Luther on the Creed

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The Apostles' Creed has served as the baptismal creed for expounding the Trinitarian faith to countless catechumens within the western church for over fifteen hundred years. During that time it has been the subject of some of the most profound catechetical lectures, theological orations, and devotional writings ever produced by the church. Within the history of the western church, however, no exposition of the Creed for catechumens has yet matched the treatment given it by Martin Luther in his two catechisms of 1529. The Small Catechism's explanations possess a unique combination of theological depth and literary beauty that remain unsurpassed.[1] In the Large Catechism, those explanations are given a fuller theological amplification while remaining rooted in the earthiness of everyday life. In dealing with Luther's treatment of the Creed, it would be a serious mistake to comment on it in isolation from its relation to the Decalogue and Lord's Prayer, that is, within the larger framework of the catechisms themselves. When taken in their totality they provide the Christian with a handbook for the "art of living by faith."

Within the overall structure of Luther's catechisms, the Decalogue diagnoses the fundamental human condition in terms of the need for faith in God within every situation of life. Yet even as the Decalogue requires us to have no other gods, it does not divulge the identity of God. That is the task of the Creed. In addition, if the First Commandment makes known our fundamental nature as receivers, the Creed underscores it by drawing out the nature and essence of God as the Giver of all good things. And so Luther consistently expounds the Creed as the confession of Christians in response to the First Commandment.[2] In his May 1528 sermons on the catechisms, Luther introduced the Creed with the question, "What kind of God do you have? What do you expect from him?"[3] In answer to that question, the Creed shows what we can expect from God (LC, Creed, 1). In the Creed we learn that God has "given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has."[4] Luther's

keynote and theme can be stated simply: God gives; we receive. Knowing who God is, what God is like, Christians can then pray confidently the next chief part of the catechism, the "Our Father."

The Three-fold Work of the Trinity

The Christian answers the question, "What is your God like?" by confessing the threefold name and work of God. To that end, Luther deliberately re-organized the credal material, without altering the wording, by reducing the twelve articles (corresponding to the twelve apostles) common in the late Middle Ages to the three articles common in the early church. More than a desire for historical accuracy on Luther's part accounts for this rearrangement. He wanted to concentrate the catechumen's attention on the saving work of the Triune God and further emphasize the *pro nobis* character of God's work "for us" in all aspects of our life. In doing so, he refocused the church's attention on the Trinity and the triune structure of salvation.

This restructuring of the creed occurred in two stages. First, in 1520, Luther correlated the three articles to the three persons of the Trinity. Each article tells about one of the three persons of the Holy and divine Trinity. The first speaks of the Father; the second speaks of the Son, and the third speaks of the Holy Spirit.[5] This Trinitarian ordering gave the entire explanation of the Creed a theocentric perspective, since the Trinity now became the foundation of catechisms' explanation of the Creed. Girgensohn suggests that one ramification of this change is that the object of our faith no longer consists primarily of dogmatic statements about various theological subjects. Instead, the object of faith becomes the person of God, and so faith becomes viewed interpersonally and relationally.[6] Second, in the latter half of the decade, Luther correlated the three articles of the Creed not only to the three persons but to the particular gifts and works of each person. This theme comes out most prominently in his 1528–29 catechetical sermons. During this period, Luther attaches the captions "creation, redemption, sanctification" to the articles and thereby makes them their leading motifs.[7] These captions are firmly in place by the December Sermon Series of 1528.[8] At that point, Luther summarized the Creed with the words, "I believe in

God the Father, who created me; I believe in God the Son, who redeemed me; and I believe in the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies me."[9]

Luther's restructuring of the Creed allows him to teach the language and vocabulary of faith in a way that avoids turning faith into purely a matter of the head (*fides quae creditur*) or purely a matter of the heart (*fides qua creditur*). When the former becomes the exclusive understanding of faith, faith becomes little more than an intellectual assent to the correctness of facts and thus devoid of any personal commitment to that which is confessed. It is akin to saying, "I believe that two plus two equals four." On the other hand, when the latter becomes the exclusive understanding of faith, we end up in the situation too common in the United States: "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe sincerely." The key to faith becomes one's personal passion or depth of commitment apart from the object of that commitment. The subjective experience of faith becomes detached from the message of the gospel and degenerates into some form of sentimentality. Luther's exposition avoids falling off on either side of those two positions and provides a way to hold the head and the heart together in a most intimate unity. At every mention of God's gifts we must speak of their reception, that is, faith. At every mention of faith, we must mention the gifts received.

The Father Creates

Even as the entire Creed was given to provide us with the gift of faith, so each article individually moves toward the same goal. In his earlier catechetical works, Luther placed more emphasis on the phrase "Father Almighty" than on "Creator of heaven and earth" in the Apostles' Creed.[10] In this context, he stressed the dynamic interaction between the omnipotence of God and the love of the Father. Because God is almighty he can help us; because he is our Father, he wants to help and will help.[11] In his later writings, he shifts the focus to the words, "Creator of heaven and earth." And so in the Small Catechism, Luther takes the opening line of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth" and capitalizes the word CREATOR, thereby bringing to the fore-

ground the theme of the article and making it the point of reference for his entire exposition.[12]

In the case of the First Article, Luther's goal is to arouse faith in God's creaturely and providential care. In Luther's wording, the First Article teaches that "we should know and learn where we come from, what we are, and to whom we belong."[13] In brief, we are to perceive ourselves as creatures and we are to recognize God as the exclusive giver of our lives and the whole context of created reality. We belong not to ourselves, and therefore also the course of our lives belongs not to ourselves.[14] By stressing God's creaturely care, the First Article provides the basis for the Christian to pray the concluding words of the Small Catechism's morning and evening prayers, "I commend myself, my body and soul and all things into your hand." As Luther expounds on the theme of Creator in the catechisms he addresses both the *creatio prima* (initial creation) and the *creatio continua* (continuing creation).

