

## How Can We Prove Our Gratitude for Luther's Small Catechism?<sup>1)</sup>

"If Doctor Luther during his lifetime had achieved no other good than restoring to our homes, schools, and pulpits both Catechisms, the Table Prayers, and the Morning and Evening Devotions, all the world could not sufficiently thank or repay him for that,"<sup>2)</sup> — was not the Joachimstal pastor a bit fulsome in expressing his admiration for one of the smallest treatises of his great friend and teacher? If he was, Luther himself must be charged with exaggeration when, on July 9, 1537, he wrote to Wolfgang Capito that all his other writings might perish and he would not grieve much, provided only his treatise on the "Bondage of the Will," against Erasmus, and his Catechism would survive.<sup>3)</sup> Today, after the lapse of four centuries, the verdict of the author and of one of his most loyal pupils on the Small Catechism stands confirmed by the estimate which men of all stations, classes, and nationalities have placed on its value. One way in which we may prove our gratitude for it is to *realize the epochal significance of Luther's activity which culminated in the publication of the Small Catechism*. Germans, and Lutherans, have occasionally shown a proneness to fail to recognize genuine merit of the highest type among their brethren, and strangers have had to open their eyes to the greatness of an achievement.

The little "handbook" which had left the press of Nick Schirlentz and was being sold at Wittenberg during the early days of May, 1529, started out to be a "best seller." Historical research has produced evidence of nineteen editions published during 1529 in all the principal cities of Lutheran Germany. Printers pirated this product of Luther with a zest. Before his death, in 1546, there had been seventy-one editions of which we have definite knowledge today. At the close of the century and during the early part of the next the Small Catechism had been translated into twenty-four languages of Europe.<sup>4)</sup> The influence of this little book was felt far

1) Summary of address delivered June 16, 1929, at Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, Ill., before school boards of Missouri Synod and guests. Published by request.

2) John Mathesius in sixth sermon on "Story of *Herrn Doktor Martin Luther*," p. 59; quoted in Walch's Edition of Luther's Works, St. Louis revision, Vol. X, 29.

3) St. L. Ed., Vol. XXI b, 2176.

4) See records of these facts in Weimar Ed. of Luther's Works, Vol. 30, sect. II.

beyond the confines of Germany and the pale of its Evangelical Church. The book has maintained its splendid record ever since: next to the Bible it is still the "best seller" on the religious book market. There is something in this book that every man needs, and the world has been prompt to recognize this fact.

In 1818 Prof. J. F. L. Wachler of the University of Breslau delivered a series of lectures on the history of the national literature of Germany. When he approached the age of the Reformation, his remarks began to vibrate with a deep pathos. He said: "Any person able to sense what happened in the sixteenth century for the good of mankind, any person able to comprehend the immeasurable success of these happenings, will recognize in them a direction from on high and will gratefully trace the path, marked by blessings for the education of the human race, which the divine World-governor chose for these happenings.

"In Luther there arose a robust, free, and God-fearing spokesman for the people's rights and for their claims to their peculiar character and independence in the holiest affairs of the mind, in their beliefs and volitions, their love and their hope. He taught the people to understand themselves and not to look outside of themselves for that which they can find only in their inner selves.<sup>5)</sup> The people were to value themselves according to their higher destiny, the rights which are thereby conferred, and the strength which springs from the consciousness of that destiny. That is what gives to his literary products abiding worth for the German world. They are a faithful mirror of German strength and wisdom; that is why they were read with such delight and such frequency. *Happy are we if they are still loved and taken to heart by ever-increasing numbers!* Luther succeeded in rousing millions out of spiritual stupor and making them eager to strive personally after the one thing needful, to make plain to them the fatherly will of God revealed by Jesus Christ, man's calling unto the life eternal and its relation to the life here on earth, and, by inducing men to acknowledge this destiny, to make each one mindful of his inalienable right and his indispensable duty. He sought to appropriate to all estates of the social order the sum and substance of human wisdom and happiness and to make plain how these are to be applied in public and domestic life. His words of rebuke and his messages of comfort, his warnings and reprimands, did not remain without fruit. *They still prove powerful and efficacious in our day.* Who has taught with

