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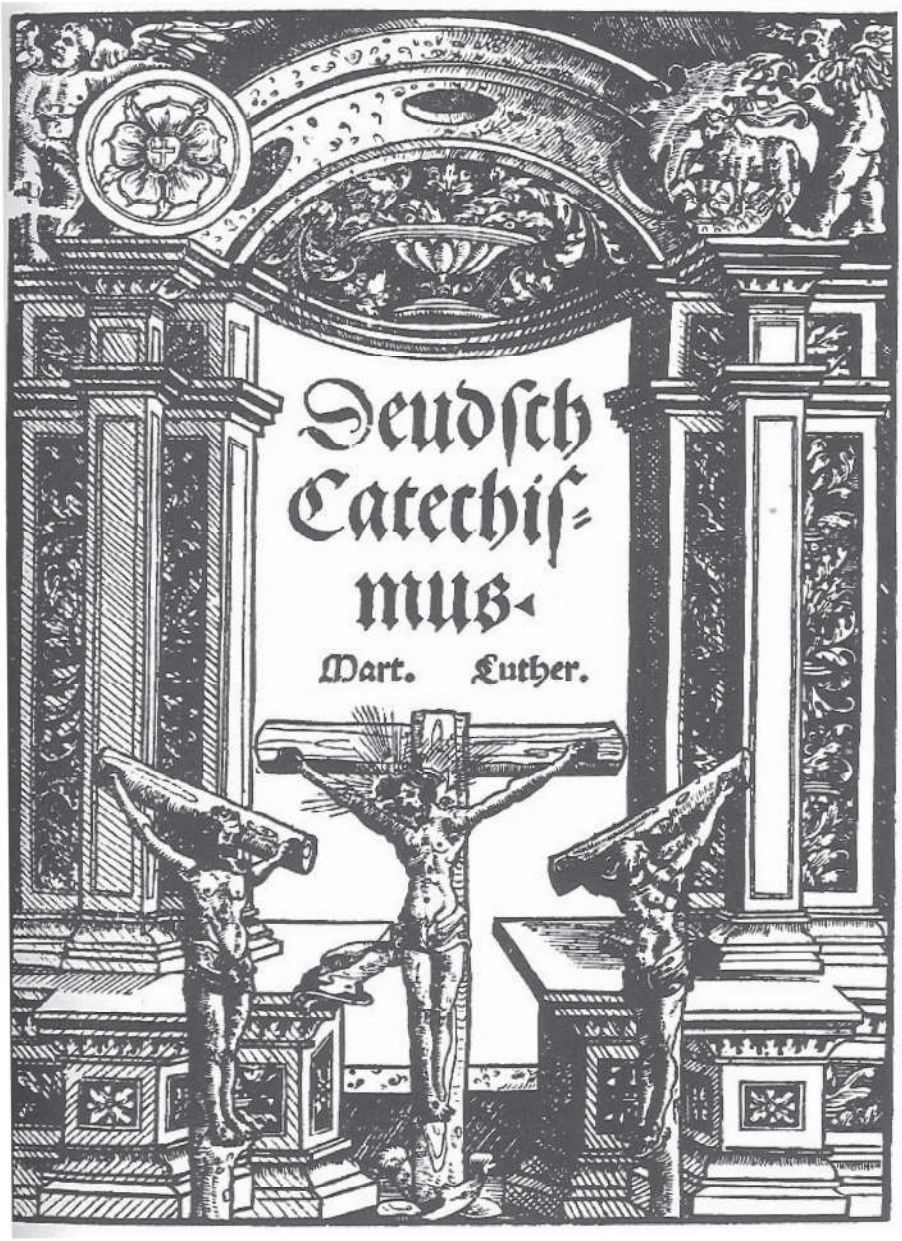
A JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY



LUTHER'S TWO CATECHISMS

REFORMATION 2007 VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 4

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The Catechism: The Heart of the Reformation

John Nordling

According to the 1986 version of Luther's Small Catechism, a catechism is a "book of instruction, usually in the form of questions and answers."[1] The word "catechism" does not occur as such in the Bible, although the idea of *having been taught* (from the Greek verb κατηχέω) does occur several times in the New Testament. For example, in Luke 1:4 St. Luke writes to Theophilus concerning the certainty of the things "you have been taught" (περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης). Likewise, in Acts 18:25 St. Luke describes Apollos as a man with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures "who had been taught" (κατηχημένος) in the way of the Lord. Finally, in Galatians 6:6 St. Paul exhorts the "man who has been taught" (ὁ κατηχούμενος) to share all manner of good things with "his instructor" (τῷ κατηχοῦντι), with his "catechist," if you will. We see from such indications that the word κατηχέω in its various manifestations[2] could be used in a technical sense for "Christian teaching." This was millennia before Luther applied it as a title to his Small and Large Catechisms that appeared in 1529.[3]

In what way does the catechism represent "the heart of the Reformation"?[4] I shall provide an answer to this question at the end of this article. Let us consider three matters that do in fact contribute to the idea that the catechism represents "the heart of the Reformation": first, historical development of the catechism; second, learning the catechism; and third, living the catechism.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE CATECHISM

Luther was hardly the first to prepare a catechism for students.[5] As concern mounted for instruction in the basics of the Christian faith in the years immediately preceding the Reformation, various primers for the catechization of children and adults appeared as early as the thirteenth century. At the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) a set of laws emerged that would shape catechetical practices in the church for centuries to come:

