

THE CATECHISM: *A Handbook for Times of Persecution*

by John T. Pless

Luther's Small Catechism is a multipurpose tool. Not only is it a brief summary of Christian doctrine and a guide to the Christian's life of prayer and vocation in the world, it is also a book of comfort. It anchors hearts and minds where true joy is located: in the promises of God made certain in Christ Jesus. As we learn and pray the catechism, God is preparing us for trials and afflictions that well may await us in this life as we move toward death.

Luther was well aware of persecution, as numerous people who had embraced his evangelical teaching were put to death, imprisoned or exiled on account of their confession. As the Turkish army advanced to Germany's back door, Luther was convinced that the threat of an invasion was real and that it was likely that his fellow Germans would soon be suffering for their faith. In 1541, Luther authored a tract, "Appeal for Prayer Against the Turk," in which he urged Christians to implore God for protection and rescue while at the same time urging prudent preparation.

This preparation included the teaching of the catechism: "And finally, I strongly urge that the children be taught the catechism. Should they be taken captive in the invasion, they will at least take something of the Christian faith with them. Who knows what God might accomplish through them. Joseph, as a seventeen year-old youth, was sold into slavery into Egypt, but he had God's word and knew what he believed." Even as Joseph (GEN. 37:12-28) was kept in the true faith because he had God's Word etched into his mind and stored up in his heart, so also will those who have learned the catechism have the spiritual resources to remain faithful if persecution and captivity come. Luther understood instruction in the catechism as preemptive in that it prepared Christians for future suffering at the hands of God's enemies.

Prepping for persecution

Each of the Six Chief Parts of Christian doctrine found in the catechism, as well as the daily prayers and Table of Duties, prepares Christians for persecution. The First Commandment teaches us to fear, love and trust in the one true God above all things, even to suffer death rather than deny Him. In the Second Commandment, we are taught to call upon God's name in every trouble. The God we confess in the Apostles' Creed is the triune God. It is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has made heaven and earth. We are given the confidence that "He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil." In His Son, this God has redeemed

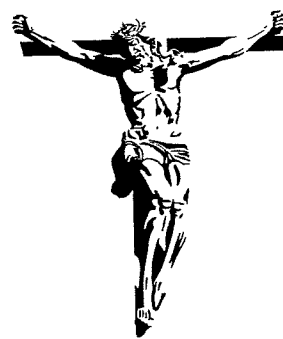
us with His blood "that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom ... even as He is risen from the dead" and "lives and reigns to all eternity." Persecution, imprisonment and death will not snatch God's children from His grasp.

One little line

Perhaps the most pertinent part of the Small Catechism in the face of persecution is the Lord's Prayer. At one point, Luther referred to the Lord's Prayer as seven descriptions of our wretchedness and seven promises of God's mercy. The conclusion of each article of the creed, "This is most certainly true," is the platform from which the Lord's Prayer is uttered with boldness and confidence. You might meditate on each petition of the Lord's Prayer under conditions of persecution. In the midst of suffering, for instance, we petition God to hallow His name in our teaching and living. We pray for the coming of His kingdom and doing of His will as that will is done when God "breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature" and "when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die."

We petition Him for daily bread, which includes everything needed for this life. The Fifth Petition teaches us to pray for those who persecute us. In the Sixth Petition we implore God to guard and keep us so that we are not misled "into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice." The final petition, "Deliver us from evil," summarizes our need and our confidence in persecution even as it looks forward to a "blessed end."

The Lord's Prayer is the basis for the morning and evening prayers in the catechism, where we commend ourselves, body and soul, and all things into the Father's hands. Perhaps it is this little line that best encapsulates the significance of the catechism for Christians facing persecution. LW



**PERSECUTION,
IMPRISONMENT
AND DEATH WILL
NOT SNATCH
GOD'S CHILDREN
FROM HIS GRASP.**

**AS WE LEARN
AND PRAY THE
CATECHISM, GOD
IS PREPARING
US FOR TRIALS
AND AFFLICTIONS
THAT WELL MAY
AWAIT US IN THIS
LIFE AS WE MOVE
TOWARD DEATH.**



The Rev. Prof. John T. Pless (john.pless@ctsfw.edu) is assistant professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions and serves as director of Field Education at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.