled outline-form with scriptural proof-texts, can produce good systematians who are then prepared to tackle Francis Pieper's *Dogmatics*. Such a pattern is appropriate and, indeed, necessary to good dogmatics, but inappropriate to catechesis. A catechism with such a construction lacks the baptismal realism of Luther, Loehe, and Reu, who prepare those catechized to "take up the Large Catechism."¹³

A. A Disrespectful Attitude

One reason already mentioned for our neglect of the Catechism is our unwillingness to honor our fathers in the faith. We believe that we know more than all those who have gone before us. Consequently, pastors use whatever seems right to them at any moment in time. However, I believe there are also other reasons.

B. A Lack of Faith in the Means of Grace

The second and perhaps the most important reason is that we simply fail in the struggle to believe that our Lord is going to do what He says He is going to do through the means which He has mandated. A quick overview of much of the adult catechetical

material available reveals rich insights into this unbelief. For instance, most materials to greater or lesser degrees spend a good deal of time speaking *about* the word of God rather than *from* it. They do not speak law which reveals sin and gospel which forgives it, but they speak about God and His word in a variety of ways. Most materials begin in lesson one with the word of God. They spend the first lesson defining and defending the word rather than speaking from it. Some take great pains to convince the student that the Bible is inerrant without speaking a word of law or gospel from the Scripture. Hence, they begin with the article of the Scripture, in a fundamentalistic way, rather than the article of justification. It can legitimately be concluded that Luther recognized that conviction that the Bible is God's word comes from speaking from the Scripture, not from speaking about it with rational arguments. Hence, he began with God's alien work, asking the crushing question, "Who is your God?" This question is present for the sake of speaking of the work of Christ in the second article and its application in the absolution. Luther believed that Scripture is self-authenticating, because it is a two-edged sword which cuts to the heart. We struggle to believe this truth and therefore begin by defending the Bible. (A procedure, again, which is appropriate and, indeed, necessary to good dogmatics - beginning with prolegomena and bibliology - is inappropriate to catechesis.)

A second observation corroborating the fact that we fail to believe that our Lord works through the means He has appointed is that the sacraments and the forgiveness delivered through them are rarely at the center of attention in modern catechetical materials but instead receive chapters embedded among others. The table of contents might read: "Scripture," "God," "Man," "Baptism," "The Lord's Supper," "Stewardship," "Evangelism," and so forth. The centrality of God's forgiving action as seen in the Catechism is missing. We simply fail in the struggle to believe that God does what He says He does through His means.

This unbelief in the efficacy of the means of grace has resulted in the aforementioned divorce of doctrine and practice which are inextricably bound together in the Catechism as well as in the rest of the confessions. In recent decades the delusion that one can

confess a body of doctrine without practicing it has resulted in a proliferation of heterodox practices in the church such as the use of worship and music forms of the Reformed tradition, open communion, abandonment of individual confession and absolution, unionistic services, lay ministry, and women serving in areas given only to men. In his recent book, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*, David Luecke writes, "Congregations or church bodies have as their substance the part of their identity that has to remain unchanged. Style can be identified as how a church expresses that substance. Style can and does change over the years."¹⁴ In making this statement Luecke does not mean as style true adiaphora as described in the confessions (especially Article X of the Formula of Concord) but distinctively Lutheran church practices such as the practice of the Lord's Supper, the practice of the ministry within the congregation, the practice of worship, and the practice of evangelism. Thus, the distinction which he makes between "substance" and "style" is really a distinction between doctrine in the abstract and practice. This distinction is condemned in the Lutheran Confessions.¹⁵ The point is simply to state that doctrine, practice, and worship are a unity. There is no such thing as baptism, confession and absolution, the Lord's Supper, prayer, the life of good works, or any article of faith *extra usum*. These articles are not and cannot be abstractions. When their practice is changed, so also is that article of faith and the doctrine of the gospel. It is the gospel which is at stake.

C. The Adoption of Legalistic Goals

A third reason that we are in a catechetical crisis is that the goals of catechesis are different in current materials than in Luther. The title of one popular adult course, *Living Discipleship*, would not necessarily imply a different goal. However, upon closer observation of the material we find that there has been a significant shift in the shape of this life of discipleship away from Luther's. Like many other adult materials, the law of God is taken up *after* a discussion of the sacraments. The implication and practical result is that the primary use of the law is not to accuse the sinner, but to direct his life. A disciple is "living," not so much by confessing sin and believing the absolution, but rather by accomplishing God's will through the commandments. The commandments are present in this

schema to chide us to do the program outlined. Unlike Luther and Scripture, the gospel is now present for the sake of the law, rather than the law for the sake of the gospel. There is thus a shift away from christological sanctification to anthropological sanctification (which is no sanctification at all). The goal of this catechetical pattern is to produce certain verifiable results in the life of the individual, rather than to train the baptized to live in their baptism with the promises of God at the center of their lives. The works of man become the center of the Christian life rather than the gifts of God. Once again, the attack is on the article of justification and the entire doctrine of the gospel.