> Among other things, [the council] decreed that once a year each male or female believer (after they reached the age of discretion) go to his priest and faithfully confess his sins, fulfill to the best of his abilities the assigned penance, and receive Holy Communion during the Easter season. The decree was given weight by the threat that those who would not comply with it would be excommunicated and denied Christian burial upon their death. To this decree were added suggestions about how priests should handle confession, and the threat of punishment (defrocking and imprisonment) for those priests who failed to keep the confessional secret.[6]

The medieval church pushed the responsibility of religious instruction onto the people: "Parents and godparents were charged with teaching the children the Creed, Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, Ten Commandments, and all that was necessary for 'a good confession' of sins."[7] Priests, meanwhile, became sinister physicians of the soul, "carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and the sin" (*diligenter inquirens et peccatoris circumstantias et peccati*).[8] A brief sampling of catechetical materials from this time reveals the investigative, or even inquisitorial, role of the man who heard the sins of the people:[9] *Manuel des péchés* (1260),[10] *The Lay Folk's Catechism* (1357),[11] and Jean Gerson's *ABCs of Simple Folk* (fourteenth century).[12] Additional titles confirm the same impression.[13]

The term "catechism" as a title for instructional primers did not come into extensive use until the mid to late 1520s when "a flood of catechetical literature hit the market."[14] There were some sixty-two printings of thirteen different instructional booklets that emerged in Wittenberg alone between the years 1522 and 1529. The total number throughout Germany — published between 1524 and 1529 — numbered some 176 separate catechisms.[15]

Luther's Small Catechism came about as a result of three separate, though interrelated events: first, one pastor's persistent request for a catechism to cement the teachings of the Reformation in territories adjacent to his congregation; second, the so-called Church Visitations undertaken by the reformers in the 1520s; and third, as a response to a controversy that raged between two of Luther's closest co-workers, Philipp Melanchthon and Johannes Agricola.

With respect to the persistent request for a catechism, Nicholas Hausmann, a pastor in Zwickau, requested the Elector of Saxony to initiate a visitation of the churches as early as 1523.[16] Failing to obtain his request, Hausmann turned directly to Wittenberg and reiterated the need for a visitation towards the end of 1524. At this time Hausmann apparently requested that a catechism be prepared for the young. Luther responded on 2 February 1525 (WA Br 3: 431) that he had instructed Justus

John Nordling is Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Jonas and Johann Agricola to prepare a catechism for children (*catechismus puerorum*).[17] This is the first time that the word *catechism*, which hitherto signified oral instruction, was applied to a book.[18] After waiting several more months, Hausmann turned to the court of Electoral Saxony and on May 2 asked, "What kind of lessons should be held for the unlettered small children?"[19] Then he repeated his desire yet again on 23 August 1525 to Stephen Roth, assistant at the Wittenberg city church: "O that it [the catechism] would be supplied and quickly published!"[20] Luther had in fact assigned the task of writing a catechism to trusted colleagues Justus Jonas and Johannes Agricola by 1525; however, their joint work on the project ended when Agricola settled in Eisleben to become rector of the newly established Latin school there.

These unfortunate consequences of the early Reformation produced repeated calls for visitations of congregations.

One year later (1526), in his preface to the *German Mass*, Luther called again for the production of a simple catechism and also proposed an outline of what it might look like. Here Luther proposed that children and catechumens should be questioned "point by point," and provided answers to what each part means and how to understand it. Luther wrote:

> If everything cannot be covered at once, let one point be taken up today, and tomorrow another [point]. If parents and guardians will not take the trouble to do this, either themselves or through others, there never will be a catechism. . . . In this manner they should be questioned:
>
> What do you pray?
> *Answer*: The Our Father.
> What is meant when you say: Our Father in Heaven?
> *Answer*: That God is not an earthly, but a heavenly Father who would make us rich and blessed in heaven.
> What is meant by Hallowed be thy name?
> *Answer*: That we should honor his name and keep it from being profaned.
> How do we profane or dishonor his name?
> *Answer*: When we, who should be his children, live evil lives and teach and believe what is wrong . . . etc. (AE 53: 65)[21]

And so on, through the remaining articles of the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments (AE 53: 65–66).[22] Here in 1526 we begin to see the form that the finalized version of the Small Catechism would take in 1529. Meanwhile, Luther suggested that his *Little Prayer Book* (*Ein Betbuchlein*), first published in 1522 and revised in 1525, should serve as a source for catechesis.[23] The *Betbuchlein* was not so much a catechism as a medieval prayer-book, "designed to assist especially the laity in their devotional life."[24]

Another event contributing to the urgency of developing a catechism was the church visitations that began in the first half of 1526. The "Instructions for Visitors," however, would not be drawn up until 1527 to 1528.[25] The early days of the Reformation had produced mixed results in church life. First, the nobility plundered the assets and property of monasteries, so church property began to fall into ruin. Second, the laity stopped paying their offerings with the result that dedicated pastors often went unpaid and so lived at subsistence levels.[26] Then too, the Reformation left a large swath of religious indifference in its wake: "The peasants learned nothing, knew nothing, prayed not at all, did nothing except [to] abuse religious freedom, and did not go to confession or commune."[27] On top of this, congregations remained agitated and unsettled following the Peasants' Revolt (1524–1525).[28]

These unfortunate consequences of the early Reformation produced repeated calls for visitations of congregations, in order to assess the condition of parishes and to assist in the introduction of the guiding principles of the Reformation. We have already considered the request of pastor Nicholas Hausmann for a visitation of congregations in Zwickau in 1523. In October 1525 and again in November 1526, Luther joined Hausmann in urging that visitations be carried out, with the intention of making sure faithful pastors received a regular income. However, these early calls were delayed, first by the death of the Elector Frederick in 1525, and then by the hesitation of subsequent princes about the possibility of having to finance church reforms out of the state chest.[29]