When the Apostles' Creed repeats the scriptural declaration that God created "the heavens and the earth," it utilizes a device called merismus by which two opposites are used to convey a larger whole. It names the highest point you can imagine and the lowest point you can imagine thereby including everything in between. It is like saying that God created everything from A to Z.[15] To confess that God has created heaven and earth indicates by means of extremes that everything from the largest galaxy to the smallest microbe owes its existence to the divine will.[16] In this way the Creed emphasized that the distinction between creator and creation was more fundamental than any other distinction in the universe. It is more fundamental than the distinction between body and soul, humans and angels, or matter and spirit. This distinction makes it clear that as Creator, God alone is independent and self-sufficient. The creation is by definition dependent and contingent. Thus the relation is established between God as absolute giver and the human person as absolute receiver. Luther captures this emphasis of the Apostles' Creed by replacing "heaven and earth," with the more personal phrase "me together with all creatures." He then reinforces the point that God is responsible for the totality of existence by stressing the little particle "all" nine times. God has made "all that exists," given me "all my limbs and all my senses," "all my mental faculties," "all my property," and "all the necessities

for body and life." He "protects against all danger," "defends me from all evil," and does this "all out of fatherly goodness." "For all of this it is my duty to thank and praise. . . ." God has complete and total claim upon my life. Thus I am completely dependent upon God as is all creation. The First Article in turn provides the ontological foundation for the First Commandment. "You shall have no other gods," because God alone is the Creator, he alone has given all that exists. In other words, there are no other gods beside him!

Luther does not proceed to expound the *creatio prima* of the First Article by first dealing the vastness of the universe and only at the very end arriving at my existence, in which context I will perceive something of my insignificance.[17] Instead, he introduces God's creative activity by beginning with the fact of my personal existence (body and soul), proceeds outward to the basic necessities of life (house and home), and then goes on to help the Christian embrace the entire world as God's good creation (LC, Creed, 14–16). This may seem somewhat anthropocentric, but in fact Luther's goal is to teach me to perceive all of life as a gift from God. And so he begins at the point where I most directly encounter God's creative activity (my very existence) and leads me by the hand out into the world in order to embrace the entire creation as God's gift.

The main focus of Luther's explanation, however, is on God's ongoing care for creation, what the dogmaticians refer to as the *creatio continua*. Here Luther expands the notion of creation beyond the Apostles' Creed.[18] The verbs (give, preserve, provide, protect, shield and defend) are all explications of the word "create." In this way Luther picks up central themes of the biblical witness (Ps 104; Job 38–40) where God does not stand apart from his creation after he brought it into existence. To the contrary, God remains actively involved in the here and now by continuing his work of creation for us. Whereas in the *creatio prima* God created *ex nihilo,* "out of nothing," in the *creatio continua* he works through his "masks." In a sense, "God together with all creatures" has created me! Creatures are the "hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings" (LC, Ten Commandments, 26).

In his catechisms, Luther personalized creation in a different way than do contemporary New Age philosophers or radical environmental theologians. The Creator is not in, or equated with, the crea-

ture. Instead, he stands behind his gifts as the good giver. By viewing creation as a mask or co-worker with God, creation is personalized and freed from being seen as godless material with which humans can do whatever they want.[19] Luther wants us to see the One who has given all things by having us look beyond the mask to where God works. Thus he exhorts, "When you see a tree bearing fruit, you see God the Creator at work."[20] Luther wants to open our eyes and ears that we may perceive how God is constantly at work around us. He shows how to cultivate the eyes and ears of faith in a simple and straightforward manner in a sermon from 1538. He exhorts that if we would only open our eyes and ears we could hear the corn speaking to us: "Please rejoice in God, eat, drink, use me and serve your neighbor! I will fill the granary." In a similar way, the cows are also speaking to us. If we were not deaf, we would hear them say: "Rejoice! We bring you butter and cheese from God. Eat, drink, and share it with others. . . ." Likewise when we see the chickens lay their eggs we would hear them saying, "Rejoice; we hatch new chicks." Continuing the theme, Luther points out that we should be able to hear the pigs grunt that they bring us brats and wurst from God. In brief, "all of the creatures are speaking to us."[21] And so whoever "disgraces the creature, violates the creator, who is in them for us there."[22]

The Son Redeems

The Second Article shows what we receive from God, above and beyond all the good things of creation that were mentioned in the First Article (LC, Creed, 26). Like the First Article, Luther selects a single theme by which he illumines the entire article. In the Apostles' Creed, Luther had three options around which he could have centered his explanation: (1) Jesus Christ; (2) His only Son; (3) our Lord. In the history of catechetical interpretation, the expression, "our Lord," is pressed into service first by Luther and made the focal point of the interpretation. From the time of Augustine to Aquinas, it remained relatively unstressed. Indeed, Peters contends, "Nowhere was there an attempt to acquire a grasp of the entire article with the help of this expression."[23] And so the entire explanation of the Second Article centers our entire attention on the statement: Jesus Christ. . .