D. A Search for Shortcuts

A fourth reason that we are in catechetical crisis is that we look for easy formulae for instruction rather than patiently instructing in the meaning of simple words. A case in point is catechetical material dealing with the Lord's Supper. In the Catechism Luther goes to great pains to make clear the meaning of the simple words of Christ and the gifts which they deliver. This procedure gives opportunity to evaluate the Reformed and Roman views on the basis of the words and the understanding of these words. The heterodox teaching in each is the emphasis on human participation and action in the Supper which attacks the merits of Christ and the righteousness of faith. Modern catechetical material typically takes neither the words nor the gifts of Christ seriously. For instance, most of these materials describe the differences between the Reformed, Roman, and Lutheran churches on the Supper in a chart describing which elements are present. This description is done on the basis of 1 Corinthians 10:16 and is intended to teach the Lutheran position of the real presence over against Roman transubstantiation and Reformed "real absence." Totally ignored, however, is the central thing at issue with Rome, the sacrifice of the mass and, with the Reformed, the purely spiritual eating which makes the Supper dependent on the one receiving rather than the one giving. These are the central issues between Lutherans, Romanists, and Reformed, and they center on the merits of Christ and the gifts which He gives. Once again, the issue is the article of justification. Faith which trusts the word of God is born and nurtured through patient

exposition of that word, not through easy formulae and categories which explain peripheral distinctions.

I believe that this quest for easy formulae for catechesis is in part the result of a vocational crisis among pastors. Catechesis, preaching, the liturgy, the sacraments, and personal confession and absolution are no longer believed to be the primary means of pastoral care. The life of the church outlined in the Catechism has been supplanted by marketing schemes, programs, methods of persuasion, and "leadership" which all promise success. The church and the ministry are being viewed increasingly as social or, even more disturbingly, as political phenomena which change as society changes.¹⁶ The result is that, when the "felt needs" of the congregation are slick marketing, positive reinforcement, non-directive counselling, fundraising, or whatever, the world and the old man impose a shape of pastoral care which conforms to these "needs." The result is that pastors run from meeting to meeting, always trying to keep up with the latest fads, and are left without sufficient time to pray, study, hear confession (or confess themselves), or prepare sermons. This vocational confusion is nothing new. Wilhelm Loehe wrote of it in the middle of the last century:

The Lutheran Church knows that the Lord imparts His Holy Spirit only through His Word and Sacraments, and therefore she acknowledges no other means of operation. She knows that in the work of salvation man is able to do nothing more than lend his ear to the divine truth just as he would lend it to any other word; therefore before anything else, she tries to move men and admonish them to hear and to heed the Word . . . She does not consider it an insult if it is said: This pastor thinks it enough to preach, catechize, administer the Sacraments, hear the confessions of penitents, and comfort the sick. She knows that even the most faithful pastors do not enough of this. She does not care for a multiplication of pastoral offices, but she does care for a right use of those enjoined in the Scriptures and handed down from old time. To many it is a new discovery that one ought not be a master of many trades but a master of the few and noble means; but the Church never knew any

other wisdom – in one word, she does much with few means . . . The poverty of our fathers is richer than the riches of their critics . . . Therefore it does not have any sympathy with the new highly-praised means of furthering good works. She desires to carry on good works, but not in the manner of an association or a stock company . . . The preacher of the Church is therefore no friend of "new measures," as the Methodists call them, but he stands by the old measures of patient, faithful loyalty to the Word and true doctrine.¹⁷

Loehe points out that the primary means of pastoral care and practice can be quickly forced to the periphery in order to address changing and urgent demands of the changing winds. The result of this process is a breakdown in catechesis where it becomes programmatized and segmented away from its unity with the Divine Service and the daily baptismal life. To avoid this vocational confusion it would be wise for each pastor to read and study his ordination vows on a consistent basis. The vocational clarity of the Catechism and the rest of the confessions is affirmed in them.