An initial visitation was carried out under George Spalatin in the first half of 1526 for the purpose of examining the theological aptitude of pastors. It is interesting to note that the Reformation succeeded or failed in large measure according to the quality of those pastors who brought the teachings of the Reformation to a specific area. Men like the aforementioned Hausmann and Jonas came to embody a new type of Lutheran cleric who was schooled in the languages and in the distinctive doctrines of the Reformation. But there were other clergymen who, though they had renounced the abuses of the Roman church in varying degree, were hardly competent in carrying out the objectives of the Reformation. Many had adopted the new Lutheran faith for the "sake of the belly." For example, one odd preacher carried a canister of beer into the pulpit to refresh himself occasionally during the preaching.[30] Then there were clergy who dressed outlandishly, striving to give the broadest possible interpretation to the new freedom from Rome.[31] Nor was it unusual for the peasants to talk or to walk about outside the church in the graveyard during the service.[32] By 1527 teams of theologians, jurists, and court counselors were crisscrossing the territories of Saxony for the purpose of conducting visitations of the congregations there. Melanchthon prepared "In-

structions for Visitors,"[33] and even Luther, despite his press of duties at the University of Wittenberg and elsewhere, served as a visitor in 1529, and again in 1530.[34]

The visitations revealed that the stereotype of the sixteenth-century peasant was all too true. Many of the peasants were a "harsh, crude folk who far preferred fairs and hard drinking to church services."[35] Visitation records reveal the deplorable state of affairs that Luther complains about in his Preface to the Small Catechism.[36] For example, only three people attended worship services in a town called Ducher where some 110 families lived; at Werche the peasants could not recite the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, nor the Creed; and at Zinna the peasants refused to learn the Lord's Prayer because it was too long![37] No wonder that Luther expressed frustration at those who stubbornly refused to learn the faith.[38] Such experiences undoubtedly compelled Luther to complete the catechism.

The third event that had a direct bearing upon the publication of the catechisms was the first Antinomian Controversy, which broke out between two of Luther's closest colleagues, Johann Agricola and Philipp Melanchthon. Without entering too deeply into the specific nature of the controversy,[39] we may nonetheless observe that Agricola attacked Melanchthon for teaching that the law has a necessary role in salvation by moving a sinner to contrition, defined as "sorrow for sin," in advance of the work of the gospel, that is, the announcement that the death of Christ has paid for all sins completely. Agricola taught, wrongly, that the true knowledge of sin is produced not by the law but by the gospel, and that "there is in the Church no use whatever for the Law of God."[40] Melanchthon maintained his doctrine of the law on the basis of situations found during the visitations.[41] Eventually it became clear that both Agricola and Melanchthon diverged significantly from Luther, but each in a different direction:

> In a compromise presented and formulated by Luther, the necessity of preaching repentance was expressly affirmed, and thereby Melanchthon was largely vindicated. Agricola was granted that repentance "follows from and after faith," and that repentance and the law belong to faith. At the same time it was said that one must believe that God is the one who threatens, commands, and frightens. Because of the limited ability of "the unschooled, common people" to understand this, one had to distinguish repentance, commandment, law, and fear from the justifying faith in Christ. Thus they achieved no real clarification.[42]

The practical effect of the controversy was that it postponed publication of the two catechisms by several years.[43] One should recall that Luther had charged Agricola and Jonas with the publication of the Small Catechism in 1525. By November 1527 Agricola had completed a catechism in question-and-answer format entitled *One Hundred and Thirty Common Questions for the Young Children in the German Girls' School in Eisleben*.[44] However, this catechism-of-the-long-title "was seen as too complicated and difficult for beginning students,"[45] plus it was compromised by Agricola's theological inadequacies just described. When Luther's Small Catechism appeared in January 1529[46] Agricola's sank into obscurity. In contrast, Luther's Small Catechism was issued in thirty German editions before Luther's death in 1546.[47] By the end of the sixteenth century it appeared in at least 125 more editions.[48] Luther himself regarded his two catechisms to be among his most important books. In a letter to Wolfgang Capito in July 1537, he wrote:

> I am quite cold and indifferent about arranging my books, for, incited by a Saturnine hunger, I would much rather have them all devoured, *eo quod Saturnina fame percitus magis cuperem eos omnes devoratos.* For none do I acknowledge as really my books, except perhaps *De Servo Arbitrio* and the Catechism.[49]

Agricola taught, wrongly, that the true knowledge of sin is produced not by the law but by the gospel.

Still later, the catechisms were pointed out repeatedly as representative of that which epitomized the evangelical purpose of the Reformation.[50]

LEARNING THE CATECHISM

We have just mentioned the large number of catechisms that were published during the sixteenth century. However, the publication, buying, and selling of such instructional books does not in itself explain how the catechism reached the majority of people with the message of the Reformation. Even though the publication of Luther's Small Catechism, in particular, was a great success, most people could not read it. The literacy rate throughout the Holy Roman Empire was perhaps five percent. It never rose higher than thirty percent in the cities where, to be sure, there were more people who could read and write. If the Reformation was "an urban event,"[51] it remains the case that it was "a minority event as well."[52] Only about ten percent of the population of the Holy Roman Empire lived in cities:

