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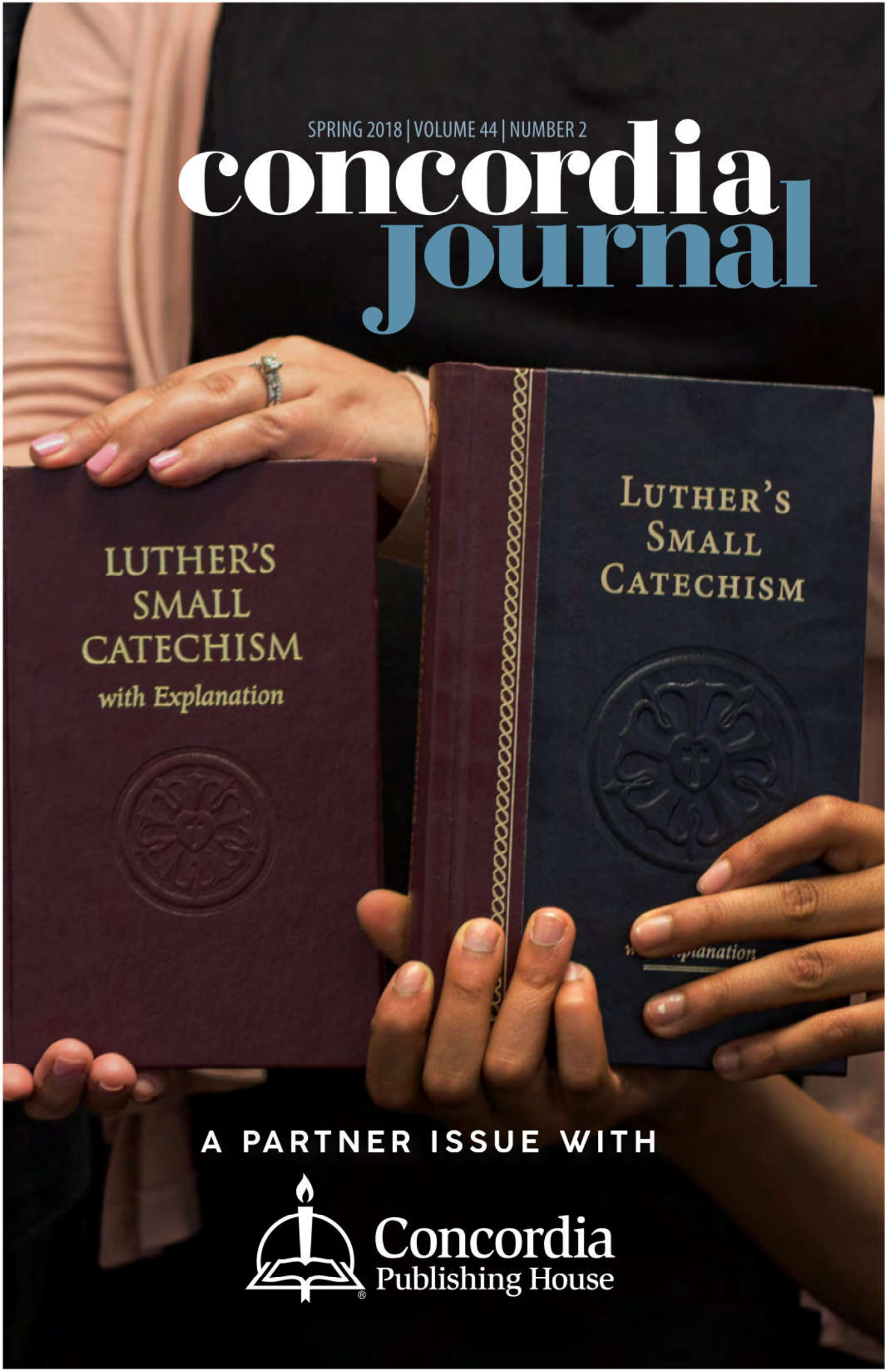

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On the cover: editions of Luther's Small Catechism as published by Concordia Publishing House from (left to right) 1870, 1943, 1991, and the newest edition on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, 2017. Photo credit: Courtney Koll

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Knowing How to Live and Die
Luther and the Teaching of the Christian Faith

Gerhard Bode

Gerhard Bode is dean of advanced studies and associate professor of historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Bode has been a faculty member since 2005. He also serves as Seminary archivist. His areas of interest and expertise include the Reformation and the history of Lutheranism.

As we consider the significance of Martin Luther's role in the Reformation it's helpful to focus on his work as teacher of the evangelical message. It may be trite to say it, but it is still true: what is more important than the person of Martin Luther is the message he proclaimed. Perhaps the message is a good place to start if only because the message is what changed everything.

Preaching a catechetical sermon in September 1528, just a few months before he issued his Small Catechism, Luther called the core catechetical instruction "a *kinder predigt* [a childrens' sermon] or the *leyen biblia* [a Bible for the laity]."[1] Two years after the catechism was published, he commented on the impact of the catechism and of the evangelical teaching and preaching:

> But now—praise be to God—it has come to pass that man and woman, young and old, know the catechism; they know how to believe, to live, to pray, to suffer, and to die. Consciences are well instructed about how to be Christians and how to recognize Christ. We preach the truth about faith and good works. In brief, the aforementioned items have again come to light, and pulpit, altar,

Editor's note

Some of the material in this essay has been adapted from the author's dissertation: "Conrad Dieterich (1575–1639) and the Instruction of Luther's Small Catechism," Concordia Seminary, 2005. An earlier version of this essay was presented to the LCMS's New Jersey District Reformation Seminar on October 24, 2015, in Princeton, New Jersey.

The catechism forms and informs the daily life of Christians in the teachings of the Scriptures and thus is a book of prayer and comfort.

and baptismal font have been restored to their proper place, so that—thank God—the form of a Christian church can again be recognized.[2]

How could a simple *Kinderpredigt* have such consequences in a mere two years? How could Luther's German people be so transformed by it? As Luther would make clear, all this was accomplished through the gospel.[3] But how could a little book containing a few dozen paragraphs teach people how "to believe, to live, to pray, to suffer and to die," to know how to be a Christian, to be a Christian church? After all, what is the catechism about? For Luther, the answer is clear: it is about the gospel. The catechism forms and informs the daily life of Christians in the teachings of the Scriptures and thus is a book of prayer and comfort. The catechism explains what every Christian needs to know about God and human beings.[4] It was but one instrument Luther used to help people—children and adults—understand the new evangelical message. In this way, the catechism became a vehicle for the Reformation. More than that, it was Luther's way of teaching people how to live in Christ and die in Christ, in short, how to be Christians.