E. A Confusion in Ecclesiology

This observation leads us to a fifth reason for the current catechetical situation. We have changed the church from an article of faith to something in the visual sensorium. Luther follows Scripture in making catechesis primarily an oral-aural exercise rather than a visual exercise. God always works through speaking. He spoke creation into existence. The virgin conceived through the word of the angel. Faith is given through hearing. St. Paul says that, if we live by sight, we are no longer living by faith. The church is always believed to be where God's word is taught in its truth and purity and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.¹⁸ For Luther the words of the Catechism are to be memorized so that they can be heard rather than being seen.¹⁹ In this way God does His work in us. This truth does not deny the reality of the church in the world but anchors it in the oral sensorium of faith, not the visual sensorium of proof. Luther expounds this position in a sermon on the Palm Sunday gospel taken from

Matthew 21:

Thirdly he says: "Behold." With this word he arouses us at once from sleep and unbelief as though he had something great, strange or remarkable to offer, something we have long wished for and now would receive with joy. Such waking up is necessary for the reason that everything that concerns faith is against reason and nature; for example, how can nature and reason comprehend that such a one should be king of Jerusalem who enters in such poverty and humility as to ride upon a borrowed ass? But faith is of the nature that it does not judge nor reason by what it sees or feels but by what it hears. It depends upon the Word alone and not on vision or sight.²⁰

This agrees with the word "Bethphage," which means, as some say, mouth-house, for St. Paul says in Romans 1,2 that the Gospel was promised afore in the Holy Scriptures, but it was not preached orally and publically until Christ came and sent out His apostles. Therefore the church is a mouthhouse, not a pen-house, for since Christ's advent that Gospel is preached orally which before was hidden in written books. It is the way of the Gospel and the New Testament that it is to be preached and discussed orally with a living voice. Christ Himself wrote nothing, nor did He give the command to write, but to preach orally. Thus the apostles were not sent out until Christ came to his mouth-house, that is, until the time had come to preach orally and to bring the Gospel from dead writing and pen-work to the living voice and mouth. From this time the church is rightly called Bethphage, since she has and hears the living voice of the Gospel.²¹

The church proper, which can never be seen, is believed to be where the word is preached in its truth and purity and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel. Luther so structured the Catechism that the church and its life might be focused and bound to her true marks and thus to the gifts of her Lord.

A common ground of modern catechetical material is an emphasis

on the textual word rather than the spoken word.²² The typical material is set out in a "course" with lessons that are intended to be covered and passed with the assumption that the material has then been learned. Often worksheets and tests are used to corroborate satisfactory performance. Thus, "confessing with the lips" has been supplanted with visually verifiable standards of performance. The visual is further emphasized in that these courses typically conclude with lessons on stewardship, evangelism, and other topics which emphasize the quantifiable, anthropological dimensions of the church. These topics are certainly significant to the life of the church, but they would be much better taught at appropriate points in the Catechism. For instance, stewardship can be especially emphasized in teaching the First Commandment and the First Article. However, when these topics are taken up on their own as the climax of a course, it is easy to assume that the marks of the church are such quantifiable, visual human activity. We have been so conditioned by this procedure that most congregational members look to these visual criteria as the marks that the church is healthy. This approach is reinforced by constant synodical and district concern over such quantifiable, visual criteria, while concern over what is preached and taught and over how the sacraments are administered is rarely discussed. The church, practically speaking, is no longer an article of faith, but is now something measurable and visible. One becomes a part of it through completion of a course centered in the visual sensorium and one is directed to quantifiable human activity to judge its health. The result is an ecclesiastical life focused on the works of men rather than the gifts of the Lord. Once again, the article of justification and the entire doctrine of the gospel are at stake.

A result of this shift in the article of the church is a shift in vocational understanding. Luther is clear in the Catechism that the works of a Christian which are pleasing to God are those done according to God's law in the station in which God has placed the person. Thus, Luther could say that the faithful mother changing the soiled diapers of her baby was a greater work than all the works of the Carthusians. The law of God applied to each one's station is the clear measuring rod for both good works and, of course, evil works. Interestingly, the shift in the article of the church to emphasize

human activity has created a new form of monkery. Truly "living disciples" are those who take part in the self-chosen works of the congregation. The congregational member who is faithful in his work, to his family, and to his Lord is not quite as good a Christian as the member who attends church business meetings, social events, and (the greatest mark of a number-one Christian) makes evangelism calls each night of the week. As Charles Evanson has pointed out, in this form of ecclesial life sins are no longer against the law but are now against the gospel: "Freed from the old lower law, we now serve the new higher law of the Great Commission. A typical result of this kind of thinking is the appearance of worship orders in which the central confession has to do with supposed sins against the Gospel; sins of ingratitude, lack of appreciation and vision, failure of nerve, and the horror of ineffectiveness replace the confession of sins against the First and Second Tables of the Law. One pastor has remarked that we will need to teach our people the Gospel so that they may examine themselves and confess their sins. Here the parameters of the Christian faith and life are severely narrowed."²³ In this schema the Christian no longer looks to his baptism as the shape for his daily life but now seeks to become a living or, better yet, effective disciple.