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5) That this is not meant in any Pelagian sense will appear anon.

greater plainness and effectiveness, more forcefully and stirringly, that princes exist for the sake of those whom they are to govern, that subjects owe obedience to the powers that be and must work for their own contentment by their God-fearing mind and their heavenly faith, by self-discipline and honesty, by diligence and order, by love and fidelity in the state of matrimony, by bringing up children in the fear of the Lord? *To him, to his pleading and energetic acts, Germany owes its system of public schools, which is highly esteemed even by foreigners, and the progressive ennobling of which may be regarded as the ripest fruit of Luther's public-spirited mind. He never ceased to repeat that the welfare of the people depends on their public institutions of learning. He struck the true note that penetrated to the heart of the common people and to the world of childhood. His Catechisms are masterpieces that have never been surpassed.*"<sup>6)</sup>

During the preceding generation a theological radical in the nominally Lutheran Church of Luther's homeland, Saxony, wrote: "The Small as well as the Large Catechism were written primarily for pastors; however, with the intention that through them they were to permeate the people. While the Large Catechism remained a book for pastors and teachers, *the Small Catechism became the people's book in a manner not achieved by any other book except the Bible.* There can be but one unanimous decision among all men capable and willing to render an opinion on the Small Catechism: More than all decrees of so-called ecumenical church councils, more than all the writings of the Fathers, scholastics, and mystics, this little book deserves to be called a work of the Holy Spirit;<sup>7)</sup> for what the Church has handed down from the era of the Fathers and during the Middle Ages as the sum and substance of all that a Christian needs to know, has been set forth with a simplicity and profoundness, a conciseness, clearness, and solemnity equal only to the cordiality and impressiveness of the author. *As long as the pure Gospel will be proclaimed in the German tongue, this little book will have to remain the guide of our youths unto the knowledge of salvation.* For the aged, however, and for theologians, let me cite

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6) *Vorlesungen ueber die Geschichte der deutschen Nationalliteratur*, Th. 1, p. 159 ff.

7) Dr. Kahnis can afford to say this because he belongs to that class of theologians who hold that all intellectual developments in the historic evolution of the human race are due to operations of the Spirit of God, who produces, in one instance, the Bible of Christianity, and in another, the Iliad of Homeric antiquity.

here a word of Luther: 'I am also a doctor and preacher, yea, as learned and experienced as all those may be who have such presumption and security; yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism, and every morning, and whenever I have time, I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and am glad so to remain.' (Preface to Large Cat. *Conc. Trigl.*, p. 569; English Ed., p. 166.)" 8)

Among American scholars outside of the Lutheran Church, Arthur Cushman McGiffert of Union Seminary has said in his treatise "Martin Luther, the Man and His Work" (first published *seriatim* in the *Century Magazine*): "More important for the future of the evangelical cause than any of his labors over details of organization and worship, were some of the *products of his pen, upon which German Protestantism has nourished itself from that day to this. . .* In 1529 appeared his Large and Small Catechisms, the latter containing a most beautiful summary of Christian faith and duty, wholly devoid of polemics of every kind, and so simple and concise as to be easily understood and memorized by every child. It has formed the basis of the religious education of German youth ever since. Though preceded by other catechisms from the pen of this or that colleague or disciple, it speedily displaced them all, not simply because of its authorship, but *because of its superlative merit, and has alone maintained itself in general use.* The versatility of the Reformer in adapting himself with such success to the needs of the young and immature is no less than extraordinary. *Such a little book as this it is that reveals most clearly the genius of the man.*" 9)

From the ranks of the Baptists, Dr. Vedder, one of the keenest American critics of the Reformation in Germany, voiced the following estimate: "*One of the things most firmly believed by Luther was the necessity of a systematic Christian training for the whole people.* It was this conviction that led him to insist so strongly on the duty of the clergy to expound the Scriptures regularly. But as the work of reformation went on and as he learned through the visitation more about the actual condition of the people, his plan enlarged and at the same time became more definite. He could entertain little rational hope of making any considerable impression on the adults

8) Dr. K. F. A. Kahn, *Die lutherische Dogmatik*, 1864, Vol. 2, p. 418.

