

Forming the Faith Today through Luther's Catechisms

by TIMOTHY WENGERT

Do we, who are American Christians of the Lutheran tradition in the waning years of the twentieth century, know what Luther's Small Catechism is? I do not think I knew until 1990. Not that I did not know its content. After all, I had the Rev. Paul Faust as my catechist in Detroit, at the same time I was being instructed by my own pastor in the American Lutheran Church. I even have the confirmation picture to prove it. And I can still rattle off the old approved version. Moreover, I taught the Catechism for eight years in the parish.

And not that I did not know its power. As a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Michigan, while walking home one night, I had fly into my head some words, the origin of which I could not at first trace: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord." Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord. Suddenly I could say those words with such conviction that later I was amazed to remember their origin, namely, Luther's Small Catechism.

Moreover, I know its power for other people in vastly different times and cultures from my own. When my daughter was confirmed in 1993 I gave her a ninety-year-old hymnbook, once belonging to my grandmother, Lydia Semmann, a gift given to her on her confirmation. Years later, senile dementia had taken from her the ability to recognize her own son, my father, yet when he read portions of the Small Catechism to her from that hymnbook, she corrected his mistakes in German without missing a beat.

When a friend of mine, a Lutheran pastor from Germany, was a missionary in Tanzania during the 1980s, he recounted in one of his letters how he had flown on a medical plane into the bush in order to set up a table of religious books for sale. One man, a Lutheran catechist in a remote part of the country, walked five hours in the African sun in order to buy a copy of Luther's Small

Catechism in his own language. Surely a testimony to the power of that book.

And yet, to return to my question, although I knew its content and its power, not until May 1990 did I come to know what Luther's Small Catechism is. That was when, in preparation for teaching a summer course on Luther's catechisms at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, I actually held a sixteenth-century copy in my hands. It was not the blue book I had used with Pastor Faust, packed with Bible verses and organized with an eye toward Melancthon's theological loci.¹ It was not the small orange booklet, shorn of many of Luther's insights, that I had used with adults in my parish ministry.² It was instead a book so different in content, presentation, form, and intent that even today I am not sure I fully comprehend its import. This article thus serves as an introduction to the Small Catechism, not the contemporary version familiar to our congregations, but the one Luther produced for "his own dear Germans"—those "dear cattle and irrational pigs."

A Brief History

Luther did not invent the catechism. In fact, the Greek verb, which means to sound again or from above, was already used by Paul in Galatians 6:6 for Christian instruction. In 2 Clement 17:1 the word designated pre-baptismal instruction.³ As a Greek loan word in ecclesiastical Latin, Ambrose, Augustine, and others used it for basic Christian instruction, Augustine being the first to use the noun, catechism, to designate the basic topics of Christian instruction.⁴ In the Middle Ages the word became more and more associated with the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Some German synods even passed regulations insisting that parish pastors preach on these basics regularly and test their parishioners on them as well.

By the late Middle Ages catechetical instruction was connected to the sacrament of penance for two reasons. First, the priest was to determine what the penitent knew of Christian teaching. Sec-

ond, and more important, the catechetical material itself was geared toward this sacrament and its view of the Christian life, moving from contrition (sorrow for sin out of love of God) to confession and finally to works of satisfaction. One of the most popular late-medieval catechisms was *A Fruitful Mirror or Small Handbook for Christians*, written in 1470 by Dietrich Kolde, an observant Augustinian turned Franciscan. It was printed at least nineteen times before 1500 and another twenty-eight times thereafter.⁵

The structure of Kolde's work demonstrates the power of penance to define Christian life and teaching. Kolde begins with a discussion of what must be believed (twenty-two sections) and moves to an explanation of how one must live (twenty-one sections). A shorter part on how to die (three sections) concludes the book. What Kolde says about this final section goes for the whole catechism: "Every person who holds to [these lessons] can hope to reach heaven." It is a theology of "musts" and "laws" in the interest of meriting heaven.

The first part begins with faith because medieval theology held that one could in a state of sin through the exercise of the free will muster up an "acquired faith," that is, an acknowledgment that the church's teachings are true. Kolde moves immediately to the Commandments, because with such faith comes anxiety over God's judgment. His goal is to bring the individual to contrition: "Keep each commandment, every word, if you would come to see the Lord."⁶ As if not content with his lengthy explanation of the Ten Commandments, he adds descriptions of the Five Commandments of Holy Church, the seven deadly sins, the nine alien sins, the six sins against the Holy Spirit, and the like, ending with instruction in how to tell whether one is in a state of grace or not and how to confess.