"is my Lord."[24] These three words fall heavily like a deep bell striking three times with the loudest strike on the word "LORD."[25] Why would Luther settle on the phrase "our Lord"? In part the language of lordship and kingship would have resonated with hearers living in a feudal society. But two further reasons suggest themselves. First, by means of it, Luther draws out the soteriological ramifications of the early church's Christology. Second, it also allows him to bring out the *pro nobis* character of Christ's work "for us," which in many ways was the chief contribution of the Reformation.[26]

With the phrase "Our Lord," Luther pulls together the three centers of the Apostles' Creed, namely, the incarnation and birth, suffering and death, resurrection and exaltation of Christ. These three centers in turn raise three distinctive but related questions. Who is my Lord? How did he become my Lord? For what purpose did he become my Lord? For peasants in a medieval context, Luther accents what might be called a *Christus Victor* motif without ignoring the *Christus Victima* theme. This is especially true in the Large Catechism. Luther creates a "vivid miniature word painting" (*Kleinmalerei*).[27] The picture painted before the eyes of the catechumen is a battlefield. On one side of the battlefield, stretched as far as the eyes can see, from horizon to horizon, stand Satan's armies and powers (sin, death, and the power of the devil). Behind enemy lines, the human race lies captive under the power of the devil, condemned to death, and "entangled in sin and blindness" (LC, Creed, 27). Christ the champion appears on the field for battle (like David against Goliath) and defeats sin, death, and the power of the devil by means of his blood and death.[28] Having routed the jailors and tyrants (LC, Creed, 30), Christ frees us, takes us as his own possession, and takes us home to his kingdom where we live in everlasting innocence, blessedness, and righteousness.

As Luther expounds the concept of Lord he does so in a soteriologial direction. The catechism does not speak in such a way that we first need to "accept Jesus as savior and then receive him as Lord." In the context of that phrase, "Lord" can sound like a taskmaster. In other words, accepting him in that way as our Savior is step one; putting him then in charge of our lives would be step two. Luther, by contrast, declares that "the little word 'Lord' simply means the same as Redeemer, that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to

God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness and keeps us there" (LC, Creed, 31). In addition to the catechisms, this soteriological emphasis on Jesus as Lord appears in Luther's 1533 Torgau sermons on the Creed. "See, thus shall we learn to know Him, that He is such a LORD who helps us, protects us and saves us." Luther proceeds to define Christ's Lordship in terms of a gracious self-giving. As my Lord, Jesus gives himself in such a way that he is mine and I am his. He has given his life to us that we might find our life in him. Such gracious self-giving becomes and remains the trademark for the type of lordship by which Christ reclaims us and takes us under his care.[29] Christ does all this "for me." Here both elements belong together for Luther. All Christological expressions are expressions *pro me,* and every phrase *pro me* must be interpreted in a Christological fashion. The *pro me* emphasis on Christ's work again comes out in the Torgau sermons of 1533; "with 'our Lord' we confess that all that man is and does has occurred for us, that he was born for this purpose, has suffered, died and is risen that he may be OUR Lord."[30] Put more directly and bluntly, he became a human being in order to be my Lord, he lived and died in order to be my Lord, and he rose from the dead in order to be my Lord.

The Spirit Sanctifies

As in the First Article, Luther selects one word from the Third Article and organizes his explanation around it. But this article gave him the most difficulty, for the Apostles' Creed simply states "I believe in the Holy Spirit" and then appends a series of five seemingly disconnected items, namely, "the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." It was not readily apparent how all these things related to the Holy Spirit. It was not until 1529 that Luther finally settled on a central theme. He took the name "Holy Spirit" and focuses on the word "holy" in such a way that the Holy Spirit (*spiritus sanctus*) of the Apostles' Creed becomes the sanctifying Spirit (*spiritus sanctificator*) in Luther's explanation. The theme of the "sanctifying Spirit" enables Luther to weave the five disparate items of the Apostles' Creed (holy Christian church, communion of saints, for-

giveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and life everlasting) into an organic unity based on and centered in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit—as the title of the article indicates.[31] In other words, instead of using the word "holy" to describe a personal attribute of the Spirit, Luther uses it to describe what the Holy Spirit does for us and to us!

What does it mean to say that the Spirit sanctifies? The key lies in the opening words of Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him...." The Spirit sanctifies us by bestowing upon us the righteousness of Christ (Second Article) and thus making us holy. In the Large Catechism "sanctify" is treated initially as a synonym for justification. It means to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing [the treasures of salvation won by Christ]" (LC, Creed, 39). So to be "sanctified" or to "be made holy" means "to be made a believer."[32] To be sure, later in his treatment of the Third Article Luther also deals with the idea of sanctification as we have become accustomed to considering it, namely, as growth in holiness or growth in faith (LC, Creed, 57–59). The Spirit accomplishes this in two simultaneous actions: by bringing us to Christ and by gathering us into the church.

In the Small Catechism, Luther first begins with the individual Christian. As in the case with the First Article where Luther amplified the activity of "creating" to include "preserving" and "protecting," so here he unfolds the meaning of "sanctify" so as to encompass the activity of "calling," "enlightening," and "sustaining." It is not entirely clear what Luther packs into these words or precisely what is their relation to each other for he does not deal with them at any length in the Large Catechism. It would seem best, however, not to take them as describing different, successive steps in the saving work of the Holy Spirit,[33] but as depicting the one work (bringing to faith) from different vantage points in order that we might appreciate the magnitude of this work. In other words, to say that the Spirit brings me to faith is to say that he has called me (an effective, successful calling and not merely an unheeded invitation), enlightened[34] me (not merely an intellectual process, but a kindling of faith within the heart),[35] sanctified me (bestowed upon me the

righteousness of Christ) and sustained me in the true faith. As in the First Article where God provides for our bodily needs through divinely designated "means of preservation" (reason, food, clothing), so the Spirit sanctifies through divinely designated "means of grace." The Spirit calls through the gospel, enlightens with his gifts,[36] and sanctifies and sustains me by means of the one true faith (*im rechten Glauben; recta fide*).[37] In every instance, the entire emphasis "lies upon the Gospel. In this central idea lies the key to the understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit."[38]