Luther is known as the great reformer, theologian, biblical scholar, and preacher, but he was also, throughout his career, an educational reformer.[5] His call for the education of all people resulted, in part, from his emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Bringing the Bible into German—into the language of the people—was an early step in this educational project. Translation was key and Luther's catechisms played a central role in the Reformation project of translating the evangelical message into the culture of the time.

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to describe what Luther intended with his catechisms, asking how they reflect his evangelical concern and purposes for the Reformation, and second, to explore briefly the implications of these questions for the church's life today.

Luther's Intention for His Catechisms

Luther understood that catechetical instruction is a teleological activity. It is directed to a particular goal and purpose, one that is divinely appointed. In Luther's context, this was to educate the German people of his day for faith in Christ and to train them for life in him. Yet Luther recognized that the believer's faith relationship with God is ongoing, nourished by the receiving of God's gifts. There was no end (*telos*) in the sense of ever being finished with this project. Learning continues throughout the Christian life. Thus, in

a broad way, Luther intended his catechisms as guidebooks for Christians. Of course, he had specific circumstances and audiences to which he addressed his catechisms.

Luther's chief reason for writing his catechisms was to educate pastors and lay people on the basics of the Christian teachings and life.[6] Attending to an urgent need for such instruction discovered during the Visitations of Electoral Saxony and Meissen in 1528–1529, Luther provided pastors and preachers with materials useful for the task.[7] His Small Catechism was presented in dialogue form and intended for lay adults and children.[8] The Large Catechism, homiletical in nature, offered a more extensive explanation of the material for pastors and preachers.[9] In both catechisms, Luther incorporated the basic teachings of the Bible and provided instruction in them.[10] His purpose was clear: all people, young and old, should learn what the catechism teaches, "for in these three parts [Decalogue, Creed, and Lord's Prayer] everything contained in the Scriptures is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms."[11] The chief parts of the catechism comprise a "theological-pedagogical key to the Holy Scriptures" and thereby a key to the believer's life in the Christian church.[12] Luther advised in his preface to the Large Catechism that once the catechism had been learned, people should be taught psalms or hymns based on the material "to supplement and confirm their knowledge," adding, "thus young people will be led into the Scriptures and make progress every day."[13] Luther conceived the catechism, then, as a summary not only of the Bible, but also of "the teaching, life, wisdom, and learning that constitute the Christian's conversion, conduct, and concern."[14] The catechism was to bring people the central teachings of the faith as well as instruct them in how to put this faith into practice.

Knowledge of the catechism is a mark of a Christian.

The biblical teaching comprised in the catechisms defines what it means to be a Christian.[15] It outlines the core components of Christian doctrine and brings them into relation with the faith and life of a believer.[16] Luther understood that catechetical instruction is interrelated with baptism: through these together the church carries out Christ's mandate to make disciples, "baptizing and teaching" (Mt 28:19–20). Baptism and catechetical instruction work in tandem to bring a person to a new standing of faith and life in Christ. As Charles Arand has observed: "If baptism carries us into the church by transferring us from the kingdom of Satan into Christ's kingdom, catechesis imparts the mind of Christ so that we put to death the old ways of thinking and bring to life new patterns of thought."[17] Knowledge of the catechism is a mark of a Christian. In Luther's view, the catechism "contains what every Christian should know. Anyone who does not know it should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament, just as artisans who do not know the rules and practices of their craft are rejected and considered incompetent."[18]

Woodcut from the 1531 Wittenberg edition of Luther's Large Catechism
(Credit: Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University)

Learning the catechism is also learning confession of the Christian faith. Drawn from Scripture and the confessions of the early church, the catechism itself became an exposition of the teachings of Scripture and a confessional primer for the Christian. Although Luther's catechisms were later included among the confessional writings of the Lutheran church, Luther himself did not set out to write them as confessions for a new church.[19] They were teaching resources. However, Luther realized that teaching the faith and confessing it are very nearly the same thing. Both interpret and apply the Scriptures to contemporary life.[20] Luther understood confessing the faith to be both what is confessed and the activity of confessing.[21] The catechism, as a guide to confessing, also makes it possible, at least on a fundamental level, for people to determine when a preacher or teacher is expounding God's word correctly. Instruction in the catechism provides the ability to draw at least a broad line between true and false teaching, and to know what doctrines Lutherans confess and what they condemn.[22]

Luther's catechism sought to affirm and express the content of the catholic church's confession of faith. It underscores God's activity in the world and gets at key questions: Who is God? Who are human beings before him? In other words, what kind of God do we have and how does he deal with us? The catechism communicates the word about God in simple, clear language and, in turn, gives its learners the language of faith. Thus, the catechism is a confession of faith, but it is also a statement of intent to follow the Christian life. The language of the catechism speaks to the identity of the believer as one who follows Christ and lives in him. The appending of elements for personal and family devotion, as well as the Table of Christian Callings, made the Small Catechism a tool for cultivating the practice of discipleship in daily life based on the law and gospel given in the first two chief parts.

Luther designed the Small Catechism as a guidebook for pastors, parents, and teachers, from whom children would receive oral instruction. He cast the material in fixed forms of expression and in simple language to facilitate memorization and comprehension. Still, conveying the content was the main thing. People should learn the text of the catechism thoroughly, appropriating it in a deliberate and personal way. This would prepare them for a more in-depth study of the catechism and serve as an introduction to the reading of the Bible.[23]

Luther understood the nature of the task of catechesis as well as the difficulty of teaching the catechism well. It requires communicating in a way that affects the lives of readers and hearers with the gospel. In his "Lectures on Zechariah" (1527), Luther adds:

> One ought . . . to regard those teachers as the best and the paragons of their profession who present the catechism well—that is, who teach properly the Our Father, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed. But such teachers are rare birds. For there is neither great glory nor outward show in their kind of teaching; but there is in it

> great good and also the best of sermons, because in this teaching there is comprehended, in brief, all Scripture.[24]

