

Praying Luther's Small Catechism

The Pattern of Sound Words

John T. Pless

For the Rev. Dr. Norman E. Nagel on the occasion of his 90th birthday.



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Abbreviations

AE	Luther's Works; American Edition
FC	Formula of Concord
FC Ep	Epitome of the Formula of Concord
K-W	<i>The Book of Concord</i> ; edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert
LC	Large Catechism
LSB	<i>Lutheran Service Book</i>
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism
SD	Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Foreword

In the Lutheran Church, Luther's catechisms became formative for Christian instruction. Over the centuries, the Small Catechism in particular has been taught and learned by heart in confirmation classes around the world. In this way, not only education in pivotal articles of Christian faith took place but also the mind-sets of Lutheran congregants have been shaped over generations. Moreover, Lutheran piety has been coined in such a manner that Lutherans may be recognized and distinguished by the way they talk about God, venerate their Savior, Jesus Christ, as their Lord, and show how they are guided by the Holy Spirit. John Pless deserves to be given credit for having rediscovered and now for highlighting Luther's idea of *praying* the catechism.

The inner structure of Luther's catechisms is guided by the idea of God's solemn and sacred self-communication. This leitmotif steers the explanation of the Ten Commandments, as the First Commandment is focused on God's promise: "I, I myself will give you what you need and help you out of every danger." To this promise, God's claim corresponds: "Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else."¹ In the First Article of the Creed, Luther states "The Father has given to us himself with all creation . . . apart from the fact that he has also showered us with inexpressible eternal blessings through his Son and the Holy Spirit."² Thus, in the Second Article, we learn how God "has given himself completely to us, withholding nothing."³ So the Creed helps "us do what the Ten Commandments require of us."⁴ The petitions in Lord's Prayer, correspondingly, request nothing else but the fulfillment of what is commanded in the Decalogue;⁵ moreover, "God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words."⁶ Likewise, the Sacraments are regarded as "a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps,"⁷ or "all the treasures he brought from heaven for us," "placed at everyone's door, yes upon the table."⁸

1 LC I 4; K-W 387.

2 LC II 24; K-W 433.

3 LC II 26; K-W 434.

4 LC II 2; K-W 431.

5 K-W 440ff.

6 LC III 22; K-W 443.

7 LC IV 37; K-W 461.

8 LC V 66, 35; K-W 473, 470.

For the Lutheran Church—and even beyond—Luther became instrumental with his catechisms in presenting the Christian community with an introduction to a life guided by God.⁹ He points out that Holy Baptism is God's salutary self-communication, which brings to us "God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts"¹⁰ He views the Sacrament of the Altar, as "this great . . . treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians," providing the new human being with constant fortification in his battle against Satan, death, and sin.¹¹ The Lord's Prayer invokes God's irrefutable willingness for mercy in just such a battle, a battle that becomes inevitable for a Christian. It is precisely when a Christian partakes in God's self-giving and self-revelation, that a Christian takes on his enemies in the battle of the Gospel for the Gospel.¹²

Luther can be perceived as being the one who construes the Credo for us, thereby gratefully accepting "what God does for us and gives to us"¹³ and the implementation thereof in the reality of Christ's liberation act, since Christ "has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there."¹⁴ It is Luther who substantiates the identity of Christianity and Church as being trinitarian, and who identifies the Christocentric aspect as being a distinctive feature of Christendom and Christianity, compared to all other forms of religiosity (and a-religiosity) that are not based on Christ or inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

It is Luther who is able to discern Law and Gospel as being God's immanent manner of speaking and acting¹⁶ in which the gradient from the "extrinsic"—or even "alien"—to the "actual"—rather, "proper"—work of God proceeds in such a way¹⁷ that the Church must never be found wanting in proclaiming the declaration of forgiveness and the salvation in Christ, seeing that it is a matter of "comforting and consoling" those who are frightened and "fainthearted."¹⁸

It is Luther who places the Gospel in its forms of implementation—proclamation, Baptism, Eucharist, and confessional penitence as the "third sacrament"¹⁹—at the center of an encompassing Christian understanding of a worship service.²⁰ It is Luther who, by the differentiation of the two realms,²¹ the release of secularism from clerical paternalism, as well as the theological facilitation of the differentiation between "penultimate" and "ultimate," thereby paves the way for the separation of church and state—yet without ever having relinquished God's reign of power over all ages, nations, people, and spheres of life.²²

It is Luther who, by the end of his Large Catechism, urged the Christian community of solidarity to bear in mind that we "must all help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight against the devil,"²³ meaning the elementary and fundamental day-to-day life of a Christian existence. Indeed, all five parts of Luther's catechisms, linked to one another by the principle of God's self-donation willing to communicate His salvation to all humankind, are meant to be effective as an introduction to fundamental consummations of Christian life, even on a "daily" basis.²⁴

With this perspective in mind, praying the catechism serves as an exemplary piece of Christian piety and a strong impulse to formatting Christian life in the light of the Gospel as rediscovered in the Lutheran Reformation. The catechism must be taught in the church, on all accounts. It ought to be learned, definitely, although—or even because—we observe that in many a Western country the ability of memorizing texts is in decline. The catechism has to be preached, as it comprises the sound doctrine of the Church. Therefore, it may be meditated on as well. But first and foremost the catechism is meant to be *prayed*, as a daily exercise, as Luther wished it to be. John Pless, in his comprehensive analysis, directs our attention exercising and cultivating our Christian existence on a daily basis by advising us—along the lines of Luther's catechetical instruction—to engage in the lifelong practice of being a Christian.