The Spirit brings me to faith in the same way that he gathers the entire Christian church. Thus Luther opens this section with the word *gleichwie,* the same word he used in the Second Article to describe that we will live with Jesus "even as (*gleichwie*) he has risen from the dead...." So here he calls me to faith "even as (*gleichwie*) he gathers the entire Christian church...." What does this mean? In brief, the Spirit does not call us to faith in isolation from the church. He brings us to faith by bringing us into contact with the church. So the Spirit brings me to faith in precisely the same way as he has always brought people to faith. Hence I should not look for a special or unique revelation from God. Similarly, the Spirit gathers us into the church; we do not "join" the church any more than we decide to come to faith. Just as "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him," so also I cannot by my own reason or strength join the holy Christian church. And so Luther does not hesitate in the Large Catechism to speak of the church as the mother that begets every believer. As Martin Marty once noted, this is not a picture of the American, idolatrous understanding of the church as a voluntary society of like-minded people.[39] Believers do not and cannot live a solitary existence apart from other believers. They cannot survive on their own. To think that we can is to commit spiritual suicide. The believer only exists within the community where the Spirit daily and richly forgives the sins of me and all other believers.

The Unity of the Trinitarian Persons and Works

In expounding the threefold name and work of God, the Small Catechism appears to distinguish the works of the Trinity so sharply that the Father appears exclusively as the Creator, the Son exclusively

as the Redeemer, and the Spirit exclusively as the Sanctifier. This correlation of the three articles to the three persons does not come with an explicit discussion of the unity of the three persons, which has prompted some to suggest that the Small Catechism leaves itself susceptible to the charge of a "naive tritheism."[40] So how does Luther handle their unity? This is a difficult question given the purpose and function of catechesis. After all, catechesis provides a basic instruction in the faith. Yet the Trinity is arguably one of the most difficult teachings to convey. It is of considerable interest to note that Luther does not draw upon the traditional language and categories of dogmatics for his discussion of the Trinity in his catechisms. The Small Catechism contains no introduction to the Trinity and no treatment of God's attributes. It does not mention, let alone discuss, such classical terms as "person," essence," and "Trinity." The Large Catechism offers little more. After a brief rationale for organizing the Creed into three articles, Luther launches into the First Article without a prior discussion of God's being, attributes, or unity. He provides no formal or extensive discussion of the Trinity in its unity in either catechism. Their explanations appear rather truncated precisely at this juncture and in need of supplementation.

Practically, however, the question might be asked, what does a young person or a recent convert need to know about the church's Trinitarian formulations? Perhaps Luther here simply sets forth what was most needful and manageable for the people in the pew. He himself noted that the catechist could go into greater depth on these subjects when their students were ready to leave the milk of the Scriptures for solid meat.

> For the present, this is enough concerning the Creed to lay a foundation for the common people without overburdening them. After they understand the substance of it, they may on their own initiative learn more, relating to these teachings of the Catechism all that they learn in the Scriptures, and thus advance and grow richer in understanding. (LC, Creed, 70)

Here perhaps lies a difference between dogmatic formulations and catechetical expressions. It may well be that Luther avoided all technical, theological, and philosophical language in his catechetical expositions, preferring instead to state the faith in the language that the parishioner could understand.

Luther's pedagogical purpose alone, however, does not suffice to explain the relative absence of any discussion of the Trinity in terms of classic formulation: three persons and one divine essence. Even in the Large Catechism, where Luther instructs pastors and teachers, he does not provide any extended or detailed treatment on the subject. But there at the conclusion of his explanation of the Third Article, an important clue is provided for how he would handle the topic of the Trinity.

> In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for his very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit. (LC, Creed, 64–65)

In other words, Luther first presents the scriptural witness about the three persons and their works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Having done that, he turns briefly to the question of their unity.

> Luther did not go into detail on the formal doctrine of the Trinity because, like the Biblical writers, he was focusing more on God's works and actions in our behalf rather than on the mystery of God's person, which he never hoped to fathom. The *Catechism* is not a speculative treatise on the Godhead; it instead proclaims what he has done and is doing in our behalf.[41]

Put another way, Luther places the doctrine of the Trinity within the narrative of salvation history, which corresponds well with Scripture's own approach.[42] "Through the leading concepts, creation, redemption, and sanctification, the Reformer was able to carry sufficiently the unity as well as the differences of the Trinity.[43]

Luther's Appropriation of the Credal Tradition

In order to appreciate Luther's catechetical approach to the Trinity, it will help to see how Luther appropriated and adapted the catho-

lic heritage bequeathed to him. In some ways he reaches behind the Thomistic-Augustinian tradition and links up with the Trinitarian picture as it unfolded in the church up through the time of the Cappadocian fathers.[44] Trinitarian reflection in the New Testament and in the three centuries leading up to Nicea as a rule focused its attention on what is considered to be the economic Trinity, which centered on the way in which the three persons were manifested soteriologically in the world. More precisely, the economic Trinity is manifested externally in the world through work of creation, redemption, and sanctification.[45]

The so-called economic approach to the Trinity has several characteristics. First, discussion begins with the three persons and then proceeds to their unity. It begins with the revelation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and then asks, "How are they one?" Second, one of these three persons provides the focal point for understanding their unity. This was always the Father. The names "God" and "Father" were generally used interchangeably. Third, the unity of the Trinity is found in the Father, in that the Triune work begins and ends with the Father. All things proceed *a Patre ad Patrem,* from the Father to the Father. The one God/Father was understood as related to us *through* Christ and *in* the Spirit. These thoughts accord with the Cappadocian tradition, which emphasizes that "All action which comes upon the Creature from God... begins with the Father and is present through the Son and is perfected in the Holy Spirit."[46] This approach is apparent in the early *regulae fidei,* the Apostles' Creed, and the doxologies and prayers of the church.