> [These] ranged in size from about fifty thousand inhabitants for a city such as Nuremberg to around two thousand inhabitants, a more typical size for the great majority of towns and cities. These were obviously not the great metropolises we are familiar with today. As is often the case even in major shifts in Western history, the great bulk of the population did not—at least at first—participate actively in the change. It was activists, first of all in the city but also . . . in the countryside, who propagated or opposed the Reformation.[53]

Thus, face-to-face oral transmission remained "the primary mode of communication" by which information was passed.[54] Scholars suppose that the reformers utilized a "two-stage communication process"[55] by which face-to-face communication was integrated with the new technology of the printing press. First, reformers took advantage of whatever literacy there was by targeting those who could read — persons who, incidentally, happened also to be the "opinion makers" of the day: preachers, teachers, and government officials. Even country villages usually had one or two such persons — the village priest, perhaps, or minor officials associated with the economic aspirations of the community.[56] These literate priests, pastors, and minor officials passed the message of the catechism on to greater numbers of nonreading folk in the traditional manner, that is, orally: "One reader could share the fruits of his or her reading with hundreds and even thousands of other people."[57] Thus, the Strasbourg preacher Mattheus Zell stated that he was putting into print that which he had already taught orally to some 3,000 people.[58] A treatise such as Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520) might be reprinted some twelve times within a year or two of its initial publication, representing perhaps some 13,000 copies.[59] But one preacher, such as Zell, who read the treatise and incorporated its message into sermons, could multiply Luther's influence many times over.

Luther was not concerned about a student's inner creativity.

It is important to remember, then, that Luther's Small Catechism still reflected the process of transmitting the contents of the catechism from a small group of literate persons to a much larger group who could not read or write. Luther intended his catechism to target primarily pastors, but also parents, and other "opinion makers" who would in turn share the teachings of the catechism orally with children and illiterate members of the household. Let us suppose, then, that a document such as the Small Catechism followed a three-stage process designed to move children, or indeed semiliterate adults, from knowing little or nothing about the faith to having it impressed upon one's heart, to coming to internalize its contents, and finally to behold, and love Jesus Christ through an encounter with saving doctrine.

In the first stage, then, Luther wanted catechumens to learn the bare texts of the catechism itself. In the second stage, catechumens were to learn the meaning of the memorized passages through such explanations as those which the Small Catechism itself provides. In the third stage, Luther intended that the pastor should take up a larger catechism, such as his Large Catechism published in 1529, and so explore the various components in greater detail.[60] The general movement was from pastor to people, from parent to child, and from the simple and bare teaching of an easily memorized passage to the increasingly more complex teachings which a Christian ponders, meditates upon, and indeed prays for the rest of his life.[61]

Stage one, then, was "Learn and Remember the Basics." This stage assumed that those who learned the catechism would do so by hearing it, not by reading it. Accordingly, the catechetical instruction would only do catechumens some good if they remembered what they heard. Hence the purpose of the first stage was to get a catechumen to learn the teaching by heart, then reproduce it by heart. That is why Luther insisted in his Preface to the Small Catechism that a pastor should decide upon a single text of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and stick with it "year after year."[62] To be sure, this method seems needlessly rigid to many pedagogues today, who typically fret about the damage that memory work allegedly does to the inner creativity of a student. Luther, however, was not concerned about a student's inner creativity; his technique instead conforms the heart of a young student to what is important and precious, that is, the word of God. Luther also desired to avoid confusing students by inundating them with conflicting versions of essentially the same idea: "If hearing the catechism is the only way that they can learn it by heart, it is important that it be used repeatedly in the same way."[63]

Let us reflect a moment upon the importance of memory in Luther's pedagogical agenda. It should become clear that Luther's first stage represents not a form of mindless rote-learning, but an effective procedure of internalizing a teaching completely, that is, a fixing into one's heart that which is life-transforming and precious. Luther was hardly the first to impose the rigor of memorization on students. The memorization of important concepts actually reaches far back into the educational agendas of earlier church fathers with whom Luther and the other reformers were familiar.

Consider the Creed. The fathers universally exhorted their catechumens to learn the Creed by heart. Cyril of Jerusalem (315–368) urged: "This is what I want you to retain verbatim, and which each of you must carefully recite, without writing it on paper, but by engraving it by memory in your hearts."[64] Likewise, St. Augustine (354–430) declared:

> Receive, my sons, the rule of faith, called the Creed. Upon receiving it, write it in your heart, and every day recite it among yourselves. Before you fall asleep, before you proceed to anything, gird yourselves with your Creed. No one writes down the Creed just to be read; he stamps it on his soul, lest forgetfulness should lose what diligence had given him. Your book is your memory.[65]

Thus memory has its place in an oral culture in which people either cannot read and write at all, or are only semiliterate. In such a culture, and among such students, the spoken word represents the primary means of communication. In such a case,

a person "knows" only that which he or she can remember.[66] Luther, then, desired his catechism to be learned "by heart."[67] Even in our culture there remains the advisability of mastering certain items so thoroughly that they can never be forgotten, such as, for example, the alphabet, the musical scales, or even the dribbling of a basketball. The simple alphabet becomes one of the nonnegotiable building-blocks of reading literature, just as the mastery of musical scales becomes part and parcel of learning to play the piano well. How can one play the game of basketball without paying requisite attention to dribbling the ball, playing defense, shooting, or rebounding?

The catechumen's answer to the question takes on the character of a confession of faith.