The Catechism in the Hands of Pastors

By addressing the Small Catechism to "Ordinary Pastors and Preachers" Luther assigned the parish clergy the task of mastering the catechism and then teaching and preaching it in the local congregations. Luther also encouraged clergy to employ the catechism as a devotional and prayer book, and to drill themselves in it daily.[25] Although he intended his catechisms first for pastors and preachers, they were designed and undertaken ultimately "for the instruction of children and the uneducated."[26] In his preface to the Small Catechism, Luther charged the pastors "to take up your office boldly, to have pity on your people who are entrusted to you, and help us bring the catechism to the people, especially to the young."[27] Young or old, there were those who could not read.[28] Pastors were to speak the text of the catechism word for word, even as part of the sermon from the pulpit, so that their hearers could repeat it back and learn it by heart.[29] Luther warns, however, that "it is not enough for them simply to learn and repeat these parts verbatim," but "the young people should also attend sermons, especially during the times when preaching on the catechism is prescribed, so that they may hear it explained and may learn the meaning of every part."[30]

Luther gave preaching a primary role in the presentation of the catechism to the laity. He intended his catechisms as aids for preaching,[31] so young people "will also be able to repeat what they have heard and give a good, correct answer when they are questioned, so that the preaching will not be without benefit and fruit."[32] Luther adds, in his explanation to the commandments in the Large Catechism, "The reason we take such care to preach on the catechism frequently, is to impress it upon our young people, not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories."[33]

In his *German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), Luther makes the case that catechetical instruction is crucial in the life of the congregation, especially in worship: "First, the German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. Catechism means the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith."[34] Luther urges the preaching of the catechism as well as examination in it, not simply because corporate worship is, pragmatically speaking, a place to have contact but because this actually helps the people benefit from daily worship.[35] Without the building blocks the catechism lays down, the laity come to church and leave without learning or comprehending what they hear. Luther exhorts pastors to drive this knowledge home to the hearts of their parishioners.[36] "And let no one think himself too wise for such child's play. Christ, to train men, had to become man himself. If we wish to train children, we must become children with them. Would to God such child's play were widely practiced. In a short time we would have a wealth of

Christian people whose souls would be . . . enriched in Scripture and in the knowledge of God."[37]

In addition to providing instruction on each of the chief parts of the catechism, Luther also included other materials in the Small Catechism that helped it serve as a "manual of pastoral care."[38] This expanded the medieval use of the catechism in the confessional. These materials included a form for confession and absolution, prayers, a chart of Bible passages, and marriage and baptismal booklets for parish pastors.[39]

The Catechism in the Hands of Parents

Apart from pastors,[40] Luther urged the need for two other important groups to be involved actively in religious education: parents and the governing authorities.[41] All three—church, home, and school—have the duty to work together in teaching the Christian faith, but Luther accented the family as the primary instrument for teaching young people.

One of the most important divinely ordained responsibilities of the parental office or vocation was to teach the catechism and train children in the faith.[42] Luther assigned this duty particularly to the *Hausvater*,[43] or the head of the household, the family of which may include domestics, live-in guests or friends, and other dependents as well as the children. (This was an era of extended families and households.) The question-and-answer format of the Small Catechism provided parents with a simple method for instruction, which was to be drilled or reviewed regularly. This Luther reiterated in the preface to the Large Catechism: "It is the duty of every head of a household at least once a week to examine the children and servants one after the other and ascertain what they know or have learned of it, and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it."[44] Parents were to bring their children to church to hear sermons on the catechism and sing catechetical hymns, and see to it that they attend school where they would receive further Christian education.[45]

Luther gave extraordinary emphasis to the parents' teaching role, assigning titles once reserved exclusively for clergy.[46] Parents are to serve as pastors and bishops in their own households, preaching at home what is publicly preached in the church. In his introduction to a sermon on the catechism in 1528, Luther addresses parents: "God has appointed you a master and a wife in order that you should hold your family to [the teaching of the catechism and learning of the Scriptures]. . . . Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess."[47] Parents are to fulfill the responsibilities of their office, which, in this context, was auxiliary to the office of the ministry; as Luther says, "Remember that you in your homes are to help us carry on the ministry as we do in the church."[48] Parents are to proclaim God's word to their children—in a sense, to evangelize them—and to train them up in the fear and knowledge of the Lord.[49] At the same time, parents also are examples to their children. Parental catechesis teaches by living out faith in Christian life: caring for one's neighbor, establishing and maintaining good relationships with others, fulfilling Christian

vocations, and so on. In order for parents to serve as teachers in the home, they themselves need to have a basic knowledge of Christian faith and doctrine and to be able to explain this and exemplify it to their children.

The Catechism in the Hands of School Teachers

Luther believed the instruction of children was of vital importance for the preservation of the gospel, the church, and society. Indeed, the whole success of the Reformation depended on it, as he notes in the Large Catechism, "We cannot perpetuate these and other teachings unless we train the people who come after us and succeed us in our office and work, so that they in turn may bring up their children successfully. In this way God's Word and a Christian community will be preserved."[50] While Luther affirmed that parents have the primary responsibility in the training of children in the faith, he also recognized the failure of parents to fulfill this task, whether from lack of will, ability, time, or opportunity.[51] He reminded parents "that it is their duty, by God's injunction and command, to teach their children or *have them taught* the things they ought to know."[52] For this reason, in the preface to the Small Catechism, pastors and preachers are to urge parents (along with governing authorities) to "rule well and send their children to school."[53] Pastors, civic authorities, and teachers in schools serve as auxiliaries to parents in fulfilling their obligations regarding religious education. Luther's goal was to train up not only individual believers and their families, but also entire communities. The benefits of this education affect not only the life of each Christian, but society.

Luther believed the instruction of children was of vital importance for the preservation of the gospel, the church, and society.

Already in his *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524), Luther had exhorted civic authorities to provide schools and competent teachers and to assure that children received adequate training.[54] Luther had no illusions about the difficulty of operating schools and the challenges faced by administrators and teachers, noting, "It takes extraordinary people to bring children up right and teach them well."[55] Failure to educate children would, according to Luther, result in the ultimate ruin of both children and community.[56]

Within his broader emphasis on education, Luther stressed most of all the importance of religious instruction for children. Learning the Christian faith is more important than other school subjects are. In his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), Luther urges that schoolchildren

be instructed in the Bible, or at least the Gospels. As an introductory summary and exposition of the teachings of Scripture, Luther's catechism came to play a leading role in the curricular program of schools.