In the early fourth century, Arius changed the entire discussion by shifting the question of unity from the economy of salvation to the ontology of God's existence. He took statements made about God's work within the world and turned them into statements about God's eternal being apart from the created world. Since the Father sent the Son into the world, and since the Son obeyed the Father, the Son must be less than the Father in his being. The Nicene Creed dealt with the issue raised by Arius in a way that continued to reflect the economic Trinity but in a way that also opened the door to a new way of confessing the Trinity, namely, the immanent or ontological Trinity. In particular, the language of *homoousios* paved the

way for a shift of focus from the Father to reflection on the one divine essence that is common to all three persons. And so the so-called immanent or ontological Trinity would concentrate attention on the inner life of God. The Athanasian Creed provides a good example of this approach to confessing the Trinity.

The immanent Trinity has several characteristics that can be seen in the thought of western theologians such as Augustine and those that built upon his thought like Aquinas and Anselm. First, for Augustine, God and Father are not synonyms. The title "God" primarily refers to the Godhead, the divine essence that is shared equally by the three persons.[47] Second, the divine essence rather than the person of Father becomes the highest ontological principle and the locus of unity for the three persons. Third, this allows theologians to consider the topic of God somewhat independently of the particular revelation of Father, Son, and Spirit. It is at this point that we begin to see a separation in dogmatics between *De Deo* and *De Trinitate.* The former would deal with the attributes of God while the latter would deal with the specific relations of the three persons. Fourth, at times the ontological approach to the Trinity blurred distinctions between the three persons so that the problem becomes one of threeness.[48]

Both the economic and immanent approaches to the Trinity capture important biblical thoughts. Both approaches deal with the same God: the one in his works and his relation to the world, the other in his essence and his relation to himself.[49] In the revelation of his name and work (economic Trinity) God reveals his nature and essence (immanent Trinity). The economic Trinity preserves God's relationship to creation. It assures us that God is not simply a detached, ambivalent divine being who stands aloof from the world. The immanent Trinity presupposes the economic Trinity. It serves as the safeguard against any subordinationist tendencies in the latter. It also preserves God's freedom lest he become too much a part of this world that he cannot break in from outside and free it.

Both approaches to the Trinity are evident in Luther's catechetical writings. We can see them within two paragraphs of Luther's Brief Explanation of 1520 where Luther first makes an immanent-Trinitarian statement followed by an economic-Trinitarian statement: I believe "not only" (immanent-Trinitarian statement), "but

also" (economic-Trinitarian statement). According to this pattern, Luther develops his thinking in the Second Article concerning Jesus as the Son of God in the following way:

> I do *not only* believe that this means that Jesus Christ is the one true Son of God, begotten of him in eternity with one eternal divine nature and essence—*but* I also believe that the Father has made all things subject to him, that according to his human nature he has been made one Lord over me and all things which he created together with the Father in his divinity.[50]

The same thought and formula carries over into the Third Article with reference to the Spirit:

> I believe *not only* what this means—that the Holy Spirit is truly God together with the Father and the Son—*but* also that except through the Holy Spirit's work no one can come in and to the Father through Christ and his life, his suffering and death, and all that is said of him, nor can anyone appropriate any of this to himself.[51]

Of the two approaches to the Trinity, the catechisms of 1529 focus more exclusively on the economic than on the immanent contours of Trinitarian thought. Instead of focusing on the intra-Trinitarian relations of the three persons within the one divine essence, Luther concentrates on the Trinity's self-turning toward the world.[52] For Luther this does not exclude the immanent Trinity, for the knowledge of God's works leads us to a knowledge of God's nature.

A Patre Ad Patrem: *The Father as Source and Goal*

By adopting the economic approach to the Trinity, Luther's discussion of the unity of the Trinity begins with the Father who is identified preeminently with God.[53] In doing so, Luther follows the overall pattern of the New Testament Scriptures and the Apostles' Creed. Thus in the First Article, Luther asks the question, "What kind of God do you have? What does he do?" He answers, "My *God* is the *Father*... apart from him I have no other *God*" (LC, Creed, 11). He concludes by observing that in this article we see all that we have and receive from *God*... For we see how the *Father* has given himself to us (LC, Creed, 24). Much of the same comes through with even

greater clarity in the Second Article. Luther opens by stating that in Christ we see what we receive from *God* over and above temporal goods (LC, Creed, 26).[54] Here Jesus is called the Son of *God* and the Son of the *Father* (LC, Creed, 27). Luther observes that after we had been created by *God* the *Father,* Satan led us into sin so that we lay under *God's* wrath. But through his work Christ has restored us to the *Father's* favor and grace (LC, Creed, 30, 31, 43). There are fewer statements in the Third Article, but the thesis holds also here. In order that the treasures of the gospel might be proclaimed, "*God* has caused the Word to be published, in which he has given the Holy Spirit" (LC, Creed, 38). Later Luther notes that forgiveness is constantly needed, for although *God's* grace has been won by Christ (LC, Creed, 54), it has yet to be delivered.

The identification of God with the Father allows Luther to identify the Father as the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem,* that is, the source and goal of all the works and gifts confessed in the Creed. In other words, all things proceed *a patre ad patrem.* Again, the key passage:

> In these three articles *God* himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his *fatherly* heart, his sheer, unutterable love. *He* created us for his very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, *he* has given us his Son and *his* Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit. (LC, Creed, 64–65; italics added)

This highlights a twofold movement between the persons of the Trinity. The first movement (*a patre*) expresses the soteriological self-giving of God to us. It follows the structure of salvation in Scripture. Salvation comes *from* the Father *through* his Son and *by* the Holy Spirit.[55] The second movement (*ad patrem*) expresses our response of faith whereby I am brought *to* the Father, *through* the Son, *by* the Holy Spirit.