David Luecke makes Christian vocation more confusing by arguing for a changing vocational grounding with respect to the office of the ministry and the priesthood of all believers, depending on the "needs" of the church. He describes this vocational jellyfish as follows: "An overview of Lutheran traditions of ministry, like Pragman's, makes apparent that there were different emphases, and these emphases emerged in response to the condition of the church as it faced changing needs."²⁴ In other words, vocational understanding changes depending on what we perceive our needs to be based on the results we wish to see. This heterodox view of vocation is also promoted actively within our synod through the continuing-education materials offered "parish professionals." In a recent such publication we are told:

In the sixteenth century Reformation, the church gave the *scriptures* to the laity; in the present-day renewal, the church is giving the *ministry* to the laity. Our job as parish

professionals is to equip Christians so that they too become part of ministry and thereby part of the disciple-making process. Christ Himself and the apostle Paul provide a staff-development model for us in the disciple-making process. Both of their ministries followed a progression. Once a person or group of people was brought to faith they were shown how to do a task, they shared in doing the task, and finally responsibility for the task was given over to the new Christian.²⁵

The clear vocational understanding of the Catechism given especially in the Table of Duties is here confused by a heterodox understanding of the ministry and its relationship to the priesthood of all believers. The ministry in the Lutheran Confessions is that distinctive office created by Christ so that the keys might be administered publicly in the church – so that the gospel might be preached purely and the sacraments administered according to the gospel (Augustana V and Small Catechism V). The office is understood here evangelically. It is that office through which Christ gives His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Functionally, its task is to dispense these gifts. In the document quoted above the ministry is understood as a legal office wherein its primary task is to equip rather than dispense. Using this logic, no one would ever carry out the "ministry," since all should logically become facilitators. If the ministry is facilitation rather than dispensation of the gifts of God, then all of the "little ministers" ought also be involved in "facilitation." The result is that the roles of the universal priesthood and the office of the ministry have been reversed. The pastor does not equip the congregation for the "ministry," but rather the congregation equips the pastor through the call of Christ extended through it!

This heterodox vocational understanding comes full circle as it is used along with a false understanding of the great *satis est* of Augustana VII as the basis for changing the nature of the Sunday Divine Service. Rather than structuring our service around the reception of the gifts of Christ as the historic liturgies do (the inverse of which is the pastoral office), we now structure them around a celebration of our common spirituality. The reception of gifts requires ministers to dispense the gifts. The celebration of our

common spirituality does not.²⁶ The former is the theocentric, evangelical, Lutheran expression of the scriptural relationship between the office and the priesthood. The latter is the anthropocentric, legal expression of the heterodox relationship between the office and priesthood. Once again, at stake is the article of justification and the entire doctrine of the gospel.

Luther's catechetical genius is seen, not only in the Catechism itself, but also in his specific direction on how to use it. This instruction we find in the Preface to the Small Catechism.

In the first place, the preacher should take utmost care to avoid changes or variations in the text and wording of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, etc. On the contrary he should adopt one form, adhere to it, and use it repeatedly year after year. Young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form. They are easily confused if a teacher employs one form now and another form-perhaps with the intention of making improvements-later on. In this way all the time and labor will be lost. This was well understood by our good fathers, who were accustomed to use the same form in teaching the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments . . . Begin by teaching them the text word for word so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory. In the second place, after the people have become familiar with the text teach them what it means. For this purpose, take the explanations in this booklet, or choose any other brief and fixed explanations which you prefer, and adhere to them without changing a single syllable, as stated above with reference to the text . . . In the third place, after you have thus taught this brief catechism, take up a large catechism so that people may have a richer and fuller understanding.²⁷

Luther's method is simple. Teach them each part word for word. Teach the explanation word for word and expound the meaning of the words. Finally, take up the Large Catechism for a fuller understanding. Notice also that Luther consciously honors the fathers in the faith by adopting their method. He does not ignore

them and do his own thing. As cited above Luther examined the content of their materials as well as their method. Because the Preface to the Catechism was omitted from the synodical catechism of 1943, these words are not taken to heart as they ought. We must remember, however, that this preface is a part of the *corpus confessionis* to which we subscribed at ordination.