The Theological-Pedagogical Design of Luther's Catechisms

The catechisms epitomized and communicated the heart of Luther's evangelical message. He began with three parts of the medieval catechetical tradition: Decalogue, Creed, and Lord's Prayer. To this he added parts on Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Confession.[57] The medieval catechetical literature normally had followed the order of Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Decalogue. This arrangement had made sense pedagogically when the catechism had been used as a preparation for the sacrament of penance.[58] But in his catechisms, Luther changed the order, placing the Decalogue first, then the Creed and Lord's Prayer, a move that demonstrates his purpose includes both inculcation of faith as well as the preparation for Christian life.

The structure and content of the Small Catechism in particular reflect Luther's understanding of the relationship between God and humans in terms of law and gospel.[59] Luther first leads readers to repentance through the message of God's law in the Decalogue. Then they hear the gospel in the Creed, which proclaims the triune God's love and saving work.

Luther's reordering of the first three chief parts is key to understanding his purpose. The arrangement affects how people learn the building blocks of faith. It teaches and explains how the relationship with God works. First, the Commandments show us that we do not meet God's standards for life before him; we do not make the grade. Second, the Creed shows us who God is and what he has done for us in every aspect of our lives: He is creating, redeeming, bringing us to faith and sustaining us in it. Then when we look back at the Commandments we see them with new eyes, we see how the people of God live before him and before one another. We are people who fear and love God, honoring his name and gladly hearing and teaching his word. We are people who respect those in authority; we love our neighbors in their bodies, their family relationships, their possessions, their reputation, and all their stuff. We begin to learn our Christian callings. Ongoing learning and training in the catechism trains us in the carrying out of our vocations.[60] Then once more, we look to the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments in the catechism, and we learn again how God deals with us and who we are before him. The Lord's Prayer teaches believers to exercise their faith, praying to God as Father and calling upon him in every time of need.[61] In his instruction on baptism, confession, and the Lord's Supper, Luther shows how God, by means of his word, is at work in daily life, communicating his love, forgiveness, and salvation. In short, Luther teaches about God and human beings, about the relationship between them, in ways that lead the believer to dynamic responses of faith and love.

The Small Catechism as a Textbook

Luther's intentions for his catechisms are clear: their purpose is to teach the Christian faith and life. What Lutherans after Luther do with his catechisms is revealing. It tells us about the context of the time, the condition of the Lutheran churches and how they engaged the culture around them. Yet what these later Lutherans did with the Small Catechism also makes clear how they understood the catechism itself and how they viewed themselves as heirs of Luther's evangelical message. This is more than how they viewed the Reformation and its goals. What they did with Luther's catechism reveals how they identified themselves as Christians. How they understood who God is and who they were before him. Surveying the entire history of Lutheran catechesis is not our purpose here; however, I want to offer one illustration of how Lutherans after Luther used his catechism to meet their own needs. This example may give us something to consider as we teach the Christian faith and life today in our own context.

Luther designed the Small Catechism as a guidebook for parents, pastors, and teachers. He never really intended his catechism as a textbook in the hands of students, although it became one within a couple of years of its first publication, and quickly took its place in the new evangelical school curricula. As schools advanced over the years, the content of catechetical instruction developed beyond the limits of Luther's text. The catechism as textbook expanded and grew more doctrinal in nature according to the needs of the schools. Lutheran pastors and theologians formulated amplified treatments of the basic teachings of the Scriptures, often integrating them with the parts of the catechism. This effort followed Luther's recommendation in the preface to the Small Catechism that instruction should progress beyond his catechism to more advanced forms of catechetical teaching.[62] In some cases doctrinal textbooks intended for this purpose departed from the text of the catechism altogether and presented the fundamental Lutheran teachings in different formats. (Some, for example, employed Melanchthon's Loci Communes for this task.) Others, however, elaborated the teaching of the Small Catechism, building on Luther's base and vastly supplementing its content. Some of these catechisms were expositions or commentaries on Luther's catechism, but they also introduced a more comprehensive discussion of doctrinal topics far beyond what Luther had done.

As catechisms became textbooks for use in schools, especially higher-level Latin schools, they gradually took on more of the internal structure and methodology of a dogmatics. Elements of logic and rhetoric began to shape the content of the catechism as well as the manner and methods with which it was presented. Hans-Jürgen Fraas refers to this trend as the "*Akademisierung des Katechismus*" and suggests that use of theoretical language and the tendency toward the imparting of detailed information are marks of this "academization" of the catechism.[63] In this way, catechetical books often became small dogmatic works, still founded upon the catechism, but with a much more detailed exposition of its doctrinal content. The prime example of this is

Conrad Dieterich's *Institutiones Catecheticae* (1613), which expanded Luther's Small Catechism into an 800-page dogmatics textbook, and so became one of the most widely used catechisms in Latin schools during the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy. (For example, under Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, Dieterich's treatment on Christology is over one hundred pages long, thirty of which are dedicated to the *Genus Majestaticum* alone.)

The methods used to communicate the teaching of the Christian faith were an integral part of the understanding of education and its goals in the later Reformation period as well as that of Lutheran Orthodoxy. The approach of later Lutherans to catechetical instruction and its application did not necessarily lead to the obscuring or loss of Luther's message, nor over time did they diminish the role it played in the education of children and adults. Robert Kolb has pointed out the oversimplification that permeates "the theory of the decline and fall of Lutheran catechetical instruction" as suggested by Fraas and others. Kolb contends that instead of seeing a decay or decline in this period, "we must keep in mind that catechists of the late 16th century fought the same battle that all catechists fight as they try to find the balance between learning the material and understanding and applying it." Recalling the condition and needs of churches and schools at the time, Kolb adds, "that the catechism took on a textbook quality when it was employed as a textbook may be regrettable, but it reflects the practice which church and society found necessary for instruction in the faith."[64]

Something happens to the catechism when it becomes a textbook. More happens when it becomes a dogmatics. Its purpose has changed. No longer was it a training manual intended to form and inform the Christian faith and life; it had become a miniature system of dogma, a rationally ordered presentation of Lutheran doctrine. This is not necessarily a bad thing—it can serve a purpose—but it is not the same thing as Luther first intended with his own catechism. It is not a replacement for it. Reflection on this question is helpful, because it leads us to consider our own use of the catechism in our context today.