Luther intended that the Small Catechism would come to constitute the Christian's internal "computer operating system" (for example, DOS, Windows, Mac OS), which would become fixed in the immediate stores of memory, and thereby become the foundation for approaching God and all things spiritual. In Luther's mind, the endlessly repeated teachings of the catechism act directly upon the mind and heart of the young Christian and thereby bring about the new attitudes, thoughts, and actions associated with the word of God. After all, in Luther's theology, it is through the word of God that the Spirit bestows his blessings and drives the devil away. Luther wrote:

> The Holy Spirit does not come without the Word. But He wants to come through the harp, that is, through meditation on the Word or through the voices of father, mother, or others. Otherwise the devil comes. As David, Isaiah, and the entire Scripture testify, the Holy Spirit comes with the Word and through the Word, according to the passage: Blessed is the man who meditates in the Law of God day and night (Ps 1:1 f.).[68]

With respect to the second stage of the learning process, we may observe that committing a text to memory does not exhaust the learning of the passage, but instead provides a foundation upon which stands all subsequent mastery. Consider Luther's rather notorious admonition that the pastor or catechist should abide by a fixed form of teaching from year to year "without altering a single syllable."[69] That admonition represents stage one of learning the catechism, of course. In order to promote an actual understanding of a text, Luther suggested that ample time be allowed for coming to terms with the text's deeper meaning: "Nothing would be accomplished by mere memorizing."[70] One of the prime characteristics of the catechism is its unique form of question and answer, ensuring that what is learned, that is, memorized, might also be well understood at a deeper cognitive level.

Here we come to the question so frequently met in any encounter with Luther's Small Catechism, namely, "What does this mean?" (*Was ist das?*). Luther was hardly the first to employ the method of question-and-answer in catechetical instruction,[71] though we may say that Luther's questions in the Small Catechism are unique for their simplicity and directness. *Was ist das?* has been translated into English most famously as "What does this mean?" though perhaps a more correct rendering is "What is that?" followed immediately by an answer (*Antwort*) which supplies a direct answer to the question posed. Luther was interested, then, not in "the deeper hidden meaning" of a concept, nor in the learner's own subjective interpretation of the concept, but rather in the learner's coming to terms with, and direct expression of, the basic definition of a concept. Luther was thereby interested in an encounter with reality itself.[72]

Note that the "Answer" is less an "explanation" in the modern sense than a restatement of what was just said. Let us consider the First Commandment in this light:

> Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
> *Was ist das?* (What does this mean?) *Antwort*: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

The question, "What does this mean?" functions as a link between the original proposition "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," and the Answer (*Antwort*). The Answer, as a restatement of the original proposition, is not open for discussion but simply states what is: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."[73] What follows the question is intended to represent the response of the catechumen. Not only does the structure of the catechism permit a catechumen to master a point pedagogically, but the catechumen's answer to the question takes on the character of a confession of faith.

Consider in this connection the famous and much-maligned statement, "This is most certainly true," the phrase that concludes each of the three articles in Luther's explanation of the Creed. "This is most certainly true" represents not a particular interpretation on the part of the catechumen, but instead an assent of faithfulness to what has just been stated about each Person of the Godhead. The catechumen may be a mere child, or mentally handicapped, or an unlettered peasant, but the proposition confessed takes on the character of the affirmation Christ says he will stand by before his Father in heaven (Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8). Luther declares in this connection:

> Those who confess [Christ] before this evil and adulterous generation and must suffer much thereby, Christ in turn will confess . . . before his heavenly Father and requite them for their suffering with the delights of eternity [Mt 10:32]. God himself says, 1 Samuel 2[:30], "He who honors me, I will honor." Even if the waves of the sea

> are strong and huge billows rise up and roar furiously as though they would drown us, the Lord is still on high and has begun a kingdom as wide as the world which he now rules and has decreed that it shall endure. He is greater, yes, almighty, and he will accomplish it. Amen. (AE 43: 176–177)[74]

In addition to "question-and-answer," Luther used a full range of repetitive and mnemonic devices in the Small Catechism that were intended to impress the truthfulness of a concept not only upon the mind and heart of a learner, but also upon his mouth and lips. In the oral culture for which Luther wrote, repetition forced the mind to move forward slowly and thus reflect deeply upon what the lips declared. Consider the following repetitions that should be quite familiar to anyone who has had even a brief encounter with the Small Catechism: "lie and deceive," "house and home," "wife and children," "clothing and shoes," "gold or silver," "body and soul," "eyes and ears," "reason and all my senses," and "fields, cattle, and all my goods."[75] In addition, the catechism is loaded with many alliterative elements wherein initial consonants of successive words share the same sound: *Notdurft und Nahrung* ("needs and nourishment"); *Leibes und Lebes* ("body and life"); *behütet und bewahret* ("protects and defends"); *Tod und Teufel* ("death and the devil"); and *Worten und Werken* ("in words and deeds").[76] Finally the Small Catechism shows a decided preference for concrete terms rather than abstract concepts, for what is concrete can be more easily grasped by the mind:

The Small Catechism shows a decided preference for concrete terms rather than abstract concepts.

