

The Small Catechism

1529

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INTRODUCTION

The word *catechism* derives from the Greek verb *katēcheō*, “to sound over,” and, hence, to teach by word of mouth.^a In early Christianity, it simply stood for instructing, as in Gal. 6:6. From there it passed, transliterated, into ancient church Latin. By the fifth century, Augustine (354–430) was employing a Latin noun, *catechismus*, for basic instruction in church teaching. (The equivalent Greek noun also first appears around this time.) By the high or late Middle Ages, these basics came regularly to include especially the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, to which sometimes the *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary) was added. Preachers were to give instruction in the catechism four times a year around the “Ember Weeks” (the third or fourth week in Advent; first week of Lent; Pentecost week; and around Holy

^a For the following history, see Robert Kolb, *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther’s Catechism*, 2d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2012); Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000); Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, 5 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–2013).

Cross Day [14 September], and penitents were to be quizzed in the confessional about their knowledge of the basics.

The Development of Luther's Small Catechism

This tradition is reflected in Luther's early preaching on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creed,^b and it continued into the 1520s and beyond. In 1520, Luther's sermons on these three parts were gathered into a single tract and in 1522 Luther expanded that into his prayer booklet.^c Here, for the first time, Luther explains why he orders the parts of catechetical instruction the way he does.

A popular catechism by Dietrich Kolde (c. 1435–1515)^d had used the Sacrament of Penance as its model for organizing these various parts—beginning with the Creed (which all in a state of sin could confess), moving to the Commandments and other lists of sins (as preparation for contrition and confession to a priest), before introducing the Lord's Prayer (as one prayer to be said to make satisfaction for the punishment for sin remaining after confession had removed one's guilt and reduced one's punishment from eternal to temporal). By contrast, already in 1522 Luther viewed the Commandments as the diagnosis of sin and need for grace, and thus placed them first in his catechetical writings. He then pointed to the Creed as grace, the medicine for sin, and finally he defined the Lord's Prayer as the plea to God to deliver the cure. His *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism* would retain this same order for these same reasons.

In 1525, the first true forerunner to the *Small Catechism* appeared in Wittenberg from the presses of Nicholas Schirlentz and was quickly translated into *Niederdeutsch* (the dialect of the German lowlands from Magdeburg northward).^e It contained

^b See, for example, *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), in LW 42:15–81.

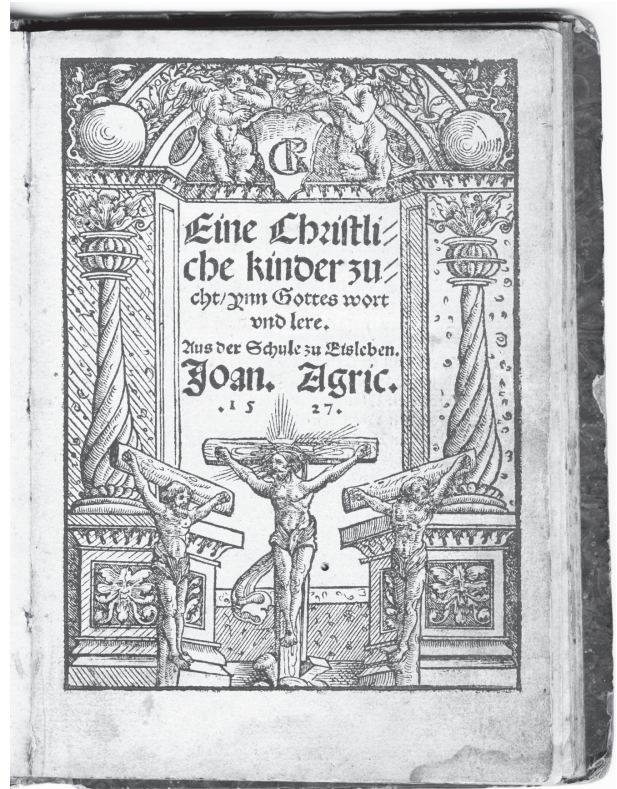
^c See pp. 159–99 in this volume.

^d See Dietrich Kolde, *A Fruitful Mirror, or Small Handbook for Christians*, in Denis Janz, ed., *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 29–130.