The movement that proceeds from God's gifts of creation through redemption to consummation follows the sequence of world and salvation history as well as personal experience.[56] It suggests that each

work builds upon the former and presupposes the one before it. "The inner connection between the gifts of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are thereby indicated that each person does not give something for himself, but the Son adds something to the gifts of the Father, and the Spirit to the gifts of the Son respectively."[57] And so each successive article presupposes the previous article. Only the First Article presupposes no other article. The First Article lays the foundation and provides the setting for the other two articles. Were it denied, the Second and Third Article would crumble. The early church recognized this fact in its confession of the First Article against all Gnostic and dualistic schemes. By confessing the Father as Creator it confessed the goodness of creation. It establishes God's *modus operandi* of working through the created orders in the First Article, so he also works through the incarnation of his Son in the Second Article. Similarly, the Holy Spirit makes use of creaturely gifts and means, namely, words, water, bread, and wine in order to sanctify us. One should also add that the creation of our body in the First Article and the resurrection of our body in the Third Article provide a nice *inclusio* to the entire Creed.

Luther gives the narrative a soteriological thrust by noting that God has created us in order to redeem us and sanctify us. The purpose for which God continues to create and sustain us, continues to protect and defend us in spite of sin, is that we might be saved. In a sense, the First Article, like an emergency medical technician (EMT), stabilizes the patient and wheels her into the operating room of the Second Article where the disease is diagnosed and destroyed. The patient then moves to the recovery room to regain her strength and health. The Second and Third Articles presuppose the introduction of sin into the God's creation and thus focus on God's gift of his Son for the world to rescue us from the domination of sin. Finally, the Third Article presupposes the work of Christ, particularly, his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit carries out the work of implementing, administrating, and bringing to fulfillment the reign of Christ.

The movement of God toward us (First Article→Second Article→Third Article) has a counterpart movement that brings us to God by stressing the way in which faith comes to know and receive the gifts of God (Third Article→Second Article→First Arti-

cle). This ordering answers the question, "For what purpose did God carry out his work in all three articles?" What is the goal of creation, redemption, and sanctification? Simply put, all three persons, together with their works, bring us back to the Father. All three works—creation, redemption, and sanctification—lead us to the fatherly heart of God. We find God's gracious fatherly heart only through the Son, to whom the Spirit alone leads us.[58] The Spirit leads us to the Father through Christ who has reconciled us to the Father. Luther gives this idea its classic formulation in his conclusion to the Creed in the Large Catechism, as already cited above: "We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit" (LC, Creed, 65).[59] This theme is be borne out by an examination of each article.

In the First Article, the purpose for which God has given us all creation is that we might look to him for all things as the First Commandment requires. In the Large Catechism, Luther states, "He gives us all these things so that we may sense and see in them his fatherly heart and his boundless love toward us" (LC, Creed, 23). He gave us all of creation that we might thereby grasp the Father, namely, in the outward works, that he creates heaven and earth, that is, believe in him. After the Father had given me all of creation according to the Great Confession (1528), those gifts became obscured by Adam's fall and our sin. After we had received all sorts of good things from the Father, the devil led us into disobedience so that we lay under God's wrath. And so Christ's work is oriented to the Father, Christ has "snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace" (LC, Creed, 30). He has taken us as his own and "brought us back from the devil to God" (LC, Creed, 31).[60] The Spirit brings us to the Father by bringing us to Christ. Except through the Holy Spirit's work "no one can come in and to the Father through Christ and his life, his suffering and death..."[61] Luther notes that under the papacy, "No one believed that Christ is our Lord in the sense that he won for us this treasure without works and merits and made us acceptable to the

Father. What was lacking here? There was no Holy Spirit present to reveal this truth and have it preached" (LC, Creed, 44).

By means of the *a patre-ad patrem* approach, the catechism binds the works of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into a unity. The works of the Trinity cannot be lined up alongside one another in such a way that they stand as three isolated and disparate events. "Their work possesses at most a relative, not an absolute distinction. Instead, the work of any given person is always seen in relation to the work of the other two persons. And so the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit are not considered in themselves, but are seen entirely in the light of the Trinitarian faith."[62] There is an intimate interdependence, one might even say a mutual dependence, between the three gifts of creation, redemption, and sanctification. In any one divine person, we confront simultaneously the other persons and their work. "The certainty of this faith rests on this, that in Christ and the Spirit we have to do entirely and certainly with God himself, who will and can cause all things to serve for the best. But this God is for Luther the Father."[63]

The Godhead of the Trinity

What about the immanent Trinity? Following the pattern that all things proceed *a patre* and return *ad patrem,* the catechisms bring us to the one true God. Proceeding from the unity of their work (and presupposing the unity of God) Luther stresses that God has given himself entirely to us. In other words, although there are three subjects of the three works in the Creed there is yet one subject, namely, God. Here the subject of the action ("God") is not divided up among the plurality of actors.[64]

Thus when referring to the works of the three persons in their totality, Luther identifies "God" as the single subject of that threefold work. When he does designate "God" as the subject, the work of God is identified in the general terms of God's self-giving and not in the specifics of creation, redemption, and sanctification. This logic of moving from the abstract to the concrete is seen in Luther's Great Confession of 1528 where he concludes,

> These are the three persons and one *God, who* has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The *Father* gives himself to us with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve and benefit us. But the gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the *Son* himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and his righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts.[65]

Again, Luther names "God" as the subject of the whole Creed, namely, God gives himself. Here he shows the move from the One God who is the Giver of all to the specification of the three persons together with the gifts proper to each.[66]

The most complete statement about the Godhead of the Trinity in the Large Catechism is found in his conclusion to the three articles. "God [unity of the Godhead] gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and his power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts" (LC, Creed, 69). Note how "God" is first named as the subject of all the works of the Creed and then the Father, Son, and Spirit are identified with the particular works that each carries out.