> So where Luther could have used a more abstract term like "family," he writes "wife and child." Instead of writing "economic livelihood," he speaks of field and cattle. Instead of referring to shelter, he has house and home, clothing and shoes. In other words, Luther uses readily understood examples from daily life in order to convey the catechism's teaching.[77]

The third stage of learning the catechism is what Charles Arand refers to as "the lifelong practice of the fundamentals": "Luther regarded the texts of the catechism to be of such fundamental importance that a Christian should daily make use of them throughout life."[78] By providing the basics, the two catechisms were intended to be more of a companion for daily reflection and refreshment along the journey of life. Here we could reflect upon the depth of the catechism.[79] We could develop the idea that, in so many ways, the catechism remains a brief compendium and summary of Scripture's central contents.[80] In this connection, however, we can do no better than consider what Luther said in response to certain fellows who were carrying on as though the catechism was "a simple, silly teaching" which they could "absorb and master at one reading" (LC Preface, 5; Tappert, 359). In response to such callous thinking, Luther declared:

> As for myself, let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher — yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning, and whenever else I have time, 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, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism, and I do it gladly. These dainty, fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to become doctors above all doctors, to know all there is to be known. Well, this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the people's souls, yes, even God and his Word. They need not fear a fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need is to become children and begin learning their ABC's [*sic*], which they think they have outgrown long ago. (LC Preface, 7–8; Tappert, 359)[81]

This is vintage Luther. The passage assumes that each and every Christian remains a lifelong learner of the faith, including Luther himself who actually wrote both the Small and Large Catechism. Lutherans often submit to the catechism in their youth, "kicking against the pricks" the entire time! Were it not perhaps for a devoted parent — in my case, a mother who sat down with me daily and listened patiently to my halting efforts to recite the Six Chief Parts — we would never have memorized the catechism and thus internalized the faith. What happens then, as we all know, is that the young catechumen is thrown out into life, there to test the catechism's doctrines against life's experiences. Along this journey the catechism is intended to keep the Christian centered on the chief articles of the Christian faith:

> In doing so, [the catechism] provides the Christian with a defense against spiritual assaults on the one hand and assists Christians in making sense of their lives on the other hand. To that end, the catechisms provide an invaluable service to the novice and veteran of the faith alike.[82]

LIVING THE CATECHISM

Luther returned to Wittenberg from the Wartburg in December 1521 to face a congregation racked by turbulence caused by Karlstadt and the "Zwickau prophets." By March 1522 Luther came to preach a remarkable series of sermons intended to lead the congregation away from the fanatical enthusiasm inspired

by Karlstadt and answer many questions agitating the Wittenbergers at that time.[83] In his first sermon, dated 9 March 1522 on Invocavit Sunday, Luther observed:

> The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but every one must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore, every one must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian. (AE 51: 70)[84]

We might fairly refer to the catechism itself as "the chief things which concern a Christian," to quote Luther. Luther remarks in many places that the Christian does daily battle with sin, death, and the devil. However, with Christ by our side upon the plain, we are daily forgiven much. Amid the problems of daily life, Christian faith can be, and actually is, refined and strengthened. It is true that I cannot die for you, nor you for me, but Christ has already died for you, me, and all sinners on the cross. His is the one death that avails before God the Father. A Lutheran perspective on life, then, is to see one's vocation, possessions, spouse, fields, and cattle as the unique arena wherein each one, with Christ, does battle with the devil and emerges victorious, for the Christian basks in Christ's victory. In other words, the catechism has much to offer Christians who conceive of life as an exercise in the fine art of living by grace through faith.

Which one of the Six Chief Parts of the catechism best expresses the art of living by grace through faith? Each part of the catechism has been set up to bring a Christian to repentance and faith in Christ. Certainly each of the Ten Commandments work this way, as does each article of the Creed, and each petition of the Lord's Prayer. However, in order to see how the catechism functions as an aid to developing the art of "living by grace through faith," let us turn to Luther's catechetical treatment of baptism in the Fourth Chief Part.

Luther avers that baptism is not simple water only, but is the water "included in God's command and combined with God's word."[85] Baptism, more than anything else, is the missionary sacrament by which a person is transferred from the lordship of the devil to the lordship of Christ. Paul says in Romans that we were "baptized into Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:3); therefore, Luther writes in the Fourth Chief Part:

> The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and . . . a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and innocence forever.[86]

In other words, baptism incorporates the Christian into Christ himself. Thus in the Small Catechism, Luther uses the same language to speak of baptism as he does to describe the work of Christ in the Second Article of the Creed. Christ and baptism do the same thing: Christ, in historical time, rescued us "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil,"[87] and likewise baptism daily in my everyday experience as a Christian "rescues from death and the devil."[88] In baptism, God links our eternal destiny to the destiny of Jesus Christ, a destiny of "dying and rising" (Rom 6:3, 4). The gifts that Christ acquired for the world in the Second Article are here delivered in baptism. In this way, baptism becomes the gateway to all God's blessings. Charles Arand writes on this point:

> Baptism . . . gives Christians a foundation for their entire life. It is a miniature and complete picture of the Christian life. It involves the believer's birth, discipleship, conflict with Satan, death, and resurrection.[89]

In another passage, Luther mentioned that baptism brings about a real death and resurrection for the Christian: "This should not be understood only allegorically as the death of sin and the life of grace, as many understand it, but as actual death and resurrection" (AE 36: 68). In our baptism, then, we are linked to Christ, daily die to sin with him and, likewise, rise with Christ to innocence and blessedness forever.

We have seen how, in so many ways, the catechism presents itself as the "heart of the Reformation." Luther wrote both catechisms when it seemed the priceless tenets of the Reformation — *sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura* — could well have been lost, due to the pressures of sometimes violent social change and due to tendencies toward doctrinal indifference. The things about the catechism that we took exception to in our youth — its apparent simplicity and endlessly repetitive nature — have proved to be key to the catechism's success. Nor should the catechism remain for us a painful memory of having to submit to the authority of our pastor and parents in the memorization of the Six Chief Parts. The catechism, as Luther testifies, was something to which he himself submitted each day joyfully as an adult and thereby daily relearned his spiritual ABCs.[90] The catechism represents the heart of the Reformation because, in the Reformation, Luther and countless Christians recovered the essential message of the gospel and so were refreshed and strengthened by the word of Jesus Christ. Luther expressed himself quite positively about the evangelical nature of catechetical instruction in September 1528, just before publication of the Small Catechism. Luther wrote that fifteen-year-old boys and girls now know more about the word of God "than all the universities and doctors before," because the true catechism was being taught — namely, the

> Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, what confession, baptism, prayer, the cross, living, dying, and the sacrament of the altar are, and about what marriage, civil government, father and mother, wife and child, man and son, servant and maid are. In sum, I have brought a good conscience and order to all the estates in the world, so that everyone knows how he is to live and serve God in his estate, and not a little fruit, peace, and virtue has been produced among those who have accepted it.[91]

NOTES

1. *Luther's Small Catechism: With Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 52.