^e Timothy J. Wengert, "Wittenberg's Earliest Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993): 247–60. For a translation into English, see the

the texts not only of the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer, but also, for the first time, biblical texts for baptism and the Lord's Supper and instructions on prayers for morning, evening, and mealtimes. At nearly the same time, in his preface to the *German Mass* published in early 1526, Luther himself called on others to write catechisms, giving his *Little Prayer Book* as a guide and also suggesting another form for catechetical instruction.^f This call resulted in a flood of catechisms produced in many areas by a variety of pastors and theologians.^g In all, at least ten different booklets were produced in Wittenberg and elsewhere between 1525 and 1529.

Among the people who took up his charge was his former student Johann Agricola (1494–1566),^h rector of the Latin School in Eisleben, who published three separate catechisms between 1527 and 1529. During the same period, Agricola and Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) were locked in a struggle over the origin of true repentance, in which the former argued that it arose from the promise of the gospel and the latter from the preaching of the law. This diminution of the law was reflected in Agricola's catechisms, which placed the law as more or less an appendix and introduced it as equivalent to Cicero's rules for rhetoric.ⁱ



Johann Agricola's Lutheran catechetical instruction for young Christian children was published by Georg Rau in 1527, two years before the publication of Luther's *Small Catechism*. This first edition includes sections on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Supper, and the Trinity.

Booklet for Laity and Children, trans. Timothy J. Wengert, in Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1–12.

^f LW 53:64–67; TAL 3:142–46.

^g See Ferdinand Cohns, ed., *Die evangelischen Katechismusversuche vor Luthers Enchiridion*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Hofmann, 1900–1902; reprint: Hildesheim: Ohms, 1978). For further discussion of the catechisms produced prior to 1529, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over "Poenitentia"* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 47–75.

^h See also n. m, p. 206.

ⁱ Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 143.

Two other events triggered Luther's decision to write his own catechisms. First, in 1527, under pressure from Wittenberg and from parish pastors like Nicholas Hausmann (d. 1538) in Zwickau (who had also begged Luther to write a catechism), the elector of Saxony, John the Steadfast (1468–1532), decided to take the unprecedented step of authorizing an official visitation of the churches in his territories—something normally carried out by the local bishop. A team of four visitors, consisting of two representatives from the Saxon court and two from the university (one law professor [Jerome Schurff (1481–1554)] and one theologian [Melanchthon, elected by the theology faculty at Luther's insistence]), was sent out, beginning in the summer of 1527, with the tasks of evaluating the administrative, financial, practical, and theological conditions of the parishes, chapels, and monasteries. Luther himself participated in official visitation to parts of Saxony and Meissen from 22 October 1528 through 9 January 1529. As his preface to *the Small Catechism* made clear, these visits outside the confines of the university town of Wittenberg made him realize the abysmal level of Christian instruction, especially in the villages.



A portrait of Johannes Bugenhagen painted in 1532 by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)

Second, in 1528 Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), Wittenberg's chief pastor, was called away to help the cities of Braunschweig and Hamburg reform their churches. Luther was left with all the preaching duties and thus gave three sets of sermons on the catechism at the Vespers services in May, September, and December—still reflecting the medieval practice of expounding the catechism on the Embers.^j These sermons, along with sermons on confession and the Lord's Supper from Holy Week, 1529, became the basis for the *Large Catechism*, first published in 1529.^k At the same time, based in part upon summary sentences of the various parts of the Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, and sacraments scattered throughout those sermons, Luther began writing very brief explanations designed to appear on individual broadsheets for each main part of the catechism