The stage set, the second part deals with the Christian life, that is, doing works of satisfaction. The penance prescribed by the priest is not sufficient, "therefore it is necessary for us to do even more penance."⁷ In this part exhortations to consider Christ's suffering and to hear the mass are coupled with suggestions for prayer—at the monastic hours, meal times, as well as morning and evening—including the Lord's Prayer and Ave Maria, neither of which is

explained, and the prayer of St. Gregory and one to Mary. After the prayers comes a recitation of good works, under such titles as “seven works of mercy” or “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Behavior for child-bearing and child-rearing is described. Kolde even shows how the cloak of Mary, by which she protects us from the wrath of the Son, is woven by good works such as conversion, fasting, hearing mass, praying the rosary, feeding the poor, or reciting the psalter.

Against the background of this immensely popular medieval catechism, we can understand the first and possibly most important contribution made by Luther to catechetical instruction: He jettisoned the medieval penitential order, which moved from faith to contrition to satisfaction, and replaced it with an evangelical one, based upon his understanding of justification by faith alone and its hermeneutic: the distinction between law and gospel.

This shift is already clear in the first piece of catechetical instruction Luther produced, his *Betbüchlein* of 1522. That work, more a devotional book than a catechism,⁸ is a partial collection of his earlier remarks on various parts of the catechism, and still shows a strong medieval influence, especially with mention of the seven deadly sins, sins against the Holy Spirit, and so forth, an explanation of the Hail Mary also included. However, Luther is up to something new, saying as much in his preface:

Among the many harmful books and doctrines which are misleading and deceiving Christians and give rise to countless false beliefs, I regard the personal prayer books as by no means the least objectionable. They drub into the minds of simple people such a wretched counting up of sins and going to confession, such un-Christian tomfoolery about prayers to God and his saints! . . . These books need a basic and thorough reformation if not total extermination.⁹

He executes the called-for reformation in his distinction between law and gospel.¹⁰ In this regard, Luther and the Reformation break away from medieval penitential theology. One must begin not with faith, as Kolde did, but with commandments (Law) that drive inexorably, first, to the gospel and Christ and, then—with one’s

need and the source of rescue revealed—to prayer, now understood not as work or merit but as the cry of the believer in desperate need of help.

Three things a person must know in order to be saved. First, he must know what to do and what to leave undone. Second, when he realizes that he cannot measure up to what he should do or leave undone, he needs to know where to go to find the strength he requires. Third, he must know how to seek and obtain that strength. It is just like a sick person who first has to determine the nature of his sickness, then find out what to do or to leave undone. After that he has to know where to get the medicine which will help him do or leave undone what is right for a healthy person. Third, he has to desire to search for this medicine and to obtain it or have it brought to him. Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness. . . . The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine—grace—which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfillment of God's commandments [by faith] everything will be given him.¹¹

The movement from law to gospel to prayer—using the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, in that order—was not the only organizational option that Luther considered when planning his catechism. In the preface to the *Deutsche Messe*, published in 1526, Luther mentions not only the traditional content of the catechism (Commandments, Creed, Our Father) but also proposes an alternative.

The German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. . . . This instruction or catechization I cannot put better or more plainly than has been done from the beginning of Christendom and retained until now, i.e., in these three parts, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father. These three plainly and briefly contain exactly everything that a Christian needs to know.¹²

After giving examples of such instruction Luther adds:

One may take these questions from our *Betbüchlein* where these three parts are briefly explained, or make others, until the heart may grasp

the whole sum of Christian truth under two headings or, as it were, in two pouches, namely, faith and love. Faith's pouch may have two pockets. Into one pocket we put the part that believes that through the sin of Adam we are all corrupt, sinners, and under condemnation. . . . Into the other we put the part that through Jesus Christ we all are redeemed from this corruption, sin, and condemnation. . . . Love's pouch may also have two pockets. Into the one put this piece, that we should serve and do good to everyone, even as Christ has done for us. . . . Into the other put this piece, that we should gladly endure and suffer all kinds of evil.¹³

Luther then suggests that a child could be encouraged to take verses from the sermon, memorize them for the parents, and be prepared to put them into one pouch or another.