The Catechism in the Church's Life Today

Every generation in the church is confronted with two key questions: first, what of the entirety of the Christian story to communicate as essential and definitive? What is the central thing? Second, how do we translate the message to the next generation and perhaps across cultures? The answer to the first question (the what of the message) is relatively uncomplicated for Lutherans, given our catechetical and confessional tradition. The answer to the second question (the how of the translation) is more challenging because of the great diversity of contexts in which the church is at work. But here, too, Luther gives us something to consider.[65]

With the Renaissance humanists, Luther emphasized the importance of original sources, the return *ad fontes*, in particular to the Scriptures. "Back to the Bible, to Augustine, to the church fathers," as Luther would summarize his approach.[66] Yet in

Luther was about understanding the text, grasping its central meaning, and getting to the significant part.

this return, Luther meant something more than the humanists had intended. It was not merely renewed attention to the earliest and foundational sources of the church, or to the "philosophy of Christ" of humanists like Erasmus. It was not simply about establishing the best biblical text and a grammatically sound translation. Rather, Luther was about understanding the text, grasping its central meaning, and getting to the significant part. This was, for Luther, not about mere philology, but theology. He was concerned about recovering the gospel and the essence of the relationship between God and human beings. The indispensable element is the means of this relationship—the word of God, spoken by God to human beings, a living, breathing word, killing and making alive, a creating word, sustaining and life-giving. As he read the Scriptures Luther was seeking Christ and his gospel in the text. And the purpose was to convey the heart of God's word, the whole reason for God's revelation of Christ to the world. Luther wanted Christians to be radically dependent on God, specifically on the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, to hope in Christ alone, not in themselves.

The task set before the church in our time may be different from Luther's in some ways, yet fundamentally, it is still the same. Each generation faces the challenges of communicating the gospel and the Christian faith to the people of its own day. We live in an increasingly pluralistic world. The contexts in which the message of the Christian faith is taught change over time and from place to place. But change is not new. Methods of instruction are adapted to different contexts. Cultures and languages vary; however, the central message of Christianity—Luther's message—remains the same.

Lamin Sanneh observed that in its history, the Christian church has been adept at translating the message of the Christian faith. He asserted that the Christian gospel is translatable on a linguistic level as well a cultural one.[67] James Nestingen also has pointed out that the Lutheran Reformation was a matter of translation.[68] In a similar way, Luther's catechisms are fundamentally a translation. Luther brought his teaching of the evangelical faith and the message of law and gospel into the German language and expressed it within his sixteenth-century cultural context. We do the same thing in our own time and place. Whether in multilingual and multicultural contexts or not, the work of education is one of the most important means of translating the message of the Christian gospel. The central message of God's word, that human beings are lost in sin and it is God who justifies does not change. But it does translate.

The fact that methods change or need to be adapted for the audience may be obvious, but it is still not to be ignored. With Luther's example, we are reminded that Christian freedom presents the message of God's word to people in different settings and situations. God has given his people creative skills and abilities to communicate in ways that convey the message clearly, artfully, and faithfully.

Timothy Wengert has written about the importance of reclaiming Luther's catechisms for the church today.[69] He notes, for example, that the catechism grounds instruction in the word and sacraments; they play a role in evangelism and mission in that they provide the basics of the Christian faith to those who do not know them. The catechisms then also provide definition to "daily life as the locus of the Christian life," Wengert notes, adding, "What if our goal were to bring adults to realize that the catechisms were written for them?"[70] He explains that the catechism can be a useful guide in premarital counseling, in prebaptismal instruction, and so on. The catechism helps Christians understand who they are before God and before one another.

Luther was interested not merely in helping people of his day understand what it means to be human, but what it means to be a creature, not merely a member of society, but a Christian living in a distinct relationship to the Creator and to the created world.

These questions get at Luther's understanding of Christian identity. What is a Christian? How do Christians deal with God, and how do they relate to the world in which they live? These questions of identity and the consequences of that identity remain key today. What does it mean to be a Christian in Luther's day? What does it mean to be one today? The answers to these questions matter because they give us clues as to how new generations become heirs of the evangelical message. These questions matter because the answers help us as individuals and as a Christian church apply God's word today. What does God's word have to say to us today? How does that word interpret me, and all of us, and how does it interpret the world in which we live? Luther has something to teach us here. Living each day, fulfilling our divine vocations, worshipping, confessing, and witnessing, we relate to God and we relate to those around us all under the cross of Christ.

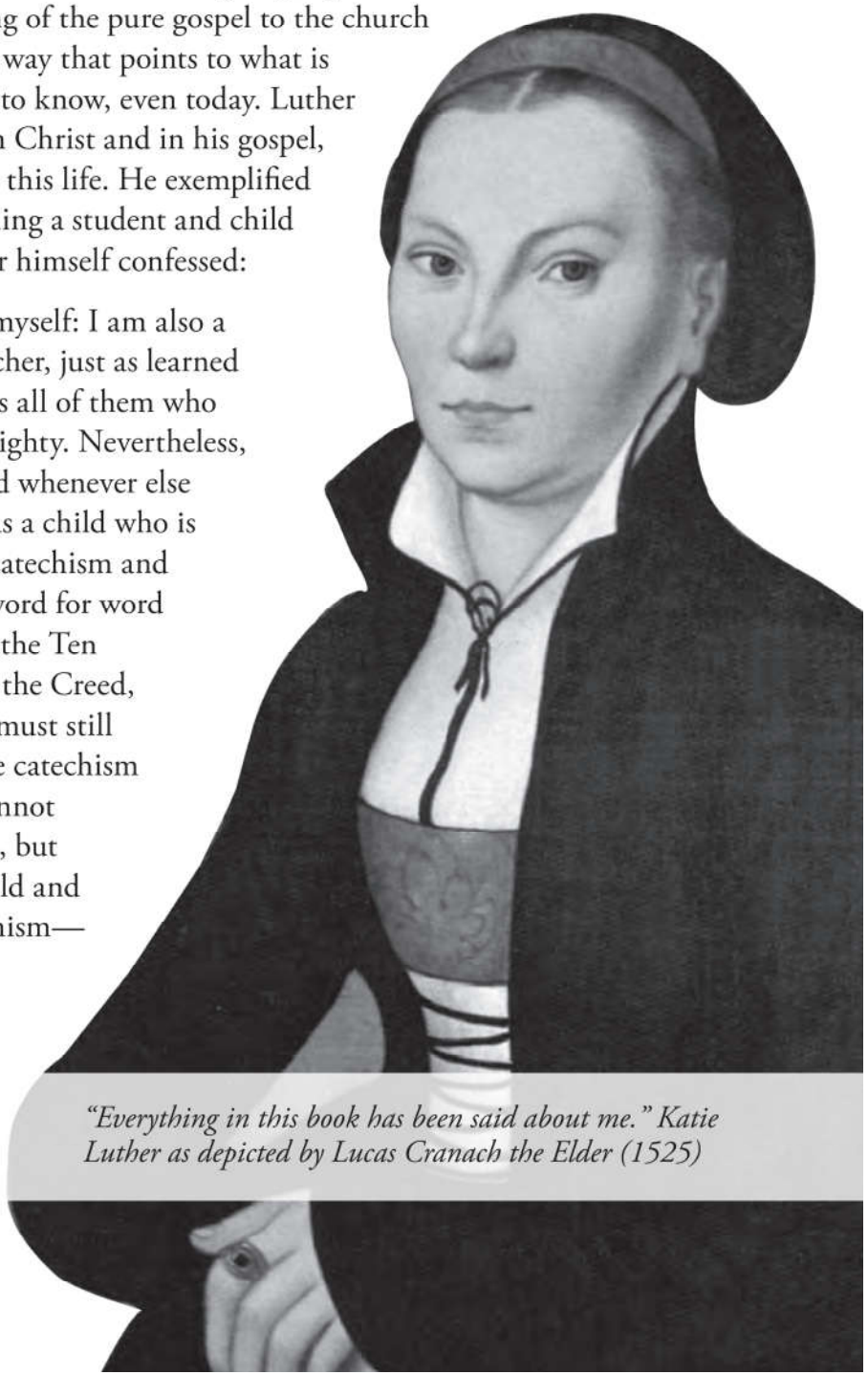
Confession means confessing . . . they go together.[71] Faith and life. Christians speak to the heart of the issue. They speak and live the basics—what God demands in his law and what he bestows through his gospel. We witness to this gospel in what we say and in how we live. Perhaps embodying this message is the thing called for. The message of the gospel is eminently translatable in word, in baptism, and in the Lord's Supper. The Christian life then, too, is translated in prayer, in worship, in praise, in hope, and in every expression of joy.