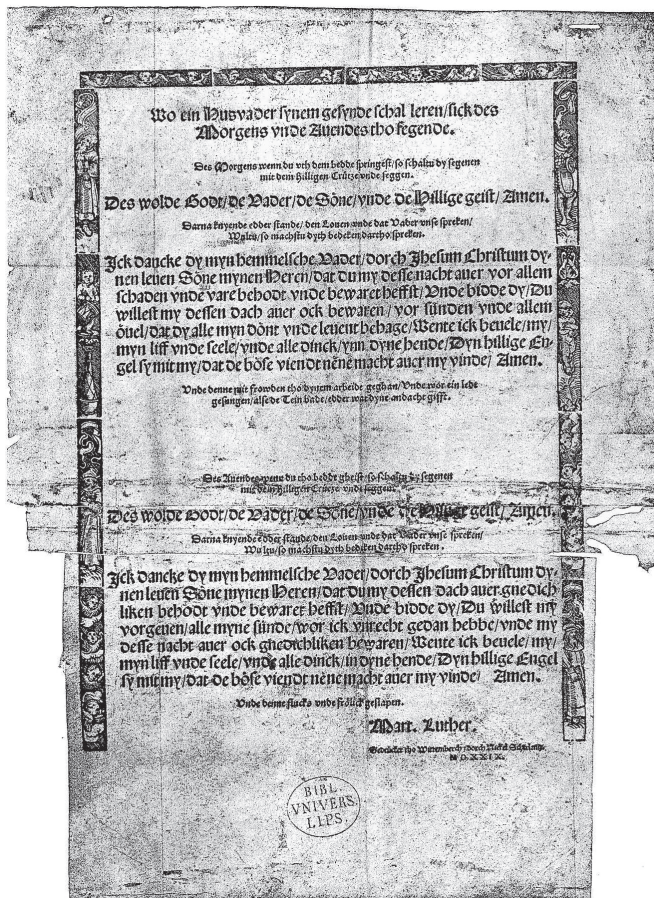
^j For an English translation of transcriptions of the third set of sermons, see LW 51:133–93.

^k See the *Large Catechism*, trans. James L. Schaaf, in BC, 377–480; TAL 2:278–415. For the Holy Week sermons, see *Martin Luther's Sermons from Holy Week and Easter, 1529*, trans. Irving Sandberg (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999).

and daily prayers and addressed to the *Hausvater* (the head of the household).

Although only one of these original Wittenberg printings has survived (a *Niederdeutsch* version of morning and evening prayer, reprints from other cities in both German dialects were gathered into booklet form and preserved. Luther completed work on the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer in January 1529, when illness intervened, so that he did not complete work on the sacraments until the spring. Almost immediately, Nicholas Schirlentz published these broadsheets in booklet form, now with Luther's preface addressed to parish pastors and preachers, the household chart of Bible passages (later called the Table of Duties), and German liturgies for marriage and baptism (with Luther's prefaces), as well as biblical illustrations for each commandment, article of the Creed, petition of the Lord's Prayer, and sacrament. A second printing from 1531 included a new section on confession and an explanation of the words "Our Father in heaven."¹ The 1529 version was immediately translated into Latin (twice), and the 1531 version saw translations into many other European languages, including a paraphrastic version by Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) into English.¹ For students learning biblical languages, several midcentury editions featured parallel texts in German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. All told, the six-

¹ The list in WA 30/1:782–804 includes Arabic, Czech, Danish, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, Icelandic, Italian, Slavonic, Latvian, Lithuanian, Dutch, Polish, Prussian (dialect), Swedish, Spanish, and Sorbian. For those printed in German-speaking lands, see also VD 16:L 5035–L 5177.



“Morning and Evening Prayers”
from the 1529 Wittenberg edition
of the *Small Catechism* in the
Low German dialect

1. Later editions published during Luther's lifetime in Wittenberg also occasionally included other additions. In 1536 Schirlentz added Scripture references under each picture along with texts of the *Te Deum* and *Magnificat* (LW 53:171–79). In 1543 he included the “Prayer against the Turks.” The version from 1529 also included the *German Litany* (LW 53:153–70).

2. Luther deemed only two texts obscure (the fourth petition and the water of baptism) and thus asked about the meaning of a word (daily bread) and about what an action (baptizing with water) signified.

3. He stated this explicitly in the *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 326–29, in BC, 430.

teenth century produced well over two hundred printings in various languages and dialects.

In contrast to one of Johann Agricola's catechisms, which boasted in its title to contain 130 questions,^m Luther's *Small Catechism* used a single question throughout, "Was ist das?" ("What is this?"). This question invited simple paraphrase of the text in question rather than complicated explanation, thus implying that the catechism's texts were not obscure and needed simply to be put in other words for proper understanding. He added a second question for parts of the Lord's Prayer (for the first three petitions, "How does this come about?" and for the fourth, "What does [the word] daily bread mean?"). For the sacraments, four questions were used in addition to "What is this?"—questions asked about gifts and benefits and the role of faith and, for baptism, what using water signifies, and, for the Supper, the proper preparation.² The simple order for private confession contains a series of questions related to preparation for private confession to a pastor or priest.