This second way to organize Christian instruction was used by a wide variety of Christian reformers in the sixteenth century, including John Brenz in Württemberg and Ambrose Moibanus of Breslau.¹⁴ The results were not always successful, since the approach concentrates on learning correct answers and moral behavior—precisely the focus of late-medieval catechesis with its emphasis on “what must be believed” and “what must be done.”¹⁵

Why, in a preface to a reformed liturgy, does Luther discuss catechisms at all? Aside from the obvious connection between the evangelical reformation of parish worship (which included many parts of the catechism) and instruction in evangelical doctrine, Luther was compelled to make the connection in part by a parish pastor, Nicholas Hausmann of Zwickau, from whom the original request for a catechism came. In 1525 Hausmann had appealed to Luther and the elector for three things: a visitation of parishes, a worship service in the vernacular, and a catechism for the simple folk.¹⁶ In response Luther mentions that Justus Jonas, his colleague, and John Agricola, his student, were working on that very thing. Unfortunately, the death of Elector Frederick and the move of Agricola to Eisleben, where he became rector of the Latin school, upset Luther's plans. Although Luther then promised to write his own catechism, a year later he was still content to describe the evangelical options, pointing to his own *Betbüchlein* as a possible resource.

Into the breach stepped the anonymous compiler of the first

Luther catechism published in Wittenberg, initially printed in late 1525 and very often thereafter, entitled *Buchlyn fur die Laien und Kinder*.¹⁷ It began with a so-called lay Bible, that is, the texts of the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the description of baptism in Mark 16, and the Words of Institution. The rest consisted of excerpts from the *Betbüchlein* as well as other Luther sources. It concluded with the only section not from Luther, a description of repentance and confession.

This compiler, perhaps Stephan Roth, then student and catechist in Wittenberg and later city secretary in Zwickau, influenced the final shape of Luther's own catechisms in several ways. First, he retained the order of the *Betbüchlein* and excerpted the very section cited above that described the relation of commands, promises, and prayer. Second, he provided texts for baptism and the Lord's Supper. The juxtaposition of Word and sacrament, crucial for understanding Luther's own work, comes from this source. But the *Buchlyn* provided explanations from Luther only for the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Roth provided a collection of prayers for morning, evening, and mealtimes, some of which pass directly into the Small Catechism.

Given the plethora of printings for both the *Betbüchlein* and the *Buchlyn fur die Laien und Kinder*, one must seriously ask why Luther bothered to write his own catechism at all. Three events are crucial for understanding the impetus, as well as the shape, of Luther's 1529 catechisms. The first event Luther himself refers to in the preface to the Small Catechism: the Visitation of the Saxon church, begun in 1527. Poor health and the fact that, at Luther's urging, Melancthon had been elected by Wittenberg's theological faculty as one of the four official visitors (the law professor, Jerome Schurff and two officials from the court being the others), meant that Luther himself was not initially involved in the visitation. His brief experience in 1528, however, led him to remark in the preface of the Small Catechism:

The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain and simple version. [2]Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person,

especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. [3] Yet they all supposedly bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy Sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom.¹⁸

The second event, one that many assistant pastors like Luther have had to endure, was the rather lengthy absence from Wittenberg of St. Mary's head pastor, John Bugenhagen, who was introducing reform measures in Braunschweig. As a result, in 1528 all of the preaching duties at the town church fell to Luther, including week-day preaching on the catechism (the five parts to the lay Bible published in the *Buchlyn*) four times a year.

The third event, which one can only infer from the sources, had the most profound impact on the content of Luther's catechisms. It centered in the first dispute among students of Luther: the 1527 fight over the meaning of *poenitentia* (penance/repentance) between Philip Melanchthon and John Agricola.¹⁹ Their fight was triggered by the Saxon Visitation. In the summer of 1527 Melanchthon formulated a set of theological articles to be used by the visitors to train the pastors whom they encountered. After an initial skirmish over the inclusion of the three-fold division of *poenitentia*—contrition, confession, and satisfaction (where satisfaction was made by Christ, not by us)—Agricola attacked Melanchthon's notion that sorrow for sin arises from the law and terror. Agricola insisted that the law only leads to despair and that sorrow for sin must come from the love of God and the gospel. As proof he cited the stories of Judas and Peter. Judas was condemned by the law and finally despaired and killed himself. Peter, buoyed by the promise given to him in the Upper Room (Luke 22:32), was moved by his love of Christ to repent after his denial.