Education was key for Luther's work as a reformer. The great change came with living by faith, not by logic. It remains the same today. Faith is trust, but faith takes hold of something. Faith looks to its object and grasps it. The Holy Spirit brings us to faith through our hearing the word of God. Yet also the message of this word—the content—must be learned. Luther understood the relationship between faith and education.[72] The Christian faith must be taught and it must grow. Education in the faith never ends in this life. Learning the catechism is a lifelong learning—it is learning for life.

Conclusion

Katie Luther once proclaimed of the Small Catechism: "Everything in this book has been said about me."[73] This is true *for* us, too. The message of the catechism has been said about us; it is about us because it is for us. The law, the gospel, the word of God to us and for us, his baptism, his holy supper. All of this is said about us and for us. This is the heart of Luther's evangelical message. And, this message—with Christ at the center—has interpreted us. In a sense, it has translated us. The message of the gospel has converted us from living expressions of sin and death to people of life and hope. The gospel has informed and shaped every aspect of our lives as Christians and leads us to live out our callings wherever God has placed us. God's word addresses the reality of our lives—it speaks to us in our context, at this place and at this time. The gospel is amazingly translatable, crossing languages, cultures, and ethnic lines. Luther restored the teaching of the pure gospel to the church of his day. He did this in a way that points to what is most important for people to know, even today. Luther called us to a life of faith in Christ and in his gospel, yet showed us a way to live this life. He exemplified this in his own life, remaining a student and child of the catechism. As Luther himself confessed:

> 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.[74]



"Everything in this book has been said about me." Katie Luther as depicted by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1525)

Endnotes

1 "Vorrede zur 2. Predigtreihe," WA 30.1:27.

2 *Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People* (1531), LW, 47:52–53. *Warnunge D. Martini Lutheri, An seine lieben Deudschen*, WA 30III, 276–320. This treatise was composed in October 1530, in the aftermath of the Diet of Augsburg.

3 Ibid.

4 Cf. Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms. Volume 1: Ten Commandments*, trans. Holger K. Sonntag (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 20f.

5 Cf. James M. Kittelson, "Luther the Educational Reformer," in *Luther and Learning: The Wittenberg University Luther Symposium*, ed. Marilyn J. Harran (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1985), 96.

6 For a concise discussion of the contextual issues involved at the time Luther wrote his catechisms, cf. Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 13–16. For a further study of the Agricolan controversy and its role in prompting Luther to write the catechisms, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 49ff.

7 It is possible to see Luther's gradual development in the purpose of education in the 1520s from *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524) to *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530). In the former he is chiefly interested in communicating the basic teaching of the gospel; in the latter, written while Luther was at the Coburg during the Diet of Augsburg, he is concerned about ensuring the survival of the evangelical teaching in the Germans lands. What brought about the difference? Several factors, but the Saxon Visitations played a key role. Luther responded to the challenge by writing his catechisms.

8 *Der kleine Katechismus für gemeine Pfarherr und Prediger,* first published in May 1529 and later known as the Small Catechism (WA 30/I: 243–425).

9 The *Deudsch Catechismus*, first published in April 1529 and later known as the Large Catechism (WA 30/I: 125–238).

10 The Formula of Concord, Epitome (Concerning the Binding Summary, Rule, and Guiding Principle . . . , 5) calls Luther's Small and Large Catechisms "a Bible of the Laity [*Laien Bibel*] in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation." Already in 1528, in his first series of catechetical sermons of that year, Luther called the catechism the "*kinder predigt oder der leyen biblia*" (WA 30/I: 27), understanding it as the instrument for bringing the biblical message to the laity. In the Large Catechism, Luther describes the catechism as "a brief digest and summary of the entire Holy Scriptures" (Long Preface, 18).

11 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 18.

12 Ivar Asheim, *Glaube und Erziehung bei Luther: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Verhältnisses von Theologie und Pädagogik* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1961), 272.

13 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 25. Luther's translation of the Bible into German made this even more possible.

14 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 19. The catechism shares the same object and claim as the Scriptures, as expressed in Jn 20:31: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

15 Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2000), 27.

16 For a discussion of Luther and Melanchthon's understanding of doctrine, cf. Robert Kolb, *Teaching God's Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther's Catechism*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2012), 16–17.

17 Arand, 28.

18 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 2.

19 See Karl Bornhäuser, *Der Ursinn des Kleinen Katechismus* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1933), 3.

20 See Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church*, 1530–1580 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 22–23.

