

Fidelity to the Catechism: In Prayer and Teaching
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The Society of the Holy Trinity is committed to fostering the life of prayer, study and faithful parish practice among pastors of the Lutheran Church. A key component of this life is the use of the Small Catechism. The Society's Rule stipulates that members will "Provide sound catechesis for all candidates for baptism and confirmation, guided by the¹ catechisms of the Church catholic, especially Luther's Small and Large Catechism." With this in mind, I would like to address the topic of fidelity to the Catechism, looking specifically at two overlapping dimensions of such fidelity, prayer and teaching.

Edmund Schlink once characterized 19th century liberalism as that period of "evangelical theology during which 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." Casting an eye over the field of contemporary efforts in systematic theology, we well may ask ourselves if we are again in a time when Christians have forgotten how to pray through the Catechism. Antinomian dismissals of the Ten Commandments coupled with Gnostic deconstructions of the Creed and spiritualities that can no longer call God "Father with delight" give more than ample evidence for an affirmative answer.

Fidelity to the Catechism might well begin with learning anew how to pray the Catechism. Listen to Luther's admonition in the preface to the *Large Catechism*: "But this I say for myself: I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism-and I also do so gladly. These fussy, fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to be doctors above all doctors, to know it all and to need nothing more. Well this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their own office and people's souls, yes, even God and his Word. They do not need to fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need, however, is to become children and to begin to learn the ABC's, which they think they have long since outgrown" (LC-Preface 7-8, Kolb-Wengert, 380-381).

Luther then implore his readers to use the catechism as a book for meditation: "I implore them not ever to imagine that they have learned these parts of the catechism perfectly, or that they know them sufficiently, even though they think they know them ever so well. Even if their knowledge of the catechism were perfect (although that is impossible in this life), yet it is highly profitable and fruitful to read it daily and to make it the subject of

¹ Edmund Schlink, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 36.

meditation and conversation. In such reading, conversation, and meditation, the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested, as Christ promises in Matthew 18 (:20), 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.' Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one's self with God's Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it, in the way that Psalm 1(:2) calls those blessed who 'meditate on God's law day and night.' Without doubt, you will offer up no more powerful incense or savor against the devil than to occupy yourself with God's commandments and words and to speak, sing, or think about them. Indeed this is the true holy water and sign that drives away the devil and puts him to flight. and evil thoughts For this reason alone you should gladly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism, even if the only advantage and benefit you obtain from it is to drive away the devil and evil thoughts.. For he cannot bear to hear God's Word, And God's Word is not like some idle tale, such as about Dietrich of Bern, but, as St.Paul says in Romans 1 (:16), it is 'the power of God,' indeed, the power of God that burns the devil's house down and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help" (LC-Preface 9-11, Kolb-Wengert, 381).

Wilhelm Loehe opines of the *Small Catechism*: "No one can deny that no catechism in the world but this can be prayed"² The catechism shaped the piety of Lutheranism as it not only provided a compendium of Christian doctrine but a pattern for praying. Luther uses liturgical practices of the tradition such as the Trinitarian name, the sign of the cross, and the literary elements of the prayer offices, but he recasts these items in the context of daily life. ³ The catechism functions both to tutor the believer in genuine prayer through its catechesis of the Lord's Prayer and to form to the voice of faith within the daily cycle of life-getting out of bed and going to bed and mealtime. James Nestingen reminds us that the Catechism "moved the village altar into the family kitchen, literally bringing instruction in the faith home to the intimacies of family life."⁴

Luther's preparation of the Catechism was the culmination of over a decade of pastoral work aimed at equipping believers for a life of prayer and vocation. From June 1516 to February 1517, Luther preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. These sermons were published in 1518 under the title "Ten Commandments Preached to the People of Wittenberg" (WA I: 398-521). In Lent of 1517, he preached on the Our Father. In 1519, he preached a sermon entitled "Sermon on the Holy, Reverend Sacrament of Baptism" (AE 35:29-43). The following year, he composed his "Short Explanation of the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer" (WA 7:204-229). In 1522, Luther inaugurated the annual practice of preaching serial sermons on Catechism. These sermons would form the basis of his exposition of the core of Christian doctrine in the Catechisms.