Luther's method has tremendous practical advantages. The uniform text forces us to take the words and their meaning seriously. It brings continuity between generations and enables parents to fulfill their vocational catechetical duty. His method is primarily an oral one which centers in the shape of the baptismal life presented in the entire catechism as well as in each individual part. The words which become a part of the person form the basis for meditation, prayer, preparation for confession and absolution, preparation for eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, and guidance for daily doing one's duty in the place where God has put him. It serves to teach the baptized how to hear the word of God and participate in the Divine Service in a salutary way. The method promotes a life of the church centered in the word and action of Christ rather than the word and works of men. It also fosters a confessional consciousness and provides a confessional base for the baptized. This confessional base provides the baptized with the hermeneutical tools necessary to study the Scriptures in further depth. Finally, this method gives the pastor a solid ground on which to deal with the erring and withering. Application of law and gospel can be made with the specific words of the Catechism.

Conclusion

It was wise for our synod to include the Catechism in *Lutheran Worship*. Unfortunately, the Preface and the Table of Duties were omitted. However, it is my conviction that the same forces which currently seek to change Lutheran liturgical forms and hymnody also seek to change catechesis and, indeed, have done so already. In *each* case the action of God in bestowing His gifts is exchanged for the works of men. The marks of the church shift from God's means of grace rightly administered to visual and quantifiable criteria. Promises of the gospel are turned into requirements of the law. The

unifying forces of hymnbook-agenda and catechism are different sides of the same coin. They provide the shape of church practice for churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Confession. There is currently an open attack on the one and simultaneously a quiet attack on the other. Only God can grant us the wisdom to discern the spirits and cling to "that which we have known from childhood."

Endnotes

1. Especially helpful have been the Rev. Charles Evanson, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Korby, the Rev. John Pless, and the Rev. Adolph M. Bickel.
2. Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Dallas: Word Publishing House, 1989), pp. 128ff.
3. Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 52-53.
4. *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 358-361.
5. See Martin Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray" (LW 43); Wilhelm Loehe, *Seed-Grains of Prayer*; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, et alii.
6. For a further discussion see John Pless, *How Does Catechesis Relate to Worship?*, an unpublished paper presented at the Liturgy and Outreach Consultation, St. Peter, Missouri, May 1989.
7. Gunther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, ed. Robin Leaver and trans. H. J. A. Bouman, D. F. Poellot, and H. C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), pp. 75-80.
8. Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," *Luther's Works*, 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), pp. 64-67.
9. Tappert, p. 341, pp. 459-460.

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10. Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. E. T. Horn (Reading, Pennsylvania: Pilger Publishing House, 1908), p. 186.
11. Kenneth Korby in a course, "The Loehe Tradition," taught at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the summer of 1989.
12. Michael Reu, *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1947).
13. Tappert, p. 340.
14. David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), p. 21.
15. For instance, the Anabaptists are condemned for the practice of seeking the Holy Spirit through our own preparations rather than through the means of grace (AC V). They are also condemned for rejecting the practice of *infant baptism* (AC IX). The Papists are condemned for their practices of penance (AC XI, XII, XXV), the medieval mass (AC XIII, XXII, XXIV), and others. For a thorough confessional discussion of this point see Robert Preus, "Confessional Lutheranism in Today's World," *CTQ*, 54 (1990), pp. 99-116. The same distinction is made in the essay by Kurt Marquart, "Article X of the Formula of Concord, Confession and Ceremonies," *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978).
16. For an interesting discussion of the politicizing of institutions in America which formerly stood on objective foundations see Robert Bork, *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law*.
17. Loehe, pp. 177-183.
18. Tappert, p. 32.
19. Tappert, pp. 338-339.
20. Martin Luther, "First Sunday in Advent," *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), pp. 22-23.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

22. For a thorough discussion of the oral versus written word in the church see Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
23. Charles Evanson, *Evangelicalism and the Liturgical Movement and Their Effects on Lutheran Worship* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1989), p. 8.
24. Luecke, p. 141.
25. Paul Schoepp, *The Parish Professional as Volunteer Staff Developer* (River Forest, Illinois: LEA-TEAM, 1990), p. 5.
26. I am indebted here to the Rev. James C. Strawn.
27. Tappert, pp. 339-340.