The dispute came to a peaceful settlement in meetings of all the parties at the Torgau Castle in late November 1527. Luther, treading lightly, proposed the compromise that was to become a part of the German translation of Melanchthon's articles published in

1528, the *Instruction for Visitors*.²⁰ Earlier in a letter to Melanchthon Luther had noted that sinners cannot easily tell what the motivation is for repenting—sometimes it is fear of punishment; sometimes it is love of God. At the Torgau he admits that one might say that some “general gospel” precedes the preaching of the law, so that a person comes to believe God exists, but such an approach only confuses the common folk. More important, he insists that preaching of law without gospel leads to despair; preaching of gospel without law leads to a false sense of security and abuse of Christian freedom.

All this would not necessarily have led to Luther’s publication of his catechisms were it not that earlier in November Agricola published his third, and by far most successful catechism, the *130 Questions for the Girls’ School in Eisleben*. In it, his theory that repentance arose from the gospel and his disdain for the law came to full expression. He wrote

... of what does godliness consist? Answer: Of two parts. . . . What are they called? Answer: Word and Faith. . . . There are two sermons: one is of the law and the other is of grace. There have been two preachers: Moses and Christ. . . . What do Moses and the Law preach? Answer: The Law forces and compels people through punishment and torture, that they should love God above all else or else they must die an eternal death. How are Law and Gospel divided? Answer: The Law says, “You are to love God above all things or else you must die.” The Gospel says, “I [God] am too high for you, and I simply want everyone to know how much I love you, how favorable I am toward you. But if people want to do what pleases me, they love the brother [and sister], whom they can see, and take care of their needs.”²¹

The Ten Commandments were reduced to an appendix, a list of possible actions for the Christian. Agricola’s catechism moved from faith to repentance to good works, much like the medieval catechetical works it was designed to replace. There is some indication that Melanchthon himself had been urged successfully, by Georg Spalatin and Stephan Roth, to respond. However, he broke off his own work in the middle of the Third Commandment, once Luther began writing the Large Catechism. Thus, it is in part Agricola’s nascent antinomianism that led Luther to emphasize the

centrality of the Commandments in the Large Catechism, where fifty percent of the entire book deals with the decalogue. It is no accident that he writes in the preface to the Small Catechism about the laity's propensity to abuse Christian freedom. Moreover, the Small Catechism echoes Luther's compromise in its juxtaposition of the fear and love in the explanations of the Ten Commandments.

Finally, Luther is pedagogically light years ahead of Agricola when he reduces the verbose and often aimless 130 questions to one: *Was ist das?* (What is this?). Only in the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer does he add a second question—*Wie geschieht das?* (How does this happen?)—and a third question—*Was heisst das?* (What does this mean?)—with respect to the fourth petition. Only the sacraments contain more questions—four parallel ones, beginning with *Was ist das?* It is no accident that he states in the Large Catechism that “because we preach to children we must talk babytalk to them.”²² That includes using simple questions. Luther was one of the first theologians in the recent history of the church to have witnessed his own child learning to speak and to ask simple questions (in 1529 Hans was in his third year of life). The experience most certainly contributed to Luther's pedagogic clarity and simplicity.

The clear distinction between law and gospel and the combination of explanations for the Word and sacraments distinguish Luther's catechisms from the others. Then, too, the immediate context out of which the catechisms arose also shaped Luther's work in a unique way: the concern for educating commoners in the basics, a homiletical style arising out of Luther's own experience, the rejection of Agricola's antinomianism. However, there is one more factor that contributed greatly to the clarity and longevity of Luther's work. When in January 1529 Luther first published the Small Catechism, each section appeared on large single sheets of paper, to be sold like newspapers and hung up in churches, schools, and homes. Each sheet bore the title: “How the head of the household is to present the Ten Commandments [or Creed, etc.] to the members of the household.”²³ This orientation towards the household—one might even say the housechurch, given Lu-

ther's comments in the preface to the *Deutsche Messe*—marks Luther's entire catechetical enterprise.