² -Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books About the Church* trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 170-171.

³ -See Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*- Band 5 (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 191-204; Also see Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechism* (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 67-70; and Glen L. Borreson, "Luther's Morning and Evening Prayer as Baptismal Spirituality" *Word & World* 22 (Winter 2002), 55-63.

⁴ -James A. Nestingen, *Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2003), 76.

The *Betbuechlein* or “Personal Prayer Book” of 1522 would form yet another source that would flow into the Small Catechism. With the advent of the printing press, prayer books became more elaborate and more accessible to the laity. These late medieval prayer books included catalogues of virtues and vices to be used in preparation for confession, explanation of the steps necessary for salvation, prayers for various times and occasions, meditative prayers on the passion of Christ, prayers to the saints, and the penitential psalms. These books shaped the piety of laypeople at the grass roots level. Luther's *Personal Prayer Book* was an attempt to provide an evangelical alternative to these manuals using biblical material. Luther notes the need for a reformation of prayer books: "I regard the personal prayer books as by no means the least objectionable. They drub into the minds of simple people such a wretched counting up of sins and going to confession, such un-Christian tomfoolery about prayers to God and his saints! Moreover, these books are puffed up with promises of indulgences and come out with decorations in red ink and pretty titles...These books need a basic and thorough reformation if not total extermination" (AE 43:11-12).

Luther would use the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer as the core texts for Christian praying. The *Personal Prayer Book* reflects Luther's growing understanding of the necessity for brevity and clarity in catechetical forms: "Indeed, the total content of Scripture and preaching and everything a Christian needs to know is quite fully and adequately comprehended in these three items (Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer). They summarize everything with such brevity and clarity that no one can complain or make excuse that the things necessary for his salvation are too complicated or difficult for him to remember" (AE 43:13).

Luther summarizes his approach: "Three things a person must know in order to be saved. First, he must know what to do and what to leave undone. Second, when he realizes that he cannot measure up to what he should do or leave undone, he needs to know where to go to find the strength that he requires. Third, he must know how to seek and obtain that strength. It is just like a sick person who first has to determine the nature of his sickness, then find out what to do or leave undone. After that he has to know where to get the medicine which will help him do or leave undone what is right for a healthy person. Then he has to desire or search for this medicine and to obtain it or have it brought to him. Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself to be a sinful and wicked person. The Creed will teach and show him where to find medicine - grace - which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfillment of God's commandments everything will be given to him. In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible" (AE 43:13-14).

The *Personal Prayer Book* provides an overview of the Ten Commandments. The first table of the Law (the right hand tablet) instructs us in our duty to God inwardly (faith) and outwardly (God's name and worship). The second table of the Law (the left hand

tablet) teaches us our obligation to the neighbor. Then Luther provides examples of how each commandment is broken in the way of a *beichtspiegel* or “mirror for confession”:

- First Commandment: Use of superstition, failure to trust and rely upon God's mercy at all times, "every kind of doubt, despair, and false belief" (AE 43:17).
- Second Commandment: Cursing, swearing, false use of God's name, false teaching about God, spiritual pride, failure to call upon God's name in prayer and praise.
- Third Commandment: Failure to listen to and understand God's Word, failure to pray, failure to allow God to do His work in you, failure to regard all that you do as God's work.
- Fourth Commandment: Lack of regard for parents, failure to provide for needy parents, disobedience and arrogance toward parents.
- Fifth Commandment: Anger, lack of forgiveness, murder and other acts of violence, creation of offense.
- Sixth Commandment: Sexual sins of all kinds, inciting others to sexual sin in thought, word or action.
- Seventh Commandment: Every kind of theft, greed and envy.
- Eighth Commandment: Every form of lying, gossip and deceit, failure to defend the truth.
- Ninth and Tenth Commandments: Evil desire, self-love.