Content

In contrast to Luther's reputation for verbosity, the *Small Catechism* was uniquely succinct. Using standard texts of medieval catechesis, Luther managed to explain these basics in terms consonant with major themes in his theology. Justification by faith alone had insisted that faith, demanded by the First Commandment, was the center of the Christian life. Thus, Luther took his explanation of that commandment ("fear, love, and trust in God") and applied it to the other nine commandments, where "fear and love" hearken back to the meaning of the First Commandment.³ Justification also implied for Luther the proper distinction between law and gospel. His consistent use of *wir sollen* ("we are to"), found in both the commandments and his explanations, underscored what human beings *ought* to do but were not able to accomplish."

^m Johann Agricola, *130 Common Questions for the Girl's School in Eisleben*, trans. Timothy J. Wengert, in Kolb and Nestingen, *Sources and Contexts*, 13–82.

ⁿ See the *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 316; Creed, par. 2; Lord's Prayer, par. 2, in BC, 428, 431, and 440–41, respectively.

First in explanations to the Creed, which Luther took as a description of God's triune actions of creating, redeeming, and making holy, Luther expounded the gospel of God's unmerited grace. God created "out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all"; God the Son ransomed humanity from the evil "kidnappers" of sin, death, and the devil by his suffering, death, and resurrection; God the Holy Spirit bestows faith and makes holy through forgiveness proclaimed in the Christian assembly.

The Lord's Prayer then pleads for God, now described as a loving Father, to fulfill the very promises made in the Creed by asking first for the word, faith in the word through the Holy Spirit (cf. the third article of the Creed), defeat of enemies of the word and faith (echoing the language of the second article), and then asking in thanksgiving for the gifts of creation (first article). Luther's explanations of petitions for forgiveness of sin, rescue from attacks on faith, and final deliverance from all evil underscore the centrality of God's mercy in the Christian's life. The "amen," which refers directly to commands and promises, also centers on the certainty of faith. Thus, the words "it is going to come about just like this" reflect the threefold paraphrase of the Creed's amen ("This is most certainly true"), which also appears in Luther's translation of Titus 3:5-8, used in question three of baptism, explaining the role of faith.

Luther's explanations of the sacraments move from what they are (question one, related to Christ's institution), to what effect and benefit they provide (forgiveness, life, and salvation), to the role of faith. The fourth question to each sacrament deals with the way they function in the believer's life: involving a daily drowning of the old creature and rising of the new in baptism (and, thus, in 1531 followed by an appended description of private confession, which moved from law to gospel) and the proper inward preparation of faith (as opposed to the outward, medieval practice of fasting) in the Supper.

This practical application continues in the prayers for morning, evening, and mealtimes and in "The Household Chart of Some Bible Passages." While affirming the common practice of regular prayers (based upon medieval models), Luther also directly criticized the late-medieval view of the monastic and mendicant life as being a higher form of Christianity.⁴ Instead, in line with his view of Christian vocation in the world, he wrote

4. Such a chart echoed catechetical material prepared by the medieval theologian Jean Gerson (1363-1429).

this chart “for all kinds of holy orders and walks of life.” He clearly rejected any division into more and less spiritual walks of life by including the responsibilities of ecclesiastical offices and governmental authority but primarily focusing on the “offices” of the German household of his day. This was also underscored by the inclusion of the liturgies of baptism and marriage, which constituted Christian households before God and in the world, and by the presence of woodcuts, which allowed even the unlettered in the household to visualize the catechism and its relation to Scripture.

The Purpose of the Small Catechism

With the *Small Catechism* in particular and other catechisms in the sixteenth century,⁵ Lutheran catechists attempted to achieve several important goals. As a result of the visitations, Luther and others viewed many baptized members of congregations as woefully ignorant and in need of basic catechesis; their pastors were often ignorant themselves and inept teachers. A catechism provided a basic summary of the Christian faith. Moreover, catechisms continued to function as during the Middle Ages in the context of private confession while also providing basic liturgical texts to local pastors and congregants for marriage and baptism. In addition, catechisms provided, as it was often called, a “lay Bible,” providing a summary of and introduction to the biblical message.⁵ Thus, the combination of law (Commandments) and gospel (Creed and Lord’s Prayer) and of word and sacraments gave people the tools by which to hear, understand, and even judge the preacher’s sermon⁶ and the basic sacramental actions in the congregation (baptism, confession, and the Lord’s Supper), while also providing liturgies and biblical guidance for the home.