To some extent this approach echoed the earlier work in the *Buchlyn*, which included daily prayers and the like. But even that book, and certainly the other catechisms available at the time, especially John Agricola's, took their cues from the school and church, not from the household. Luther's vision to include parents and children in the catechetical enterprise was deeply rooted in his understanding of the Christian life. In the introduction to the third series of catechetical sermons in 1528, Luther encourages his listeners to send their children and servants to hear his explanations by reminding them that, "Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess."²⁴

This appeal, however, was not so much grounded in the priesthood of all believers as in Luther's profound understanding of the Christian callings in this world. Fathers and mothers were precisely those called and ordained by God to train their children or to see that others did it for them. It is no accident that each time Luther discusses the Fourth Commandment at length, which explicitly only demands something of children, he insists on recounting parental and princely responsibilities, emphasizing in particular their duty and call to educate their children.²⁵

Luther's contemporaries were emerging from a religious world where there had always been two distinctly different kinds of Christians: the secular ones, destined to follow just the Ten Commandments, and the *perfecti*, those under a vow and hence in a state of perfection, whose works by virtue of the vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience were always works of supererogation. Luther overturned that entire scheme by centering the Christian life in baptism and in everyday affairs.

If this truth could be impressed upon the poor people, a servant girl would dance for joy and praise and thank God; and with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would gain a treasure such as all who pass for the greatest saints do not have. Is it not a wonderful thing to be able to boast to yourself, "If I do my daily housework faithfully, that is better than the holiness and austere life of

all the monks"? . . . In the sight of God it is really faith that makes a person holy; faith alone serves him, while our works serve the people.²⁶

Nowhere is this new orientation more succinctly expressed than in Luther's title for what we somewhat misleadingly call a "Table of Duties." "The Household Chart²⁷ of Some Bible Passages for all kinds of holy orders²⁸ and estates, through which they may be admonished, as through lessons particularly pertinent to their office and duty."²⁹ Even in German the language is somewhat stilted. The point, however, is unmistakable. Luther has taken the word used to designate monks and nuns, "holy orders," and applied it instead to the ordinary Christian walks of life: government, church, but especially the household. Husband, wife, parent, child, boss, worker, young people, and even widows now have standing in God's sight. Whatever else may be wrong with our own society, our utter failure to appreciate domestic life, workers, and widows stands convicted by Luther's sanctification of them.

Handbook for the Christian Household

The Small Catechism, called an enchiridion, or handbook, by Luther could well be renamed "Handbook for the Christian Household." This means not merely that parents ought to help pastors teach the catechism. To be certain, addressing the explanations to the heads of households,³⁰ meant that the explanations were to be used by parents to explain the various texts of the lay Bible to their children. But as well, Luther included the basic "liturgy" of the household, prayers at meals, morning and evening, with instructions that these prayers be memorized. Those liturgical moments fit not the spiritual life of the monastic world, but the daily schedule of common household: rising, eating, and sleeping.

The final two contributions to the housechurch in the Small Catechism, along with the simplicity of Hans' catechetical question, *Was ist das*, comprised the heart of my initial discoveries when

I first examined a sixteenth-century printing. First, much to my surprise there were woodcuts—not just one or two, as in other early evangelical catechisms—but one for each Commandment, each article of the Creed, each petition of the Lord's Prayer, and each sacrament: twenty-two in all. Each depicted a Bible story, complete with reference, illustrating the point of the respective portion of the catechism. They also served as visual aids for illiterate members of the household. Today people do not always remember, to cite one example, that Luther connects hallowing God's name to the preaching of the Word of God. However, in the catechism the reader, even the nonreader, would have seen on the page facing the explanation a picture of people in contemporary dress listening to a preacher delivering a sermon.³¹ These woodcuts may originally have been made in 1529 to accompany a new edition of Luther's *Betbüchlein*. What they demonstrate is that, at least in the minds of Luther's printers (who continued to supply woodcuts throughout Luther's lifetime and beyond), the Small Catechism was much more closely related to that genre of prayerbooks than our modern versions or the uses to which we put them might suggest.