9) p. 315 f.

of his own generation; and highly as he esteemed preaching, he had no illusion as to its effect. 'Many a man listens to preaching for three or four years,' he testified, 'without learning much to enable him to make answer, if questioned, concerning a single article of faith.' But it was different with the rising generation; he did believe it possible, by diligent Christian instruction, to bring about a great change in Germany. And accordingly, as soon as possible, he turned his attention to the composition of two catechisms in German, both of which were issued in 1529.

"The first, or Larger, Catechism, under his hands outgrew the purpose of a catechism, both in length and in form. The method of question and answer was abandoned, and it became in fact a brief compendium of theology, quite unfit for the instruction of the young and never employed for that purpose. But the second, or Smaller, Catechism, was a true catechism, so brief and simple as to be well adapted for its purpose. Dr. Schaff well calls it '*a great little book, with as many thoughts as words*,' and quite truly adds that *it marks an epoch in the history of religious instruction*. None of his writings bears more unmistakable imprint of Luther's genius, and in none is his happy faculty of stating profound religious truth in simple words and racy phrases more strikingly shown. Its defects are chiefly the result of the method adopted, — a method sanctioned by ancient usage, but not therefore beyond criticism, — to base the Catechism, not on the entire teaching of Scripture, but on three familiar liturgical documents: the Decalog, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. This method results in an incompleteness that requires the supplementing of the Catechism with further religious instruction, as became, and continues to be, the practise in all Lutheran churches.<sup>10</sup> *Yet it may be said without exaggeration that, next to the Bible, no other book has had so wide a circulation among the German people or had so profound and lasting an influence on the national character.*"<sup>11</sup> W. H. T. DAU.

(To be concluded.)

WISE men make mistakes; fools continue to make mistakes.

IMPROVE upon your speech, because your speech reveals the degree of your culture or the depth of your ignorance. W. C. K.

10) This stricture will be weighed further on.

11) Henry C. Vedder, *The Reformation in Germany*, 1914, p. 278 f. Cp. Preserved Smith, *Martin Luther, His Life and Letters*. (Index.)

## How Can We Prove Our Gratitude for Luther's Small Catechism?

(Concluded.)

Dr. Vedder has touched upon a motive for Luther's composition of the Small Catechism that suggests an eminently practical way for proving our gratitude for this little book: the christianizing of the education of our youth from the very start of their schooling. All honor to the great body of confessors grouped about Luther, who by word and pen fought the good old fight of the Christian Church against the powers of darkness in the sixteenth century. It was an age of powerful preaching, and its sacred oratory will remain an inspiring model for all time. But the positive results of christianizing the masses — let us not overlook this fact — were achieved by the quiet work of the Lutheran schoolmasters who thoroughly popularized and perpetuated the work of the Reformer for generations after Luther's voice had become hushed. The lasting victory of the Reformation was won in the Christian day-schools of Germany by faithful Christian pedagogs, who built up a new, well-indoctrinated nation out of the wreckage of the former papistic populace.

Luther often voiced his disgust with the stolid indifference, the stupidity, and the sloth of the generation with whom his lot was cast. Pope-rule had for ages ground them under the heel of spiritual tyranny and crushed out of them all intelligent responsiveness and initiative. He did not hope for much cooperation from these old sinners who in matters of religion were inclined to follow the line of least resistance and "let well enough alone." But he scanned with wistful interest "the tender little plants" that were growing up in the child-world of Germany. It was well-nigh impossible to start the gnarled and crooked adults on a new way of thinking and living and to straighten out their set notions and superstitions. Only God by His almighty Word could do it spite of the resistance it encountered from these inveterate mongers in work-righteousness. Therefore, the Word must be preached incessantly and forcefully. But what could not be accomplished by enlisting the plastic mind and exuberant enthusiasm of youth for the cause of Christ!