Luther also offers examples of how each commandment is fulfilled:

- First Commandment: True fear, faith and love of God are comprehended in this commandment. This commandment requires "Fear and love God in true faith, at all times, firmly trusting him in all that he does, accepting in simple, quiet confidence everything whether good or bad" (AE 43:22).
- Second Commandment: Praise, honor, glorify, and call upon God's name. "...rather sink into utter nothingness so that God alone be exalted" (AE 43:22).
- Third Commandment: Listening to God's Word so that "all we accomplish is God's and nothing our own" (AE 43: 22)
- Fourth Commandment: Humility and submissiveness.
- Fifth Commandment: Patience, kindness, mercy, "a tender and friendly heart devoid of all hatred" (AE 43: 22).
- Sixth Commandment: Sexual purity in thought, word and life.
- Seventh Commandment: Poverty of spirit and generosity.
- Eighth Commandment: Truthful and sincere speech.
- Ninth and Tenth Commandments: "Perfect chastity and thorough disregard for all temporal pleasures and possessions" (AE 43:23). "In all such actions we see nothing but a strange, all-comprehending love toward God and our neighbor which never seeks its own advantage but only serves God and our neighbor...It means to devote oneself freely to belonging to one's neighbor and serving him and his concerns" (AE 43:23).

As the Gospel follows the Law, Luther moves from the Decalogue to the baptismal creed.

The threefold division of the Creed is reflective of the doctrine of the Trinity. Faith is defined both as knowing and trusting in the one true God. Living faith is connected with the First Commandment. "Only a faith that ventures everything in life and in death on what is said (in Scripture) of God makes a person a Christian and obtains all he desires from God. No corrupt or hypocritical heart can have such a faith; this is a living faith as the First Commandment demands: I am your God; you shall have no other gods" (AE 43:23-24).

The First Article renounces every idolatry and false belief. Trust is located only in God. "I take the risk of placing my confidence only in the one, invisible, inscrutable, and only God, who created heaven and earth and who alone is superior to all creation. Again, I am not terrified by all the wickedness of the devil and his cohorts because God is superior to them all" (AE 43:25). This trust is steadfast in spite of everything that contradicts it. "I trust in him steadfastly, no matter how long he may delay, prescribing neither a goal, nor a time, nor a measure, nor a way (for God to respond to me), but leaving all to his divine will in a free, honest, and genuine faith. If he is almighty, what could I lack that God could not give or do for me?" (AE 43:25) The Second Article unfolds around the confession that Jesus is the one true Son of God, begotten from all eternity and made man to suffer, die, and rise again for our salvation. Biblical texts are used to unpack each phrase of the Second Article. The Third Article sets forth the work of the Holy Spirit. Here Luther focuses on the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake in the context of the church as that community created and sustained by the word of forgiveness preached and bestowed in the sacraments.

If the Creed is the summation of God's Word to us in the Trinitarian Gospel, then the Lord's Prayer gives voice to the faith created by that Word. Luther's exposition of the Lord's Prayer comes by way of prayers that are derived from each petition. "Our Father" is a cry for faith that we may remain God's children rather than becoming His enemies (AE 43:29). Themes of childlike certainty, comforting trust in God's fatherly mercy emerge. "Hallowed be thy name" is a prayer for protection from all that would bring dishonor to God's name. "May thy kingdom come near" is a petition for the success of God's Word against "unbelief, despair, and from boundless envy" (AE 43:32). "Thy will be done equally in heaven and earth" is a prayer for mercy. "Therefore have mercy upon us, O dear Father, and let nothing happen just because it is our own will" (AE 43:33). "Give us this day our daily bread" calls upon the Father "that the life, words, deeds, and sufferings of Christ be preached, made known, and preserved for us and all the world." "And do not hold us accountable for debts, as we do not hold our debtors accountable" is for the forgiveness of sins. "In this petition belong all psalms and prayers which invoke God's mercy for our sin" (AE 43:37). "And lead us not into temptation" is a prayer against the flesh, the world, and the devil. "But deliver us from evil" is a prayer for the final accomplishment of the Father's holy will-eschatological deliverance. Amen is the signature of faith.