2. Consider also Acts 21:21, 24; Rom 2:18; 1 Cor 14:19.

3. H. W. Beyer (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:639) writes that κατηχέω, like the much more common διδάσκω, could be used "as a technical term for Christian instruction" in the New Testament. The noun κατήχησις ("instruction by word of mouth," Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, New Edition, 927) occurs in Hippocrates *Praec.* 13; Cicero *Attic.* 15.12.2; Diony. Hal. *Dem.* 50; *Din.* 7; Diog. Laert. 7.89.

4. The title was assigned to the author by several pastors who invited the author to present an earlier version of this article to a small group at St. James Lutheran Church in Reynolds, IN, on 27 October 2006.

5. For the best treatment, see Gottfried G. Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism in the Context of Late Medieval Catechetical Literature," *Concordia Journal* 25 (1999): 364–404.

6. Ibid., 365.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid. The Latin appears in H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 31st ed. (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1957), No. 437.

9. "Parishioners were to confess their sins, but they also were to be interrogated by the 'diligently inquiring' priest. The by-law-obligatory confession and Holy Communion combined elements of pastoral care with efforts of spiritual and social control. Following that decree, regional synods ordered that the Decalogue had to have a fixed place in the confession of sins. Soon the first catechetical treatment of the Decalogue appeared" (Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 366).

10. French: *Manual of Transgressions*. The treatise in French verse contained instruction in the Creed and Ten Commandments, but also the Seven Deadly Sins and Penance. See Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 70.

11. Intended to counter ignorance on the part of the clergy, it carried an indulgence for those who memorized it. See Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 86 n. 63.

12. It contains the Seven Deadly Sins, Contrary Virtues, Hail Mary, Seven Works of Mercy, Seven Offshoots of Penance, among other teachings. See Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 86 n. 65.

13. See the ascetic tracts designed to assist parents and sponsors in the instruction of children in Johann M. Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of Its Origin, Its Distribution and Its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg, 1929), 1; see also, Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 367 n. 45–50.

14. Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 70; Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over* Poenitentia (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 47, describes an "explosion of catechisms" that occurred in Wittenberg from 1525 to 1527.

15. See Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 51; and Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 70, for the specifics.

16. Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 49.

17. "Ione & Eyslebio mandatus est Catechismus puerorum parandus" (WA Br 3: 431).

18. See Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 12.

19. "Was fur Ubunge mit den unverstandigen kleinen Kindern solle gehalten warden?" in Ferdinand Cohrs, *Die Evangelischen Katechismusversuche vor Luthers Enchiridion* (Berlin: A. Hofmann, 1900–1907), 4:247; and Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 49 n. 13.

20. "Utinam [Catechismus] a Jono suppleretur citoque ederetur in lucem, sperarem profectum inde maximum," in Cohrs, *Die Evangelischen Katechismusversuche*, 4:248; Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 49 n. 14.

21. See also Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 13.

22. See also Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 13–14.

23. Frederick Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921; reprint, 1965), 78.

24. Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 48.

25. See AE 40: 266.

26. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985–1993), 2:259–260.

27. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:270

28. Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 72. For details on the Peasants' Revolt, see E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 556–570.

29. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:261; Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 72.

30. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times*, 630–631.

31. "They. . . . wore 'multicolored coats,' 'baggy knee breeches,' and 'shoes with pointed toes' during the services" (Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times*, 627).

32. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times*, 627.

33. For example, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony" (1528), in AE 40: 263–320.

34. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:270; Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 73.

35. James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 216.

36. "Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty" (SC Preface; Tappert, 338).

37. For specifics, see Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 73 nn. 76–77; and Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 4.

38. "If any refuse to receive your instructions, tell them that they deny Christ and are no Christians. They should not be admitted to the sacrament, be accepted as sponsors in Baptism, or be allowed to participate in any Christian privileges. On the contrary, they should be turned over to the pope and his officials, and even to the devil himself. In addition, parents and employers should refuse to furnish them with food and drink and should notify them that the prince is disposed to banish such rude people from his land" (SC Preface; Tappert, 339).

39. See Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 161–172; Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:264–265; Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 18–19; and Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 73–75.

40. Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 162.

41. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:265.

42. Ibid. For the compromise formulated by Luther, see the Instructions intended for parish pastors in Saxony, in AE 40: 274–275. Brecht maintains (*Martin Luther*, 2:265) that Luther had not wanted to believe that there was a difference of opinion between Agricola and Melanchthon, with the result that "the conflict later broke out again[,] just that much more severely."

43. Agricola had begun to reveal Antinomian tendencies as early as 1525. See Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 163.

44. It proved to be very popular and went through ten printings in two years. See Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 59–61.

45. See Arand, *That I May be His Own*, 88 n. 85.

46. Each section appeared on large sheets of paper, "to be sold like newspapers and hung up in churches, schools, and homes"; see Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 75. See also Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 17–18; and Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:275.