Luther was also disgusted with much of the preaching that was going on. Mercilessly he scored his own: "If I were younger, I would cut down my postils considerably, for I have used too many words in them without measure. Nobody can follow these long talks and all this twaddle nor catch everything. Neither is every-

thing suited to the times and in keeping with them. All things should be governed by the attending circumstances. *However, the Catechism will have to abide and remain in force.*"<sup>12)</sup> "My advice is, not to engage in disputation regarding matters that are hidden, but to abide simply by God's Word, especially the Catechism, for in it you have the truest way of the entire religion."<sup>13)</sup> Luther's Table Talk shows that the Catechism was one of the favorite topics which he discussed with his guests and its success a matter of the gravest concern to him. It always roused his ire to hear the Catechism belittled. "The Catechism," he said, "is the most perfect doctrine and must always be preached. I should like to preach it every day and read from this book, but our preachers know it so accurately that some are disgusted with the preaching, the rest with the hearing of it. They are ashamed of this lowly teaching and are eager to exhibit *themselves*, and when they hear the peasants and the nobility say: Our pastor is always harping on one string, they want to find something better and more elevated."<sup>14)</sup> At one time the conversation was about the neglect of the catechism-examinations in the schools, homes, and churches of Pomerania. Luther remarked: "Alas! the preaching at church is not edifying our youths, but the recitation of the Catechism at home, the explanation and recitation at confession, accomplishes very much. It is, indeed, irksome, but necessary. The papists shunned this wearisome task and could think of nothing but their tax-regulations. Thus the flock of Christ and the Church were neglected."<sup>15)</sup> Yea, at one time he curtly announced: "If any one is not satisfied with having the Catechism preached to him, let the devil be his preacher."<sup>16)</sup>

The events of history have since fully established the wisdom of Luther's policy, and no one was prompter than the Roman Catholic Church to recognize in Luther's zeal for educating children and young people in the Christian religion a master-stroke in practical and far-seeing church-building and church government. The Counter-Reformation started by the Jesuits borrowed a leaf from Luther's ecclesiastical statesmanship by launching its phenomenal educational enterprises throughout the world. By their schools they raised a bulwark against the inroads which the Lutheran movement was making upon their Church.

"Give me the young people, and I shall determine and control

12) Vol. XXII, 396.

14) Vol. XXII, 293.

16) Vol. XXII, 396.

13) Vol. XXII, 392.

15) Vol. XXII, 392.

the future" — that is a true maxim which the leaders of the Church do well to heed. Our forefathers heeded it, also here in America, to the extent of their ability: the building of their schools went hand in hand with the building of their churches. Consistently they endeavored to extend the influence of the Christian religion to every department of education, from the primary to the college and university. The confessional consciousness and solidity, the organized compactness of the Missouri Synod is due, not only to the unity of spirit and the consecration of her ministry, but to a very large extent to the devotion and faithfulness of her body of Christian schoolmasters. To abate this educational zeal in sect-ridden America, in an age of pronounced religious indifferentism and materialism, at a time when the pinch of poverty is no longer felt by our people as it used to be — what else does that mean than to soften the fiber of our religious sinews and to invite the plethora and delicateness of decay. A schoolless Missouri Synod may win a lot of applause and popularity in America, but it will join the ever-growing number of useless American churches. Here is an answer to the question at the head of my paper, which the schoolmasters will have to help our Synod spell out.

This leads me to suggest a third way for proving our gratitude for Luther's Small Catechism: *We must realize the safeguard and protection which the Catechism provides for the pure faith of our Church.* In his preface to the Large Catechism, Luther says that a book such as he was publishing "was of old called in Greek *catechism*, that is, instruction for children, what every Christian must needs know, so that *he who does not know this could not be numbered with the Christians* nor be admitted to any Sacrament, just as a mechanic who does not understand the rules and customs of his trade is expelled and considered incapable." 17) In January, 1533, Luther wrote his "Warning to the Christians at Frankfort on the Main," in which he said: "Since we intend to educate and leave behind us Christians and in the Sacrament administer the body and blood of Christ, we will not and cannot give the Sacrament to any one *except he is first examined as to what he has learned of the Catechism* and whether he is willing to quit the sins which he has committed against it. For we do not want to turn the Church of Christ into a pigsty and permit any unexamined person to hasten to Communion as pigs run to their trough. Such churches we leave to the fanatics." 18) His victory over the

17) *Conc. Trigl.*, p. 575; Engl. Ed., p. 168.