It is at this point, at the conclusion of his treatment of the Creed, that Luther makes the point that the Creed's teaching on the Trinity in its twofold movement (*a Patre ad Patrem*) distinguishes Christians from all other peoples on earth.

> All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (LC, Creed, 66)

And so the Creed brings us back to the First Commandment. The Creed has made known the identity of the one God to whom we entrust our lives, and that one God is none other than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Luther's catechisms not only provide a catechumen with easy-to-understand expositions of the faith, they also provide a pattern and basis for interpreting life theologically in light of God's Word. That is especially true in his treatment of the Creed. Here Luther provides the catechumen with a "big picture" perspective by which she can glimpse God's work from the creation of the world to the consummation of the world. In addition, he assists the catechumen to see how she is an integral part of that great sweep of creation and salvation history so that it becomes her own personal history as well. The strength of Luther's presentation of the Trinity in the catechism lies in how each person of the Trinity plays an active and vital role within our lives. By connecting the three articles to the three persons and their works, the catechisms show that the "Giver and gift belong together; neither can be understood without the other."[67] Each plays a role that together they embrace the totality of our life in such a way that we cannot treat the Trinity as a piece of data that we are to know about, but as three persons who give us a true knowledge of God himself. This is true whether we consider each person of the Trinity individually or consider them together in their unity.

NOTES

1. Luther's expositions of the Apostles' Creed in his Small Catechism (SC) and Large Catechism (LC) will be cited from *The Book of Concord* (BC) edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), in parentheses according to the marginal paragraph number. Thus, (LC, Creed, 14–16) refers to those paragraphs in that translation.

2. *Luther's Works,* American Edition, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) 43:25. (Hereafter cited as LW.)

3. *Luthers Werke,* Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols. Eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.) 30/I:9. 18. (Hereafter cited as WA.)

4. LW 37:366.

5. *Ein kurze Form der zehn Gebote, eine kurze Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers,* 1520 (WA 7:214. Z25–28). This is also found verbatim in Luther's Personal Prayerbook, 1522 (LW 43:24).

6. Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism,* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 121.

7 The captions for the First and Second Articles are fairly obvious, but less so for the Third Article Luther first uses the caption "sanctification" in the Visitation Articles In the Third Article, Luther had to contend with five disparate items and bring them into an organic unity The Second Article seems to have provided the key as seen in his Sermon on 10 December 1528 As the individual items of the Second Article dealt with the person and work of Christ, so Luther took the individual items of the Third Article and identified them with the work of the Spirit Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* Vol 2 *Der Glaube* (Gottingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 36–7

8 "The Creed has three articles, the first concerning the Father, the second concerning the Son, the third concerning the Holy Spirit What do you believe about the Father? Answer He is the Creator What do you believe about the Son? He is the Redeemer What do you believe about the Holy Spirit? He is the Sanctifier" (LW 51 162)

9 The First Article teaches creation, the second redemption, and the third sanctification (LW 51 162, 163) The Third Article was the last to receive such a superscription Here and elsewhere in Luther, the terms "sanctify" and "sanctification" include all aspects of being made holy, including forgiveness of sins

10 Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* 2, 56–57

11 This especially true of Luther's Brief Explanation of 1520 (see LW 43 26) and his sermon on the Creed of March 4, 1523 (WA 11 49 27ff)

12 The Kolb-Wengert edition (note 1) has helpfully brought this out through its capitalization of these words as well

13 WA 45 12 16f

14 Michael Beintker, "Das Schopfercredo in Luthers Kleinem Katechismus" *Neue Zeitschrift fur Religionsphilosophie* 31 (January 1989) 16

15 Scott E Hoezee, "A Sermon The End in the Beginning," *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed,* ed Roger E Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI William B Eerdmans Publishing Co , 2004) 50

16 Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary* Genesis (1 15) (Waco,TX Word Books, 1987), 36

17 Our insignificance and place within the universe can be gained from a picture in Carl Sagan's book, *Pale Blue Dot* The picture is of the earth as taken from the Voyager spacecraft as it sped past Saturn

18 In a sense, however, Luther is simply picking up and developing that which was implicit in the title *pantokrator* (all ruling or almighty) of the early Christian creeds The title did not stress so much an abstract attribute of God as much as the active government of God within the world It captures what that popular song declared, "He's got the whole world in his hands"

19 Beintker, 14

20 Sermon, Dec 10, WA 30/II 87 6–9, 88 5–6 10–11, WA 30/I 87f 33ff, Katechismuspredigt, 1528

21 WA 46 494 15ff, see also 45

22 Beintker, 15

23 Albrecht Peters, "Die Theologie der Katechismen Luthers anhand der Zuordnung ihrer Hauptstucke," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 43 (1976) 16

24 LC, Creed, 26, 27, 31

25 Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* 2, 100

26 See Peters' lengthy treatment of this point, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* 2, 116ff.

27. M. Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism A History of its Origin, Its Distribution, and its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1929), 148.

28 For these motifs, see *The 1529 Holy Week and Easter sermons of Dr Martin Luther,* translated by Irving L. Sandberg ; annotated with an introduction by Timothy J. Wengert (Saint Louis, Mo. Concordia Academic Press, 1999) These sermons appeared just prior to the publication of the catechisms.

29. James Arne Nestingen, "Preaching the Catechism," *Word and World* 10, 1 (Winter 1990): 37

30 WA 37· 49 16–19

31 Girgensohn. 178.

32. Girgensohn, 180.

33. As in Erik Pontoppidan's pietistic catechism which treated these as an *ordo salutis,* a series of distinct but successive steps. See, for example, H U Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism / Based on Dr Erick Pontoppidan,* tr E G. Lund, abridged ed. (Minneapolis. Augsburg, 1900).