47. Reu (*Luther's Small Catechism*, 25–45) considers several of these.

48. Arand mentions (*That I May be His Own*, 75) the translations of the Small Catechism into various languages, including one polyglot edition in German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew that appeared in 1572. See also Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 46–60.

49. In Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 91.

50. See Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 60, 63, 64, 65, 71.

51. See A. G. Dickens (*The German Nation and Martin Luther* [London, 1974], 182), who summarizes a wealth of previous scholarship.

52. Mark U. Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 37.

53. Ibid.

54. Robert W. Scribner, "Oral Culture and the Diffusion of Reformation Ideas," in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 50.

55. Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 37.

56. Scribner, "Oral Culture," 50; and Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 92.

57. Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 38.

58. Mattheus Zell, *Christeliche Verantwortung M. Matthes Zell von Keyserssberg Pfarrherrs und Predigers im Münster zu Strassburg, uber Artickel jm vom Bischöfflichem Fiscal daselbs entgegen gesetzt, unnd im rechten ubergeben* (Strassbourg: Köpffel, 1523) b; Tü 217/613; in Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 39 n. 33.

59. For the example, see Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 39.

60. Luther mentions the three stages in SC Preface 7–10, 14–16, and 17–18, in Tappert, 338–339, 339–340, and 340, respectively.

61. For the significance of praying the catechism, see John T. Pless, "Fidelity to the Catechism in Prayer and Teaching," *Lutheran Forum* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 8–15.

62. "The preacher should take the utmost care to avoid changes or variations in the text and wording of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, etc. On the contrary, he should adopt one form, adhere

to it, and use it repeatedly year after year. Young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form. They are easily confused if a teacher employs one form now and another form — perhaps with the intention of making improvements — later on" (SC Preface; Tappert, 338–339.

63. Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 98.

64. Ὅπερ καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῆς τῆς λέξεως μνημονεῦσαι ὑμᾶς βούλομαι, καὶ παρ 'ἑαυτοῖς μετὰ πάσης σπουδῆς ἀπαγγεῖλαι, οὐκ εἰς χάρτας ἀπογραφομένους, ἀλλ ' ἐν καρδίῃ τῇ μνήμῃ στηλογραφοῦντας (Cyril, *Catechesis* 5.12. In Migne, *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* 33:521; cited in Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 99).

65. *Accipite, filii, regulam fidei, quod Symbolum dicitur. et cum accepitis, in corde scribite, et quotidie dicite apud vos: antequam dormiatis, antequam procedatis, vestro Symbolo vos munite. Symbolum nemo scribit ut legi possit: sed ad recensendum, ne forte deleat oblivio quod tradidit diligentia, sit vobis codex vestra memoria* (Augustine, *De Symbolo ad Catechumenos*. In Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 40:627; cited in Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 99).

66. Margaret A. Krych, "The Catechism in Christian Education," *Word and World* 10 (1990): 43–47.

67. "The reason we take such care to preach on the Catechism frequently is to impress it upon our youth, 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" (LC Preface; Tappert, 364).

68. WA 43: 505; translation in Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1463.

69. "We, too, should teach these things to the young and unlearned in such a way that we do not alter a single syllable or recite the catechism differently from year to year" (SC Preface; Tappert, 339).

70. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:274.

71. Most famously, the "verbose and often aimless 130 questions" of Johann Agricola's catechism; see Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 102.

72. Timothy J. Wengert, *A Contemporary Translation of Luther's Small Catechism: Study Edition* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 8. See also Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 380.

73. "'*Was ist das? Antwort*' is the copula with which Luther connects the following *explanatio dicti superioris*, explanation of what has been said above, with the *propositio*" (Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 381).

74. See AE 18: 364 for similar sentiments. Krodel's insights on the nature of the catechumen's declaration of faith ("Luther's Work on the Catechism," 381–382) seem particularly apt.

75. Most of these examples occur in Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 105.

76. Again, the examples occur in Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 104–105.

77. Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 105. In addition to the examples contained in these last two paragraphs, Arand includes (p. 104–109, 199–211) Luther's preference for the spoken — rather than the written — word, various narrative techniques that are especially prevalent in the explanations to the three articles of the Creed, several additional harmonic and rhythmic devices, and the significance of the woodcuts with which Luther and printers adorned early editions of the Small Catechism.

78. *That I May Be His Own*, 109. Arand continues (p. 109–110): "In the same way a pianist practices scales, a basketball player his shots, so also the Christian practices her catechism. The basics lay a foundation for everything that follows. Once students have learned their ABCs, they can go on to learn the grammar of speaking and writing. Scales and arpeggios form the basis for a pianist's repertoire so that a pianist both practices them and then uses them to learn new pieces. A map is drawn in order to be used. It is not enough to learn the map, but one must then take it upon the journey and use it to find one's way to the destination of the journey. In a similar way, these fundamentals of the catechism as contained in its texts, lay the foundation for a person's lifelong spiritual formation."

79. "There is a depth to the catechism that cannot be exhausted in a single session. Instead, the words and contents of the catechism contain the highest mysteries of the faith" (Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 111).

80. See Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 111–113.

81. See Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:278.

82. Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 115.

83. See AE 51: 69–70 for these and other background matters.

84. Also in Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 378.

85. *Luther's Small Catechism*, 21.

86. *Luther's Small Catechism*, 22–23.

87. See the Second Article of the Creed, in *Luther's Small Catechism*, 14.

88. From the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, in *Luther's Small Catechism*, 22.

89. Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 169.

90. See Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 379.

91. WA 26: 530.25–531.20; cited in Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:275 n. 13. I would like to thank John T. Pless, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, for critiquing an earlier version of this paper.