18) Vol. XVII, 2018 f.



errors of Muenzer and Zwingli, Luther regarded as victories of Catechism truths.<sup>19)</sup>

On the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, 1533, Luther preached a sermon at his house, in which he said: "It sounds as if Christ meant to say: False prophets will not stay away from you, but will surely come to you, and they will come with a beautiful, glittering show and will make you stand gaping like monkeys and imagine that never in all your life had you heard better preaching. You will drop like unripe, worm-eaten fruit when the wind shakes the tree. Whose fault will that be? Not mine; for I am warning you against it, but your own; for you hear the Word and have it, but do not abide by it.

"For, if a Christian were diligent in this matter, *even though he had no more than the Catechism, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the words of the Lord concerning Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, he would be able by that means to defend himself well and maintain his ground against all heresies.*"

Again: "The sheep's clothing soon captivates a person when he hears the Word of God and the truth praised. Who would not gladly hear the Word of God and know the truth? In such a case a Christian must know that the devil can cite the Word of God and praise the truth as well as pious Christians. A person who does not learn this is easily deceived and misled, and then it is over with him. For the wolf tears any one to pieces who allows himself to be deceived by the sheep's clothing. Therefore we should say: I shall gladly hear the Word of God and the truth, but at the same time *I shall be wary and see whether the teaching is in harmony with the Catechism and with the preaching which I have heard so far.* Any person exercising this fine care and not merely believing, but keeping his eye on the Word, is in no danger. But a person who disregards and lets go of the Catechism which he had learned formerly and listens only to what any sneak tells him is soon undone."<sup>20)</sup>

During my Hammond pastorate I had an opportunity to watch how a test was made of this advice of Luther. Two Mormon missionaries were canvassing the town. They called also on my parishioners. One of them, old Mother Gastel, received them into her house, listened to their proselyting talk, then brought out her Catechism, and actually began to examine them point for point.

19) Vol. XXII, 392.

20) Vol. XIII, 792 f.; 2260. 2264.

After an hour of this ordeal the missionaries left the house and soon had vanished from the town.

Often I have observed among our church-members a wariness not to be drawn into church movements that were strange to them. On close examination it was found that their training in the Catechism made them distrustful. It was an invisible bulwark behind which their pure faith was intrenched. May this bulwark never be leveled through our indifference and lack of zeal in behalf of the Catechism and catechizing! We all have reason, as time wears on, to remember Luther's words: "Christ means to say: When you will hear them pretending: Lo, here is Christ! do not believe them, but stay at home and tend to your business. 'How, then, am I to defend myself?' Listen to the little children praying, how they defend themselves with prayer. Do the same. I myself still keep learning the Catechism every day." 21)

Lastly, I would suggest as one way in which we may prove our gratitude for Luther's Small Catechism *that we realize ever more vividly the essential relation of the Small Catechism to the Bible.* Our Church has been charged with building people's faith on a man's book, the Catechism, instead of God's book, the Bible, which the sectarian churches of Protestantism claim to teach. Chief among the adversaries of our Church in this respect is that denomination which is becoming steeped in hypocrisy to such an extent that one questions whether it deserves to be called a Church at all and not rather a political organization for ecclesiastical self-aggrandizement. I refer to the Methodist Church, which actually had the effrontery to send its missionaries to the Scandinavian countries and Germany to convert the Lutheran people from their dead faith learned from the Catechism to the live faith which Methodists claim to get out of the Bible.

If these people could manage to forget for a while their boundless spiritual conceit and hypocrisy and sit down to a fair, unbiased examination of Luther's Small Catechism and the great work it has accomplished for the Church of our Lord, they would be amazed at the thorough, unparalleled Scripturalness of this little book, as others have been before them. Our Church has called it "a compend and brief summary of all the Holy Scriptures." 22) In an oration by a theologian at Wittenberg, after Luther, the follow-

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21) From the Fifth Sermon on Matthew 24, preached on the 23d Sunday after Trinity, November 23, 1539. Vol. VII, 1315.