Eric Gritsch asserts that “Luther saw the beginning of catechetical instruction as an initiation to worship.”⁵ In the Preface to the German Mass of 1526, Luther calls for the liturgical usage of the catechetical core of the Decalogue, Creed, and Lord’s Prayer even giving examples of how such catechization might offer (see AE 51:61-68). In the German Mass, Luther inserts a catechetical paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer after the sermon and in anticipation of the Lord’s Supper. This exposition, a substitute for the *sursum corda*, serves as both an admonition to the repentant and faithful reception of Christ’s testament and as way of teaching Christian prayer. Even a quick reading of the paraphrase reveals its literary and theological commonality with the treatment of the Our Father in the Small Catechism.

Four of the six of Luther’s catechetical hymns precede the publication of the Small Catechism coming from 1523-1524. “Here is the Tenfold Sure Command” (331 LW) reflects themes that Luther will craft into his exposition of the Decalogue five years later in the Small Catechism. Leaver observes “The first stanza is a kind of prelude that establishes the context of the giving of the law: the commandments are God’s, the instrument of God’s giving was Moses, and the place of reception was Sinai. Then Luther devotes one stanza to each of the first eight commandments, in the same order he would later follow in his catechisms (stanzas 2-9). Commandments nine and ten are expounded together in stanza 10. Stanza 11 answers stanza 1 by declaring why the commandments were given: that we should know and mark well that the Law reveals our sin and makes clear that our lives fall short of God’s purpose for them. But Luther could never state the demands of the law without also expounding the grace of the gospel. In the final stanza he therefore proclaims only the Lord Jesus Christ, in contrast to any futile attempt at law-keeping, can assist us. So Moses and Christ, at the beginning and end of the hymn, stand in contradistinction: Moses the servant introduced the demands of the law; Christ the Mediator, who fulfills the law’s demands. In hymnic form the theological distinction between law and gospel is therefore effectively expounded”⁶ (Leaver, 414).

The creedal hymn, “We All Believe in One True God” (213 LW) is a doxological meditation on the work of the Triune God who carries the verbs of creation, redemption, and sanctification. “From Depths of Woe I Cry to You” (230 LW) is Luther’s hymnic paraphrase of Psalm 130. Here Luther tutors Christians in the life of repentance and faith seen through the lens of the theology of the cross. Luther intended this hymn to tutor Christians in confession and absolution. “O Lord, We Praise You” (238 LW) confesses the Sacrament of the Altar as the evangelical instrument of God’s consolation bestowed in Christ.

The catechism hymn on the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, Who in Heaven Above” (431 LW), was written in 1539. This hymn follows the contours of Luther’s treatment of the Our Father in the Small Catechism as the Reformer sees this prayer as the weaponry that the Lord Christ has bequeathed to His Christians to pray against Satan. The baptismal hymn, “To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord” (223 LW) was written in 1541. Using our

⁵ -Eric Gritsch, “Luther’s Catechisms of 1529: Whetstones of the Church” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 60 (1980), 4.

⁶ Robin Leaver, “Luther’s Catechism Hymns 2. Ten Commandments” XI (Winter 1997), 414.

Lord's baptism in the Jordan as the template for this hymn, Luther develops several themes set forth in a sermon a year earlier on the occasion of the baptism of Bernhard, the son of Prince John of Anhalt (AE 51). The hymn exhibits a parallelism with the fourth chief part of the Small Catechism even though the Catechism does not mention Jesus' baptism. Luther's baptismal hymn, like the Catechism focuses on the institution of Baptism (stanza 5), the benefits of Baptism (stanzas 1, 2 and 6), the power of the Word in Baptism (stanzas 3 and 7) and the significance of Baptism (stanza 4).

A further fruit of the Small Catechism in the life of prayer can be seen in Luther's celebrated letter to his friend, the Wittenberg barber, Peter Beskendorf. Given the title "A Simple Way to Pray," this tract of 1535 demonstrates how Luther uses the Catechism for prayer. "Nowhere is the connection between order and freedom in Luther's practice so clearly seen as in his advice for Master Peter"⁷ says Martin Brecht.

Knowing that the flesh and the devil always attempt to impede the discipline of prayer, Luther writes "when I feel that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other thoughts (for the flesh and the devil always impede or obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself and word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do" (AE 43:193). While Luther offers Peter a number of pragmatic suggestions regarding the time and place of prayer, his focus is on the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and to a lesser extent the Creed.