Even the booklet edition, despite its preface addressed to pastors and preachers, retained the *Small Catechism*’s focus on the household, adding woodcuts (as has been done in this transla-

5. This term was used already in the *Booklet for Laity and Children* of 1525, in the *Large Catechism*, and as a description of Luther’s catechisms in the Epitome of the *Formula of Concord* (1576), in BC, 487, par. 5.

6. Mary Jane Haemig, “Laypeople as Overseers of the Faith: A Reformation Proposal,” *Trinity Seminary Review* 27 (2006): 21–27.

o See Johann Michael Reu, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Unterrichts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands zwischen 1530 und 1600*, 4 vols. in 9 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1904–1935; reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1976).

tion) and a chart of Bible passages for the household's various callings, while retaining the captions from each broadsheet addressed to householders. Indeed, in announcing his catechetical sermons to his Wittenberg congregation in November 1528, Luther encouraged the householders to send their children and servants to attend such preaching by stating, "You have been appointed their bishop and pastor; take heed that you do not neglect your office over them." In the first sermon given the next day he reiterated, "Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess. Therefore remember that you in your homes are to help us carry on the ministry as we do in the church."^p With the publication of the *Small Catechism* in a booklet form that included Luther's preface to pastors and preachers, the *Catechism* took on a role in the Evangelical (Lutheran) congregations, thus carrying on the medieval practice of regular instruction in the basics of the Christian faith. Moreover, the *Catechism* quickly found its place in schools, especially with the translation into Latin already in 1529. Thus, households, congregations, and schools all played their part in catechesis.

Luther demonstrated in his explanations what he viewed as the proper way to interpret Scripture by recognizing the commands and promises. The woodcuts tied individual commandments to examples of their being broken in the Old Testament, articles of the Creed to God's biblical actions of creating, redeeming, and making holy, and the petitions of the Lord's Prayer to examples in the New Testament (with the exception of the first petition, which depicts preaching on the Sabbath from Exodus 20). The sacraments show contemporary celebrations in Wittenberg. Only in explaining the Sacrament of Baptism did Luther include several biblical texts (four in all), while in every other portion he simply concentrated on the specific catechetical text. However, in several instances, especially with the Creed, his paraphrases alluded to other biblical texts.

The explosion of catechetical writings in the sixteenth century demonstrates the deep commitment the reformers and their opponents had toward the education of the common people. Luther's *Small Catechism*, however, played an even more important part in catechesis as other preachers and teachers

^p See *Ten Sermons on the Catechism* (1528) in LW 51:136–37. These were delivered beginning on 29 November 1528.

7. Andreas Osiander (1498–1552).

began, almost immediately, to produce sermons and commentaries on Luther's work, beginning with the Nuremberg preacher Andreas Osiander's⁷ *Children's Sermons* of the 1530s, itself a very popular publication throughout the sixteenth century.^q To help students of theology learn their languages, there were even publications that provided, in four parallel columns, the text of the *Catechism* in German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Moreover, it was not long before theologians were expanding Luther's small work with commentaries and biblically enriched outlines to theology, many of which were based upon or at least provided the text of Luther's *Catechism* as well.^r Other catechisms, designed for students already proficient in the *Small Catechism*, were also published.^s In some cases, this approach to instruction obscured the originality of Luther's own work, but it also preserved Luther's *Catechism* for later generations of Lutherans.

