

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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The Small Catechism: Pattern and Shape of



On October 31st, the anniversary of the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, the Lutheran Church celebrates Reformation Day as a festival of thanksgiving for the gifts God has bestowed on His church through the life and work of Martin Luther. The American Evangelical theologian Mark Noll comments, “For whatever reason, in the ineffable wisdom of God, the speech of Martin Luther rang clear where others merely mumbled.” Having listened to the voice of God in the Scriptures, Martin Luther’s lips were opened to confess the truth of the Gospel with clarity. Luther didn’t mumble!

Christian Doctrine

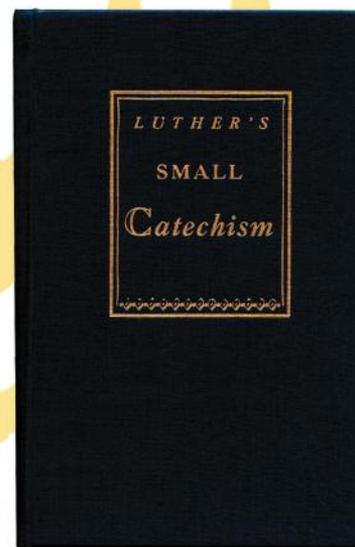
By Rev. John T. Pless

Among the many contributions of Martin Luther to the legacy of our church is the Small Catechism. Beginning in 1518, Luther frequently preached a sermon series on “the catechism,” that is, the basic components of Christian doctrine (Apostles’ Creed, Our Father, and the Ten Commandments) as they had been arranged and handed down from earlier generations of Christians. Eventually these catechetical sermons would become the basis for the Large Catechism and would be crystalized in the Small Catechism. Written in 1529, the Small Catechism would quickly become “the Layman’s Bible,” as the Formula of Concord would call it, because “it contains everything that Holy Scripture discusses at greater length and which a Christian must know for his salvation.”

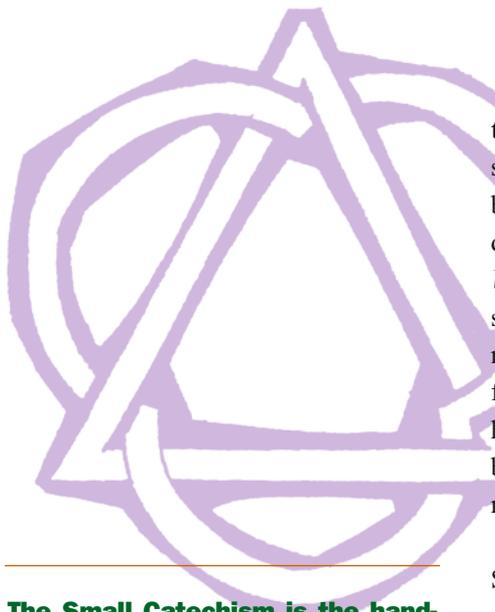
The Small Catechism is the handbook for the Royal Priesthood of Believers. As such, the Small Catechism fulfills at least three functions for the Christian. First, the Small Catechism is a “user’s guide to the Bible.” In other words, the Small Catechism is that “pattern of sound words” that the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy to follow in II Timothy 1:13. The Small Catechism is not only a collection of essential doctrines, but the very pattern and shape of Christian doctrine. The Ten Commandments come first as the Law shows us our sin. The Apostles’ Creed follows the Ten Commandments as the Gospel follows the Law. The Creed confesses the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both the Father and His gifts in creation and the Spirit and His gifts that create and sustain faith are confessed in their relationship to the Son and His gift of redemption. The Our Father comes next—it is prayed in response to the Creed for it is the prayer of faith. The gifts confessed in the Second and Third Articles of the Creed are concretely given in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar. The daily prayers and table of duties form appendices to the six chief parts of Christian doctrine.

Second, the Small Catechism is our prayer book. Not only does the Small Catechism teach us what Christian prayer is by unfolding for us the prayer which our Lord gave His disciples, the Small Catechism provides us with a structure for our prayers within the rhythm of the day (morning, evening, and at meals). Pastor Wilhelm Loehe has commented that of all the catechisms in Christendom, only the Small Catechism can be prayed. The Catechism has a liturgical function, as it gives doxological focus to Christian doctrine in prayer and praise. This is essentially what Martin Luther does in his “catechism hymn” (see hymns “Here Is the Tenfold Sure Command,” *LW*, 331; “We All Believe in One True God,” *LW*, 213; “Our Father, Who from Heaven Above,” *LW*, 431; “To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord,” *LW*, 233; “From Depths of Woe I Cry to You,” *LW*, 230; and “O Lord, We Praise You,” *LW*, 238).

Third, the Small Catechism is a handbook for the baptismal life. Writing in his treatise



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Third, the Small Catechism is a handbook for the baptismal life. Living by faith in Christ, the Christian now gives himself in love to the neighbor according to his various callings in the world.

tise on *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther notes that a Christian “lives not in himself but in Christ and in his neighbor . . . He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith, he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor” (*American Edition of Luther’s Works*[*AE*], 31:371). Just as the six chief parts of the Catechism draw us into Christ, so the Table of Duties draws us into the life of the neighbor in the concretion of the neighbor’s life in the congregation, government, family, and workplace. Living by faith in Christ, the Christian now gives himself in love to the neighbor according to his various callings in the world. “As (Christ) gives himself for us with his body and blood in order to redeem us from all misery, so we, too, are to give ourselves with might and main for our neighbor” (*AE*, 36:352).

Luther prepared his Catechism as an act of pastoral care for God’s people. The Saxon Visitation of 1528 revealed how deeply both the pastors and people were in need of catechesis. Luther alludes to these deplorable conditions in the Preface to the Small Catechism: “Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although they are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as though they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty” (*Book of Concord*, Tappert, 338).

Often overlooked in the Preface is Luther’s threefold outline for catechesis. Much to the chagrin of some contemporary educational theorists, Luther starts with the text. He makes three salient points: First, don’t be so quick to adapt new and improved translations. Luther writes: “In the first place, the preacher should take the utmost care to avoid changes or variations in the texts 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” (Tappert, 338). Second, after the text has been learned by heart, then the catechist can teach the catechumen its meaning. “In the second place, after the people have become familiar with the text, teach them what it means” (Tappert, 339). Third, after the people have mastered the rudiments of the Small Catechism, go into greater depth. “In the third place, after you have taught this brief catechism, take up a larger catechism so that the people may have a richer and fuller understanding” (Tappert, 340). With these principles in place, Luther intended that pastors would catechize their people so that the head of the household would be equipped to teach his family.

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