Luther gives a "model prayer" that serves as a preface to the Lord's Prayer. This prayer begins with a confession of unworthiness on account of sin, grounds prayer in the command and promise of God- echoing the Small Catechism and implores the Father in the name of Jesus and in communion with "all thy saints and Christians on earth" (AE 43:194-195). Each petition of Jesus' prayer is used as a foundation and platform for praying. Luther shows Peter how to unpack each petition for supplication and intercession. He provides model prayers as well as pastoral instruction along the way. For example, Luther inserts parenthetical admonition in regard to the person unable to forgive his neighbor under the fifth petition.

The great word of prayer is "Amen." It is the word of faith that binds us together with all Christians: "Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say 'yes' to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, 'Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.' That is what Amen means" (AE 43:198).

⁷ -Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 14.

Praying the Lord's Prayer does not bind us to "words or syllables" but focuses attention on the thoughts comprehended therein. "It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas in one petition that I forgo the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation" (AE 43:199). Just as a barber has to pay attention to how he uses his razor so must the Christian attend to prayer with "concentration and singleness of heart" (AE 43:199).

Luther concludes "This in short is the way I use the Lord's Prayer when I pray it. To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it. What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world!...In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (as are the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use" (AE 43:200).

Reinhard Huetter has recently written of the "Lutheran eclipse"⁸ of the Ten Commandments as a text for prayer and worship. Such a disappearance is not due to Luther⁹. Like the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments are to be prayed. Luther suggests a fourfold template for praying the Ten Commandments: "I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession, and fourth, a prayer" (AE 43:200).

Then Luther then provides model prayers. For example with the First Commandment, Luther sees these four parts: (1) Instruction- God teaches and expects us to have faith in no one or nothing other than God Himself; (2) Thanksgiving- God is our God. He has provided us with all that we are and all that we have; (3) Confession- We acknowledge our "countless acts of idolatry" and our ingratitude (4) Prayer- Preserve us from unbelief and ingratitude (200-201). In this way, Luther sees the Decalogue as providing multiple dimensions for prayer. He writes "These are the Ten Commandments in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book. They are intended to help the heart come to itself and grow zealous in prayer" (AE 43:209).

⁸ -Reinhard Huetter, "The Ten Commandments as a Mirror of Sin(s): Anglican Decline-Lutheran Eclipse" XIV (Winter 2005), 46-57.

⁹ -See, for example, Luther's catechetical use of the Decalogue in the German Mass (AE 53:63-64. For the use of the Catechism in Reformation orders, see Charles Arand, "Catechismal Services: A Bridge Between Evangelism and Assimilation" XXIII (July 1997), 177-200.

Luther concludes his instructions for Peter with “A Simple Exercise for Contemplating the Creed” (AE 43: 209). Noting that the division of the Creed corresponds to the three persons of the Godhead, Luther invites Peter to consider each article in light of God’s work and our need. So we ponder the magnitude of God’s gifts in creation, redemption, and sanctification while lamenting our lack of faith and gratitude.

The structure of the first three chief parts of the Catechism moves toward prayer. The command of the Decalogue is brought together with the promise of the Creed in Luther’s explanation of the conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer: “That I should be certain that such petitions are acceptable to and heard by our Father in heaven, for he himself **commanded** us to pray like this and has **promised** to hear us” (SC III:21, Kolb/Wengert, 358-emphasis mine).

To fear, love and trust in God above all things is to hallow His name, that is “to use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise and give thanks to God” (SC I:4, Kolb/Wengert, 352). The Decalogue itself establishes the agenda for our praying as it unveils the neediness of our creaturely existence in a world of sin, death, and the devil. The Creed narrates the generosity of the Triune God toward His creatures. Oswald Bayer sees in Luther’s usage of the words “without any merit or worthiness in me” in his explanation of the First Article a confession of justification by faith alone in relation to creation¹⁰. All that we are and all that we have comes from God alone.