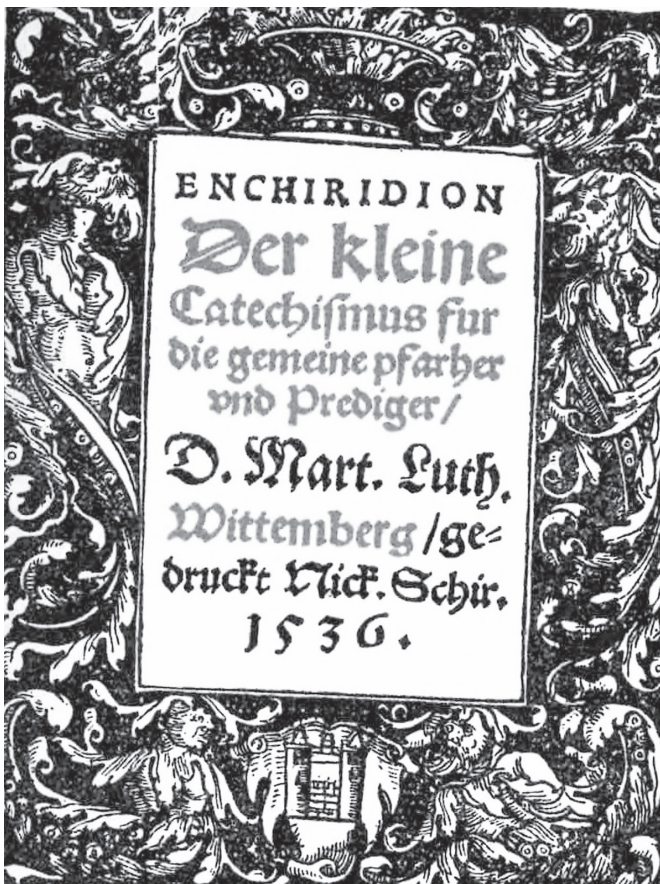
This translation uses WA 30/1:239–474, 537–819, and the *Bekennnisschriften der evangelischen lutherischen Kirche*, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 499–542. It is based upon the translator's earlier work in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 345–75, in which the *Marriage Booklet* and the *Baptismal Booklet* are revisions of Paul Zeller Strodsch and Ulrich S. Leupold's translations in LW 53:106–115. The woodcut illustrations are from a facsimile edition of the Wittenberg printing of the *Catechism* from 1536. In that year, the printer Nicholas Schirlentz published a new edition of Luther's *Small Catechism*, in which, as in 1529, he again included woodcuts for each commandment, article of the Creed, petition of the Lord's

^q Mary Jane Haemig, "The Living Voice of the Catechism: German Lutheran Catechetical Preaching 1530–1580" (Harvard University: PhD dissertation, 1996).

^r For two examples among hundreds, see Heinrich Homel, *Catechismus D. Martini Lutheri Minor: Una cum perspicuis et dilucidis scholiis, ex Sacris Bibliis* (Wittenberg: Lehmann, 1584), with a preface by David Chytraeus; and Johann Tettelbach, *Das güldene Kleinodt: D. Martini Lutheri Catechismus, mit mehr christlichen Fragen erkleret* (n.p., 1571), with a preface by Tilemann Heshus.

^s For some of the earliest, see Reu, *Quellen*. Two of the most influential were Johannes Brenz, *Catechismus . . . Deutsch*, trans. Hartmann Beyer (Leipzig: Berwalt, 1553), and David Chytraeus, *Catechesis in Academia Rostochiana ex praelectionibus Davidis Chytraei collecta* (Wittenberg: Johann Krafft, 1554).

Prayer, sacrament, and the marriage and baptismal services, this time adding Bible references for the stories depicted. Such illustrations were included in almost all versions of Luther's catechisms published during his lifetime and beyond, and even in the 1584 official Latin translation of the *Book of Concord*.



Cover of the 1536 printing of the *Small Catechism*.
Otto Albrecht, ed., *Der kleine Katechismus D. Martin
Luthers nach der Ausgabe v. J. 1536* (Halle:
Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1905)

8. German (from the Latin and Greek): *Enchiridion*. In 1501, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) had titled his instruction for the Christian life *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (“Handbook [or: Dagger] for the Christian Soldier”).

9. This reflects both types of German clergy in Luther’s day: pastors (*Pfarrherr*), who bore the major responsibility for pastoral care and worship in congregations, and preachers (*Prediger*).

10. The oldest surviving copy published in Wittenberg is from 1531.

11. See 1 Tim. 1:2 and 2 Tim. 1:2. Luther began using Pauline greetings for his letters exclusively, starting in 1522. When addressing specifically clergy, he sometimes used the greeting found in the Pastoral Epistles, as here.

12. In the medieval church, bishops were charged with regular visitation of their parishes, a formal examination of all aspects of parish life, often overseen by church officials sent by the diocese. In 1527, Elector John of Saxony (1468–1532) ordered an official visitation of churches in his lands, in the absence of cooperation from the local bishops, who normally provided such oversight. The teams consisted of two officials from the court, a professor of law (often Jerome Schurff) and a theologian (usually Philip Melancthon, who was elected by the theology faculty). As something of an exception, Luther made official visitations of congregations in electoral Saxony and Meissen from October 22, 1528, through January 9, 1529, describing his experiences in a letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf (1483–1565) dated November

HANDBOOK⁸ THE SMALL CATECHISM FOR ORDINARY PASTORS AND PREACHERS⁹ MARTIN LUTHER [1529]¹⁰

[The Preface of Dr. Martin Luther]

MARTIN Luther,^t

To all faithful and upright pastors and preachers.