Second, almost all the printings of the Small Catechism, published during Luther's lifetime, included two appendices: Luther's German marriage and baptismal services with his prefaces.³² To be sure, in the first instance these services would have been included for the sake of the "ordinary pastors and preachers" addressed in the preface. However, those two services in fact defined the house-church itself, created by God's left hand through marriage and by God's right hand through holy baptism. Moreover, Luther's pithy prefaces provided ordinary Christians with pointed admonitions concerning the importance of both liturgies in the light of the gospel and faith.

Taken together, these aspects of Luther's Handbook make clear that this little booklet was not to be reduced to an eighth-grade rite of passage. It is devotion book, a teacher's guide for parents (or pastors) under stress, a prayer and Bible primer, a picture book, as well as the basic memory book for students. Writing from Eisleben to quell Katie's fears near the end of his life, Luther's ad-

monition estimates the fuller value of the Small Catechism, “You, dear Katie, read John and the Small Catechism, about which you once said: Everything in this book has been said about me.”³³

Luther’s Small Catechism is far richer and more complex than commonly appreciated. Moreover, the Small Catechism convicts our shabby use of it, and itself opens the door to a new use. First, when our instruction upsets the order of the catechism by moving from “what must be believed” to “what must be done,” we abandon justification by faith alone for a mess of late-medieval or antinomian pottage. The “New Journeys” confirmation curriculum recently published by Augsburg Fortress begins with baptism and the Creed (“this is what we believe”) and concludes with the Commandments (“now that we believe, this is what we must do”). By this means the Small Catechism is reduced to moralism typical of catechetical aids produced since the ages of German Pietism and the Enlightenment.

The antinomian approach, also popular today, which Luther later realized was simply another kind of legalism, is also roundly rejected by the shape and content of Luther’s catechisms. There the law is treated as law: God’s way of ordering our lives and restraining evil and God’s way of revealing our sin and driving us to Christ. The pious egotism that searches for correct motives and emotions—“Am I doing this out of fear or love?”—is replaced by a brutally honest assessment of the Commandments’ demands and a brilliant confession of Christ’s victory over sin.

Luther’s order—moving from law to gospel to prayer for help—rejects penitential approaches of all stripes. Moreover it reinforces what in many ways is the center of his catechism: the fourth question on holy baptism, “What does baptizing with water signify?” Answer: “It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned through daily sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”³⁴

Second, knowing Luther’s catechism grounds our instruction in the Word and sacraments. There are shocking movements afoot in our own day and age to sever once again the preaching of God’s Word from the sacraments, and even to devise liturgies of enter-

tainment, a kind of “Christianity Lite,” to borrow a phrase from a St. Louis institution. An old pietist heresy, reinforced by the “enlightened” Christianity that has influenced us all, has obscured the centrality of the Lord’s Supper and holy baptism in both the Christian life and the gathering of the Christian community. The “Lay Bible” of the *Buchlyn* and Luther’s profound explanations of the sacraments contradict this trend. Moreover, it is no accident that the one pastoral problem Luther singles out in both Large and Small Catechisms is the failure of people to commune. In the preface to the Small Catechism he reminds people of his day, and our day, that Jesus did not say, “Neglect this in remembrance of me,” but “Do this!”

Third, the catechisms arose out of a serious pastoral crisis revealed in the Saxon Visitation of churches: “Good God what ignorance I beheld!” We, too, live in such an age. Thus, Luther’s catechisms, far from being obsolete, provide the very basics that under-instructed and biblically ignorant people need today. They do not merely have a pedagogical edge but an evangelical, “missional” one as well. At the same time, they were written by a pastor directly involved in the process of evangelizing and catechizing his own people. The continued usefulness of Luther’s catechisms stems in part from their origins within his own work at St. Mary’s.

Fourth, the catechisms define the daily life as the locus of the Christian life. Luther wrote a handbook for the Christian household, not bitter medicine for eighth graders. What Luther’s Small Catechism meant for adult Christians can expand the horizons of our modern usage. What if our goal were to bring adults to Katie Luther’s confession? Then we would use it in pre-marital counselling, especially with Luther’s straight talk on marriage in his preface to the marriage service, and in pre-baptismal instruction—perhaps even handing parents a copy of the Small Catechism at the appropriate moment in the service of holy baptism. (“Now that you have promised to teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, here are some simple explanations to guide your instruction.”)

What is Luther’s Small Catechism? When we place that small book in its historical context, the answers become endless and

exciting, enriching the lives and faith of all members of our congregations and even our own lives. After all, Luther's own life of prayer and faith began and ended with the catechism. That is why he could write this admonition in the preface to the Large Catechism.