After confessing the gifts of God in creation, Luther concludes “For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him” (SC II:355, Kolb/Wengert, 355). Luther will return to this theme at the end of the Catechism as he appends the daily prayers and table of duties to the six chief arts. We thank and praise God in the morning when we rise from sleep and in the evening when we retire to sleep and as we sit down to eat. On these daily occasions when our lack of autonomy is most evident, we praise and thank God. These are our times for praying the Catechism as Luther instructs us to pray the Creed and the Our Father morning and evening, to sing a hymn on the Ten Commandments as we go to our labor, and to pray the Lord’s Prayer as a table prayer. Luther’s use of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, texts associated with the liturgy of Holy Baptism, demonstrate the character of “the baptismal spirituality” of the Catechism as one writer has put it (Borreson). We might also observe here how the morning and evening prayer pick up themes from the Our Father thus echoing the Catechism. Prayer for Luther does not lead to withdrawal from the world but rather to life in the world, the life of vocation within the structures of creation. God is served and obeyed within his creation-in-congregation, civil government, home, and workplace. These are the masks behind which God serves us and receives our service born of faith.

Luther’s approach to praying the Catechism might well be summarized in his characterization of the life of the theologian formed by *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* (See his 1539 *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings* AE 34:285). Martin Nicol suggests that Luther’s treatment of the Decalogue corresponds to

¹⁰ -Oswald Bayer, “I Believe That God Has Created Me With All That Exists. An Example of Catechetical-Systematics” VIII (Summer 1994), 137.

the *meditatio* while his use of the Creed is for *oratio*¹¹. James Nestingen writes that “for Luther, the Lord’s Prayer is a continuing lesson in the theology of the cross”¹² for it is prayed “in the crucible of everyday life, where the heart is contended for by the powers at work in this age – the devil, the world, and the sinful self – as well as the Spirit of the new age released in Christ’s death and resurrection”¹³(37). Thus in the uttering of the Lord’s Prayer, the believer is engaged by *tentatio*.

Fidelity to the Catechism, I have suggested, is fidelity to a life of prayer anchored in God’s command and promise and lived out under the cross. Last month I was in Madagascar as lecture on pastoral theology at a conference hosted by the Malagasy Lutheran Church. Although very poor by western standards, this church founded by Norwegian missionaries in the 1860’s is wealthy in faith and love. I often tell my students that the congregation has three books- the Bible, the Catechism, and the hymnal. Our doctrine is drawn from the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, confessed in the Small Catechism, and expressed in the hymnal. In Madagascar, I was privileged to witness a church shaped by those three books. Their poverty prevented them from having many books. But these three books-Bible, Catechism, and hymnal were well-worn and known well. And this church is growing, growing rapidly, without three-ring binders, cell groups, marketing techniques or *Ablaze!* The Catechism still shapes their understanding of Christian faith and life.

In the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Loehe complained that the simplicity of the Small Catechism was being obscured by the overlay of instructional manuals that ultimately hid the Catechism itself from the catechumen.¹⁴ Our own day, of course, has witnessed the proliferation of all kinds of programs that have at best pushed the Catechism to the periphery and at worst have contradicted its content altogether.

I need not rehearse here the voices that have identified the current crisis in both the ELCA and the LCMS as a crisis in catechesis. Certainly more substantial instruction is needed both for youth and adult catechumens. But we should not forget that the Catechism is not really a text book, it is a book that embodies “the pattern of sound words” (II Timothy 1:13). It is a book of prayer for both pastors and the laity. Fidelity to the Catechism will begin with pastors learning how to pray it. Once we learn how to pray it, we will be well on our way to teaching it as Luther intended.

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¹¹ -Martin Nicol, *Meditation bei Luther* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 162-167. Also see John T. Pless, “The Triangular Shape of the Pastor’s Devotional Life” in *Lord Jesus Christ, Will You Not Stay: Essays in Honor of Ronald Feuerhahn on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* edited by Bart Day et al (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 317-331.

¹² -James Nestingen, “The Lord’s Prayer in Luther’s Catechism” *Word & World* XXII (Winter 2002), 37.

¹³ -Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ -Loehe, 171.