Grace, mercy, and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord.¹¹

The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor¹² has constrained and compelled^u me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction,^v in such a brief, plain, and simple version. Dear God have mercy, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all 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!¹³ As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have masterfully learned how to misuse all their freedom. O you bishops! How are you ever going to answer to Christ, now that

^t This preface was printed in almost all booklet editions of the *Small Catechism*. In the 1531 edition, Luther’s name begins with a large initial “M.” Such decorative letters are also found at the beginning of the *Marriage Booklet*, the *Baptismal Booklet*, and, within the latter, for the first word of the exorcism and for the Gospel reading.

^u A German rhyme: *gezwungen und gedrungen*.

^v Similar to the introduction to the LC, Short Preface, par. 1-2 (BC, 383).

you have so shamefully neglected the people and have not exercised your office¹⁴ for even a single second? May you escape punishment for this! You forbid the cup [to the laity in the Lord's Supper] and insist on observance of your human laws, while never even bothering to ask whether the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or a single passage from God's Word. Woe to you forever!^w

Therefore, my dear sirs and brothers, whether pastors or preachers, for God's sake I beg that all of you would fervently take up your office, have pity on your people who are entrusted to you, and help us to bring the catechism to the people, especially to the young. In addition, I ask that those unable to do any better take up these charts and versions^{15,x} and present them to the people word for word in the following manner:

In the first place, the preacher should above all take care to avoid changes or variations in the text and version of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the sacraments, etc., but instead adopt a single version, stick with it, and always use the same one year after year. For the young and the unlettered people must be taught with a single, fixed text and version. Otherwise, if someone teaches one way now and another way next year—even when desiring to make improvements—the people become quite easily confused, and all the time and effort will go to waste.

The dear [church] fathers also understood this well. They used one form for the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.¹⁶ Therefore, we, too, should teach these parts to the young and to people who cannot read in such a way that we neither change a single syllable nor present or recite it differently from one year to the next.¹⁷ Therefore, choose for yourself whatever version you want and stick with it for good. To be sure, when you preach to educated and intelligent people, then you may demonstrate your erudition and discuss these parts with as much complexity and from as many different angles as you can. But with the young people, stick with a fixed, unchanging version and form. To begin with, teach them these parts: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc., following the

11, 1528 (LW 49:213–14). In 1528, Luther and Melancthon together published under their coats of arms theological and practical instructions to the pastors. See LW 40:263–320 (where the title, incorrectly translated, should read *Instruction by the Visitors for the Parish Pastors of Electoral Saxony*).

13. In Luther's day the word *catechism* denoted these three parts, cited here in an order often found in late-medieval manuals.

14. For Luther, the "office" of church leaders constituted their duties and authority. He argued that pastors and bishops had primarily duties regarding teaching, preaching, and administration of the sacraments, in addition to their administrative responsibilities.

15. The word *table* (see n. x below) may refer especially to the original printing of the individual sections of the *Small Catechism* on separate broadsheets, which, like posters, could be displayed in homes, schools, and churches.

16. Luther is thinking here of the single Latin versions for the parts of the catechism used in the ancient and medieval church.

17. The reformers insisted that Christian catechesis was not just for the literate. Thus, they stressed memorization as a way of bringing "book learning" to all people. All levels of education stressed the importance of memorization—not as rote but as a way of keeping an author's message in the heart. Here, of course, Luther is not talking about his own explanations but the basic texts on which his explanations were based.

^w See Luther's criticism of the bishops in the *Instruction by the Visitors*, 1528 (LW 40:269–73).

^x Literally, in German: *tafeln und forme* (tables and forms).

18. German: *Officialen*, diocesan judges who decided administrative, disciplinary, and marriage cases.

19. Luther has in mind not only his own *Deutsch Katechismus*, which others came to call the *Large Catechism*, but also other catechetical books.

text word for word, so that they can also repeat it back to you and learn it by heart.

Those who do not want to learn these things must be told how they deny Christ and are not Christians. They should also not be admitted to the sacrament, should not be sponsors for children at baptism, and should not exercise any aspect of Christian freedom,^y but instead should simply be sent back home to the pope and his officials,¹⁸ and, along with them, to the devil himself. Moreover, their parents and employers ought to deny them food and drink and advise them that the prince is disposed to drive such coarse people out of the country.