34. Perhaps the word "enlightened" refers to baptism and the catechumenate of the early church. See Robert I. Bradley, *The Roman Catechism in the Catechetical Tradition of the Church* (Lanham, MD· University Press of America, 1990). He points out that in the early church the catechumens were referred to as the "enlightened" when the priest handed to them the creed and the Lord's Prayer, the two sources of their "enlightenment," 14.

35. Girgensohn. 185

36. "Enlightened with His gifts" is set in contrast to our natural or created gifts (*dona creata* Solid Declaration VIII, 55), especially "my own reason or strength." The same distinction is in the Large Catechism, Creed, 23. These *dona creata* are individual and they are not the same in each person, whereas the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to every Christian, the same gift, which creates faith, makes a Christian and brings him to completion when there will be no more need of forgiveness" Norman E Nagel, "The Spirit's Gifts in the Confessions and in Corinth," *Concordia Journal* 18 (1992): 230–243.

37. Note the ablative of means in the Latin translation. Also *recta* has the sense of "correct" as in the correct thing, the right stuff in contrast with right believing. Although the Latin translation should not trump the German, it may suggest one way in which a particular interpretation could be pursued. In this sense, the German (*im rechten Glauben*) could be understood as keeping me in the true faith (*fides quae creditur*), that is, keeping me in the Gospel as opposed to keeping me simply in a state of truly believing.

38. Girgensohn, 182.

39 Martin E. Marty, *The Hidden Discipline* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 59–61.

40. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics,* I, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 422, footnote 56, refers to Horst Stephan, *Glaubenslehre,* 1921, p 193. Others have accused Luther of the opposite extreme, namely, a Trinitarian monotheism. As Schlink points out, this probably indicates that Luther got it right. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions,* Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A Bouman trans. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), 60–66.

41. Robert Kolb, *Teaching God's Children His Teaching* (Hutchinson, MN: Crown Publishing, 1990).

42. Albrecht Peters, "Vermittler des Christenglaubens: Luthers Katechismen nach 450 Jahren." *Luther: Zeitschrift der Luther-Gesellschaft* 51 (1980): 38.

43. Reiner Jansen, *Die Trinitat in Luthers Auslegungen des Apostolikums 1520–29: Studien zu Luthers Trinitatslehre* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), 84.

44. Peters, "Vermittler des Christenglaubens," 40.

45. See Charles P. Arand, "Confessing the Trinitarian Gospel," in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 67(July/October 2003): 203–214.

46. Also attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, *That There Are Not Three Gods*, Post Nicene Fathers II, Vol. 5, p. 334.

47. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 98. Starting from unity tends to blur distinction between persons (any incarnate; all three in each work).

48. In other words, it does not matter who does what since it is all the work of one God (theoretically the Father could have become incarnate) nor does it matter to which person we address our prayers since they are all addressed to the same God. Here LaCugna suggests that the West began to develop a "compensating strategy" with its doctrine of appropriations. That is to say while each person is involved in creation, it is appropriate to ascribe that activity particularly to the Father. See LaCugna, 99–102.

49. Jansen, 62.

50. LW 43:26; WA 7:217. 6–10.

51. LW 43:28; WA 7. 218. 25–8.

52. Peters, "Vermittler des Christenglaubens," 39.

53. The Christian tradition has generally identified three possible referents for the appellation "God." First, "God" can refer to the divine being *in abstracto.* In this sense, it can apply to all religions who claim a deity. Second, Luther can use the word "God" as a cipher for the entire Godhead of the Trinity. This generally occurs when Luther refers to God apart from any specific person or work. Third, "God" can refer primarily to the first person of the Trinity, namely, the Father. More often than not in the catechisms, Luther uses the names God and Father interchangeably much more frequently than with the other two persons of the Trinity. When "God" is used in juxtaposition with another person of the Trinity, it is always with reference to the Father.

54. This sentence is a reference back to the final sentence of the First Article (LC, Creed, 64) where Luther states that the Father has showered us "with inexpressible eternal treasures through his Son and Holy Spirit."

55. To use Luther's words, "the Father through his Son Jesus Christ our Lord and with the Holy Spirit let all this happen to me" (Concl to Creed, 1520: p. 29). See also Luther's Predigt uber das Symbolum, 6 Marz, (WA 11:53. 7–11).

56. Peters, "Vermittler des Christenglaubens," 43

57. Jansen, 69.

58. Peters, "Vermittler des Christenglaubens," 39.

59. This approach is a consistent theme throughout Luther's writings, especially his catechetical ones. For example, Luther's teaching on the Psalms, "The Son through the Spirit of the Father unites me with himself. "Filius per spiritum patris sui uniat me sibi:" (WA 3,

553, 28). His Brief Explanation of 1520 states: "Everything, what we confess in the Creed, above all else the eschatological fulfillment, that gives us the Father through the Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, with and in the Holy Spirit."

60. He continues in the Great Confession: "Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works... and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts" (LW 37, 366). Again, Luther states: "Thus there is no other way of coming to God than through this Son and because through him (Son), his incarnation, we come to the Father"(WA 11, 51, 28).

61. LW 43:28.

62. Jansen, 84.

63. Jansen, 63.

64. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 127.

65. [Italics added.] WA 26. 505. 38–506.3; LW 37. 366.

66. In his May 1528 catechism sermons, Luther first explains, "The Father creates everything, Christ redeems us from all evil, the Spirit directs us through his word and gives his church various gifts." After describing these three works of the three persons, he then proceeds to ask, "Do you not perceive that these are exceptional works? Do you not perceive that our God is great? He who creates heaven, earth, and everything? He who thereafter is able to redeem us with his blood? He who then creates faith and directs and raises us from the dead?" (WA 30/I:10.11–17).

67. Girgensohn, 129.