21 Ibid., 23.

22 See also Formula of Concord, Epitome, 11.22, where the catechism, along with God's word, directs Christians in recognizing which teachings are "correct and incorrect."

23 Otto Albrecht has disproved the notion that memorization was the chief goal of Lutheran catechesis, arguing that it was simply the means of taking up and understanding what was being taught. Cf. Albrecht, "*Besondere Einleitung in den Kleinen Katechismus*," in WA 30/I: 543–44. It seems clear that oral communication and aural learning were likely the projected means of inculcation of Lutheran catechetical teaching. Printing was already there to stay, but it takes time to develop a reading culture, so the oral/aural approach would still dominate for a time.

24 "Lectures on Zechariah" (1527), LW 20: 157; WA 23: 486.

25 Large Catechism, Long Preface, 3, 19. As noted above, Luther asserts that the Holy Spirit is at work in such study of the catechism: "In such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion . . ." (Large Catechism, Long Preface, 9).

26 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 1. That Luther aimed his Small Catechism at parish clergy is evident from the title page: "Handbook. The Small Catechism for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers." From the early Middle Ages parish clergy had traditionally served as teachers of the catechism to the laity. As Arand (94) observes, "catechetical instruction emerged as one of the primary tasks of a Lutheran pastor."

27 Small Catechism, Preface, 6.

28 For more on the oral presentation of the catechism and Luther's recommended method of oral instruction, see Arand, 92. As mentioned above, many of Luther's own initial catechetical works were sermons on the catechism.

29 See Small Catechism, Preface, 10; Large Catechism, Short Preface, 24.

30 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 26. See also Small Catechism, Preface, 14–17. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), Melanchthon notes the absence of instruction of children in the Roman Church, and states that catechesis is the regular practice among the confessors: "Among our opponents there is no catechesis of children whatever, even though the canons prescribe it. Among us, pastors and ministers of the church are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly, as custom that produces very good results" (15.41).

31 See Mary Jane Haemig, "The Living Voice of the Catechism: German Lutheran Catechetical Preaching 1530–1580" (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1996), 10–11; Arand, 58–63.

32 Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, 26.

33 Ibid., 27. Luther also encouraged pastors to preach on the catechism in other works; see especially the *Deudsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts* (1526), (WA 19: 72–113; LW 53: 61–90), and the *Vermanung zum Sacrament des leibs und bluts unsers Herrn* (1530), (WA 30/II: 595–626; LW 38: 97–137). See also Haemig, 11–12; and Arand, 58–63, for a helpful overview of the history of catechetical preaching from the early church to the time of Luther.

34 *Deudsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts* (1526) (WA 19: 76; LW 53: 64).

35 "This instruction must be given . . . from the pulpit at stated times or daily as may be needed, and repeated or read aloud evening and mornings in the homes for the children and servants, in order to train them as Christians. Nor should they only learn to say the words by rote. But they should be questioned point by point and give answer what each part means and how they understand it." *Deudsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts* (1526) (WA 19: 76; LW 53: 65). Luther states the practice in place in Wittenberg: "On Monday and Tuesday mornings we have a German lesson on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Lord's Prayer, baptism, and sacrament, so that these two days preserve and deepen the understanding of the catechism." (WA 19: 79; LW 53: 68.) The parts of the catechism also play an important role in the divine service, for Luther as evidenced by the creedal hymn "In One True God We All Believe," a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, and admonition to receive the Lord's Supper (see WA 19: 95–99; LW 53: 78–81).

36 "[Without enrichment in Scripture and in the knowledge of God] people can go to church daily and come away the same as they went. For they think they need only listen at the time, without any thought of learning

or remembering anything. Many a man listens to sermons for three or four years and does not retain enough to give a single answer concerning his faith—as I experience daily. Enough has been written in books, yes; but it has not been driven home to the hearts." (WA 19: 78; LW 53: 67).

37 *Deudsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts* (1526) (WA 19: 78; LW 53: 67).

38 Arand, 94–95.

39 In 1535 Luther wrote *A Simple Way to Pray* for a friend, Peter the Barber, in which he suggests a method for personal prayer based on the pattern and content of the Small Catechism (LW 43: 193–211; WA 38: 358–375).

40 E.g., Small Catechism, Address, and Preface, 6; Large Catechism, Long Preface, 1, 13, 19.

41 Small Catechism, Preface, 19–20; Large Catechism, Long Preface, 19; Short Preface, 4. These three correspond to Luther's understanding of the divine division of earthly and spiritual government, the "*drei Regimenten*": the "*weltliches Regiment*" or political government, the "*Hausregiment*" or family, and the "*geistliches Regiment*" or church. For more on the secular and spiritual authorities, see Augsburg Confession 28; for more on the "*Hausregiment,*" see Large Catechism 405. 141–142.

42 Luther emphasizes this in many writings. See e.g., Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar, 87: "Let all heads of a household remember that it is their duty, by God's injunction and command, to teach their children or have them taught the things they ought to know." For a more expanded discussion, see Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, 167–178; and from the Sermon on the Estate of Marriage (1519) [*Ein Sermon von dem ehelichen Stand*, WA 2: 169–170]: "But this parents must know, that they do no better work and service to God, Christendom, the entire world, themselves and their children, than to educate their children well." ["*Aber das solln die eheleudt wissen, das sie gott, der Christenheyt, aller welt, yhn selbs un yhren kindern keyn besser werck und nutz schaffen mugen, dan das sie yhre kinder wol auff tzyhen.*"]

43 Each page of the first German Tafeldruck edition of the Small Catechism (1529) bore the title of each section or part of the catechism followed by "*wie sie ein Hausvater seinem Gesinde einfältiglich furhalten soll.*" This title was retained in subsequent printings of the catechism in pamphlet/book form. The 1529 Latin translation, intended largely for use in schools, is addressed to students and schoolteachers: "*. . . pro pueris in schola. Quo pacto paedagogi suos pueros . . . simplicissime docere debeant."*

44 Large Catechism, Short Preface, 4.

45 Robert Kolb has observed that, "Luther believed that four factors should motivate Christian parents to instruct their children in the ways of the Lord: God's command, their own reason, their feeling of love for their offspring, and the customs of human society." Kolb adds that, according to Luther, "this function of the parent was to be carried out in the freedom of the Christian life, not in an effort to earn salvation by fulfilling God's orders." Robert Kolb, "Parents Should Explain the Sermon: Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent," *Lutheran Quarterly* XXV.3 (August 1973): 239. Cf. also Klaus Petzold, *Die Grundlagen der Erziehungslehre im Spätmittelalter und bei Luther* (Pädagogische Forschungen, Veröffentlichungen des Comenius-Instituts 42), (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1969), 69–71.