Werner Klän
Oberursel/Germany
Reformation Day, 2015

9 Cf. Werner Klän, "Anleitung zu einem Gott-gelenkten Leben. Die innere Systematic der Katechismen Luthers," *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 29 (2005): 18–35.

10 LC IV 42; K-W 461.

11 K-W 470ff.

12 K-W 448ff.; 451.

13 LC II 67; K-W 440.

14 LC II 31; K-W 434.

15 K-W 440.

16 Cf. the citations from Luther's exegesis of Luke 5:1–11 in the summer homily of 1544, in FC SD V 12; K-W 583ff.

17 K-W 585 ff.

18 FC SD V 12; K-W 584.

19 K-W 465.

20 K-W 319.

21 K-W 470 ff.

22 K-W 389, 451.

23 LC V 87; K-W 476.

24 K-W 431, 444, 466, 469.

Preface

Edmund Schlink spoke of modernity as that time when dogmatics had become largely a playground for the subjective originality of speculative piety, a period in which Christians generally forgot how to pray through their catechism. Schlink's words call us back to something that ought to characterize Lutherans. Namely, both pastors and laypeople should remember how to “pray through their catechism,” for it tutors us in what Paul calls the “pattern of sound words,” locating us within the economy of God's giving and our receiving. The Small Catechism guides us into the heart of the Holy Scriptures for it is, as the Formula of Concord would come to call it, “a Bible of the Laity, in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation.”²⁵ The apostle Paul charges Timothy to “follow the pattern of sound words . . . in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13). The Small Catechism is such a pattern. Hence the title of this book— *Praying Luther's Small Catechism: The Pattern of Sound Words*.

I have come to appreciate what Oswald Bayer calls “catechetical systematics” as an approach for doing Lutheran theology. This book was conceived and crafted with Bayer's description in mind. The catechism provides both the categories and contours of our theology. Even as the catechism functioned as a handbook of doctrine, so it also served as prayer book in the Reformation. Luther was of the conviction that the catechism could be prayed. This book that you now hold in your hands might be thought of as an exercise in prayed dogmatics. I have benefited greatly from the recently translated five-volume study of Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms*. By publishing Peters' work, Concordia Publishing House has given the English-speaking Lutheran world a genuine treasure. Without Peters' careful research, this present volume could not have been written.

Praying Luther's Small Catechism moves sequentially through the Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism as well as the Daily Prayers and Table of Duties. Each section begins with material from the Small Catechism followed by a prayer developed out of the catechetical material. Subsequent commentary on the doctrine of the passage reflects on how this teaching shapes our praying. The book is aimed at pastors who regularly preach and teach from the catechism, but it is also intended for laypeople, especially parents, as Luther saw the head of the household as the primary catechist for the family. There are always more treasures

to be discovered in the catechism, so whether the readers are veteran teachers of the Church or those who have only a passing acquaintance with Luther's little jewel, it is hoped that readers will be drawn into a deeper and lasting appreciation of this handbook for doctrine, vocation, and prayer. It is especially desired that your own praying of the catechism will be enlivened and enlarged.

While I alone bear the responsibilities for the inadequacies of this volume, many have contributed to it, perhaps without even knowing that they were doing so. I first learned the catechism from my own parents, John and Betty Pless. Pastor Eldon Roeber, who baptized and confirmed me at Mount Zion Lutheran Church in Conover, North Carolina, had been a student of J. Michel Reu at Wartburg Seminary and taught me the catechism with persuasiveness and clarity. Time spent with Norman Nagel at the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University deepened my understanding of the theology of the catechism and its use for prayer and pastoral care. Peter Bender, at that time a pastor in Boone, Iowa, attended a continuing education class on the catechism with Dr. Kenneth F. Korby at Flathead Lake in Montana in August 1988 from which we thankfully would never recover. Pastor Bender remains a catechist without equal, and I am grateful for his friendship, fraternity in office, and his ongoing insights into the catechism. Theological conversation partners of long standing on all things Lutheran and catechetical—since 1983 when we were all living in the Twin Cities—are Robert Kolb and James Nestingen. Not to be overlooked are the students who have taken my course in catechetics both here at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and also at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Pretoria, South Africa, as well as pastors in various conferences both in the United States and abroad. Thanks are also due to Julia Hipkins, our faculty secretary, who graciously helped me with technical matters in preparing the manuscript for publication. Books are never the product of an individual but are the accumulation of learning from those who have gone before us in the faith and those who walk alongside us in this earthly pilgrimage. Thanks be to God for them all.

John T. Pless
Ascension Day 2015

25 FC Ep Summary 5; K-W 487.