22) Preface to Large Catechism, *Conc. Trigl.*, p. 573; Engl. Ed., p. 167.

ing was said of it: "The Catechism possesses all the qualities which can commend and distinguish an introductory book, *viz.*, an approved and distinguished author, sublime, divine materials for its contents, pure truth, plain terms, skilful arrangement, brevity and division of subjects, very great usefulness, and the approval of all right-minded people." 23) A Lutheran theologian who has built up an entire "Pastoral Theology" out of Luther's writings has declared: "This Catechism, small and insignificant though it seem, comprises with a brevity altogether admirable the entire account of our salvation in a more impressive manner than the prolix volumes of many authors that are filled with intricate questions and insipid and godless annotations, and that to such an extent that all the gates of hell and all enemies and heretics banded together could not accomplish anything against it." 24)

The historian of Lutheranism in the age of the Reformation wrote: "There is found in this little book a purity of doctrine and a spirit that has not its equal anywhere. We leave it to readers who are not actually setting up a malicious resistance to this book, to judge for themselves and form their own conviction. In particular, the explanation of the Apostolic Creed excels anything that has been offered previously. Besides, there is the brief, but exceedingly forceful explanation of the Lord's Prayer, which is able to refute the slanders that Luther meant to force upon the Church mere faith, that is, a dead lip-faith, to the exclusion of the sanctification of life, or that he had taught a mere imagination, *viz.*, that the merit of Christ imputed to us is sufficient to salvation." 25)

Literally hundreds of similar encomiums voiced during four centuries could be produced to show the world's estimate of the Biblical character of Luther's educational gem. The stricture of Vedder, afore noted, has not been felt by the great catechists of the Protestant Church. Those who would rid the Lutheran Church of Luther's Small Catechism, as the rationalistic teachers of modern Germany are bent on doing, are mostly people who have felt the power of God's Word in the Catechism as an accusing witness against themselves. Luther's verdict on this book will stand against all criticism: "A better word, or better teaching, will never come

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23) Joh. Wigand, in *Oratio de Causis cur Catechismus Lutheri in Scholis et Ecclesiis Retinendus*. (Second Ed., 1710.)

24) Conrad Porta, *Oratio Continens Adhortationem ad Adsiduam Lectionem Scriptorum Martini Lutheri, Ultimi Eliae et Prophetae Germaniae*.

25) Seckendorf in *Hist. Lutheranismi*, lib. II, § 51, p. 145.

than that which is briefly comprehended from the Holy Scriptures in the Catechism. Therefore we should abide by it." 26)

In this year of the Catechism jubilee, and at all times, we cannot utter a greater eulogy on the Small Catechism than by showing that it is what it means to be, the Bible in a nutshell, "the laymen' Bible," the Scriptural *vademecum* for the study of the pure faith of Christianity and a truly Christian life. Without the Bible the Catechism is simply unthinkable. It came out of the Bible, and it puts men's hearts into the Bible and the Bible into their hearts.

I close with a grateful acknowledgment which one of the greatest historians of the world has made. Leopold von Ranke has said: "The Catechism which Luther published in 1529 is as child-like as it is profound, as easily comprehended as it is unfathomable, as simple as it is sublime. Happy the person who feeds his soul upon this food and clings to it! He has in the Catechism imperishable consolations at every moment of his life. Behind a mean shell there is here the kernel of truth sufficient to satisfy the wisest of the wise." 27)

W. H. T. DAU.

## The Students' Library at Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, Ill.

By PROF. PAUL BRETSCHER.

The day (so we hope!) is happily past when adequate library facilities in our preparatory schools were regarded by some of us as a luxury rather than as a necessity; by others as a desideratum, but one whose realization lay in the dim and distant future. We have perhaps now reached a stage in the development of our secondary school system where the emphasis on the external expansion of our colleges should give way, at least in some schools, to the fullest possible development of their internal potentialities. The need for new and more buildings at some of our colleges has been met; the founding of new colleges appears to be, at least for some time to come, improbable, if not prohibitive; the teaching *personnel* at a number of our colleges is at length adequate to take care of the enrolment. In institutions where external conditions are favorable it especially devolves upon the controlling bodies to exploit to the fullest possible

26) From Sermon on Gospel for Eighth Sunday after Trinity, quoted above. Vol. 13, 2260.

27) *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*. Second Ed. (1852), Part II, 357.