46 See Arand, 96, and endnote 29: "In fact, Luther could apply every high and respectable title, such as ruler, bishop, doctor, pastor, preacher, judge, schoolmaster to the parent (WA 16: 490, 30ff)." See Luther, *Predigt über das 1. Buch Mose. Kap 10.* (1527) WA 24: 223, 9–13: This authority [of parents] is given and instituted for this reason that children are to be instructed and taught God's Word and to know and fear God, and to believe in Him, so that a father actually is to be bishop and pastor of his house. For to him belongs the same office over his children and household which the bishop holds over his people. *[Diese gewalt ist nu daruemb geben und eingesetzt, das man die kinder ziehen sol und Gottes wort leren, Gott erkennen, fuerchten und yhm gleuben, Also das ein vater eygentlich ein Bischoff und Pfarrer seines hauses sein sol. Denn yhm eben das ampt geboert uber seine kinder und gesind, das einem Bischoff gebuert uber sein volck.]* (Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author.)

47 *Ten Sermons on the Catechism* (1528) LW 51:136–37; WA 30/I: 58. Cf. also Luther: "Every father is obliged to train up and teach his children and servants or to arrange for them to be instructed, for in his home he is as a pastor or bishop for his household, and he is commanded to supervise their learning and is accountable for it." *Das Fünffte, Sechste und Siebend Capitel S. Matthei gepredigt und ausgelegt* (1532), WA 32.303, 29–33.

48 *Ten Sermons on the Catechism* (1528) LW 51:136–37; WA 30/I: 58.

49 Elsewhere, Luther will speak of parents as "schoolmasters of God's will" as they teach their children. Cf. Luther in a sermon on Deuteronomy 6, October 24, 1529, WA 28.662. (For other references, cf. Kolb, "Parents Should Explain the Sermon," 233.)

50 Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar, 86.

51 See *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524), LW 45: 354–55; WA 15: 33–34. The failure of many in the clergy, as well as that of parents, to adequately instruct children in the fundamentals of the Christian faith was made further apparent in the Visitations of the late 1520s. These circumstances perhaps encouraged Luther and the other reformers to promote a coalition-approach toward education and, in particular, catechesis. It is useful to note again here that the 1529 Latin translation of the Small Catechism, intended largely for use in schools, is addressed to students and schoolteachers. In addition, Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) furnished instructions for schoolmasters on how to teach the catechism to students in different grade levels in the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528) (LW 40: 315, 318; WA 26: 237, 238–39). Melanchthon also wrote a catechism, first published in Wittenberg in 1532 and with many later editions, under this title: *Catechesis Puerilis, id est, institutio puerorum in sacris* (Wittenberg: G. Rhau, 1532), in *Corpus Reformatorum*, eds. C. G. Bretschneider & H. E. Bindseil (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1855), vol. 28, 103–192. This catechism was clearly designed for use in schools, and perhaps in conjunction or in supplement to the 1529 Latin translation of Luther's Small Catechism, though Melanchthon's catechism is not based on Luther's.

52 Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar, 87 (italics added).

53 Small Catechism, Preface, 19. Luther goes on to explain that the governing authorities sin greatly and do much damage when they do not "help to train children as pastors, preachers, civil servants, etc." (Preface, 20).

54 Another example of Luther's encouragement of the establishment of schools by governing authorities is a letter dated July 18, 1529, in which Luther urges Markgraf Georg von Brandenburg to set up schools in his principality. Luther advised him to establish good schools for children in all cities and towns, as well as one or two higher schools (universities) in cities, where theology, law, and the liberal arts would be taught, and which would produce pastors, preachers, clerks, councillors, and other officials, as well as theologians, jurists, and physicians for service in his land. D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel. 18 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1930–85), 5: 119–21.

55 *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524), LW 45: 355; WA 15: 34.

56 *Ibid., LW* 45: 354–56; WA 15: 34–35. Luther's exhortations were not unheeded. In 1524, Magdeburg, Halberstadt, and Gotha adopted school reforms, followed by Eisleben in 1525, Nürnberg in 1526, and Electoral Saxony in 1528. Philipp of Hesse issued a new program for the establishment of schools in all cities and towns in Hesse in 1526, which included the organization of a new Lutheran university in Marburg. Other new *Schulordnungen* were put in force throughout the German lands in the decades that followed. See also Harran, 184–87.

57 Editions of the Small Catechism from 1531 and afterward included a separate section on confession.

58 See Marilyn J. Harran, *Martin Luther: Learning for Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 206. This former order of the catechism had assumed that faith (Creed) permits one to approach God to receive his grace (Lord's Prayer), the aim of which is the living of life prescribed in the law (Decalogue). Closing with the Decalogue made sense as a preparation for penance, "since it would leave most fresh in the mind of the person confessing the ways in which he or she had violated God's commands."

59 For a more extensive discussion of the design and method of Luther's Small Catechism, see Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen. Band 1: Die Zehn Gebote, Luthers Vorreden*, ed. Gottfried Seebaß (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1990), 29–49; and Arand, 129–146.

60 Harran, *Martin Luther—Learning for Life*, 19.

61 Luther discusses this interrelation of the chief parts in his preface to *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer* (1520), (*Eine kurze Form der zehn Gebote, eine kurze*

Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers, WA 7, 194ff.). See also the same material in Luther's *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), LW 43: 13–14, (*Betbüchlein*, WA 10/II: (339) 375–406).

62 Small Catechism, Preface, §17–18.

63 See Fraas, *Katechismustradition*, 72.

64 Kolb, *Luther as Prophet*, 162, n. 21.

65 For more on this discussion, cf. Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism*, trans. John W. Doberstein. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 1–7.

66 Cf. Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, trans, John Schmidt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 16.

67 Cf. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Cf. also Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996); and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

68 Cf. Nestingen, "Luther's Cultural Translation of the Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly*, XV (Winter 2001): 440–452.

69 Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 20–23.

70 Ibid., 22.

71 See this emphasis in Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church*, 1530–1580 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991).

72 Cf. Robert Rosin, "Luther on Education," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 130.

73 Wengert, 22. Luther himself recounted this in a letter to Katie dated February 7, 1546 (cf. LW 50:302).

74 Large Catechism, Long Preface, 7–8.