Besides, a shameful and insidious plague of security and boredom has overtaken us. Many regard the catechism as a simple, silly teaching which they can absorb and master at one reading. After reading it once they toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again. . . . 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.³⁵

May we all be filled with that gladness!

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NOTES

1. *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1943).

2. *The Small Catechism by Martin Luther in Contemporary English with Lutheran Book of Worship Texts. A Handbook of Basic Christian Instruction for the Family and the Congregation* (Minneapolis/Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress, 1979).

3. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 3:638–40.

4. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), *ad loc.* It was in this sense that Luther used the word throughout his life, even in the prefaces to the Small and Large "Catechisms."

5. Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1982), 7–12. To be cited as Janz, *Catechisms*

6. Janz, *Catechisms*, 47.
7. Janz, *Catechisms*, 82.
8. Note, however, that in the 1526 preface to the *Deutsche Messe* he refers to the *Betbuchlein* in his description of catechisms.
9. LW 43:11–12.
10. In Wittenberg's commentaries on the New Testament, produced at the same time, the same distinction is made. See Timothy J. Wengert, *Philip Melancthon's "Annotationes in Johannem" in Relation to Its Predecessors and Contemporaries* (Geneva: Droz, 1987), 208–12.
11. LW 43:13–14.
12. LW 53:64–65.
13. LW 53:66.
14. See, for example, the catechism of Ambrose Moibanus of 1533 in Johann Michael Reu, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Katechismus-Unterrichts*, 4 vols. in 9 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1904–35), II/2:710–54. Moibanus began with the distinction of the two righteousnesses.
15. These echo two of the gerunds of the medieval *Quadruga*, a medieval scheme for interpreting the Scripture on four levels. "*Allegoria*" gave the spiritual interpretation of a text according to its *credenda*, what must be believed, and "*Tropologia*" offered the text's *agenda*, what must be done.
16. See Timothy J. Wengert, "Wittenberg's Earliest Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 7 (1993):248–49.
17. See Wengert, "Earliest Catechism," 252–55.
18. *A Contemporary Translation of Luther's Small Catechism*, trans. by Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 73–74.
19. Timothy J. Wengert, "'Fear and Love' in the Ten Commandments," *Concordia Journal* 21 (1995):14–27. See also my forthcoming book *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over "Poenitentia."* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
20. LW 40:269–320. Melancthon himself called this booklet a catechism.
21. From a preliminary translation of John Agricola's 130 *Questions*.
22. Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, 375, par. 77. "*Weil wir den Kindern predigen, müssen wir ihn lallen.*"
23. Only for the daily prayers did Luther use the word teach.
24. LW 51:137. Cf. p. 136 where in his instruction to parents on the previous day he goes into more detail. "You have been appointed their bishop and pastor; take heed that you do not neglect your office over them."
25. See the preface to the Small Catechism and the conclusion to the discussion of the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism.
26. *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore E. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, p. 385, par. 145–47.
27. *Die Haustafel*. Sometimes translated "table of duties" (a meaning of the term derived from its use here), this section may have been suggested to Luther by John Gerson's *Tractatus de modo vivendi omnium fidelium*
28. Luther is both playing on the common use of this term for the monastic life and referring to the three estates: *ordo ecclesiasticus*, *politicus*, and *oeconomicus* (church, government and household). See the Smalcald Articles, Preface, 14 and the *Confession concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), LW 37:363–365.

29. *A Contemporary Translation*, 57.

30. This focus became blurred when the original broadsheets were published in a booklet, retaining these headings but with a preface addressed to pastors. However, even there some of the advice was aimed at parents.

31. The Bible reference is to the second commandment. In general Luther maintains a simplified “law-gospel” distinction by taking all examples of breaking the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament.

32. It was even included in some first editions of the *Book of Concord*. It was only taken out after objection was made to Luther’s use of exorcism in the baptismal service. a decision that leaves later Lutherans asking infants to reject the devil without ever having provided them with the “one little word” of Christ that drives the devil out. At least Orthodox Christianity knows better.

33. LW 50:302

34. *A Contemporary Translation*, 43. Note the linguistic parallels to the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed.

35. Large Catechism, Preface, 359, par. 5–8.