Although no one can or should force another person to believe,^z nevertheless one should insist upon and hold the masses to this: that they know what is right and wrong among those with whom they wish to reside, eat and earn a living.^a For example, if people want to live in a particular city, they ought to know and abide by the laws of the city whose protection they enjoy, no matter whether they believe or are at heart scoundrels and villains.

In the second place, once the people have learned the text well, then teach them to understand it, too, so that they know what it says. Take up again the form offered in these charts or some other short form that you may prefer, and adhere to it without changing a single syllable, just as was stated above regarding the text. Moreover, allow yourself ample time for it, because you need not take up all the parts at once but may instead handle them one at a time. After the people understand the First Commandment well, then take up the Second, and so on. Otherwise they will be so overwhelmed that they will hardly remember a single thing.

In the third place, after you have taught the people a short catechism like this one, then take up the large catechism¹⁹ and impart to them a richer and fuller understanding. In this case, explain each individual commandment, petition, or part with its

y See also LC, Short Preface, par. 1-5 (BC, 383).

z See the letter to Nicholas Hausmann dated March 17, 1522 (LW 48:399-402), the preface to *Instruction by the Visitors*, 1528 (LW 40:273), Luther's announcement for catechetical sermons in December 1528 (LW 51:136), and the LC, Lord's Supper, par. 42 (BC, 471).

a See the letter to Thomas Löscher dated August 26, 1529 (LW 49:232-34), and LC, Short Preface, par. 2 (BC, 383).

various works, benefits and blessings, harm and danger, as you find treated at length in so many booklets. In particular, put the greatest stress on that commandment or part where your people experience the greatest need. For example, you must strongly emphasize the Seventh Commandment, which deals with stealing, with artisans and shopkeepers and even with farmers and household workers, because rampant among such people are all kinds of dishonesty and thievery.^b Likewise, you must emphasize the Fourth Commandment to children and the common people, so that they are orderly, faithful, obedient, and peaceful.^c Always adduce many examples from the Scriptures where God either punished or blessed such people.²⁰

In particular, at this point^d also urge governing authorities and parents to rule well and to send their children to school. Point out how they are obliged to do so and what a damnable sin they commit if they do not, for thereby, as the worst enemies of God and humanity, they overthrow and lay waste both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.²¹ Explain very clearly what kind of horrible damage they do when they do not help to train children as pastors, preachers, civil servants,^e and the like, and tell them that God will punish them dreadfully for this. For in this day it is necessary to preach about these things, given that the extent to which parents and governing authorities are now sinning in these matters defies description. The devil, too, intends to do something horrible in all this.^f

Finally,²² because the tyranny of the pope has been abolished,²³ people no longer want to receive the sacrament, and they treat it with contempt. This, too, needs to be emphasized, with this caveat: That we should not compel anyone to believe or to receive the sacrament and should not fix any law or time

^b See LC, Ten Commandments, par. 225–26 (BC, 416).

^c See LC, Ten Commandments, par. 105–66 (BC, 400–409).

^d This paragraph continues Luther's exposition of the Fourth Commandment. See LC, Ten Commandments, par. 167–78 (BC, 409–410); the *Treatise on Good Works*, 1520 (LW 44:85–100; TAL 1:257–367); and *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, 1530 (LW 46:207–58).

^e German: *schreiber*, literally, “notaries” or “clerks.”

^f See the LC, Ten Commandments, par. 174–77 (BC, 410); *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, 1524 (LW 45:339–78; TAL 5, forthcoming); and *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, 1530 (LW 46:207–58).

20. Luther's catechisms were always illustrated with woodcuts of biblical scenes. For the Fourth Commandment it was the drunkenness of Noah (Gen. 9:20-27); see illustration on p. 219.

21. As in the *Large Catechism* and his tracts on education listed below (nn. *d* and *f*), Luther emphasizes the importance of education for both church and government.

22. This introduces a final example of how to apply a specific topic from the catechism and is not a fourth step in catechesis. See LC, Lord's Supper, par. 39–84 (BC, 470–75).

23. Luther is referring to the strict medieval requirement to receive the Lord's Supper once a year, especially between Easter and Corpus Christi Day (eleven days after Pentecost).

24. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, canon 21, stipulated that every Christian had to receive the Lord's Supper in the Easter season (up to Corpus Christi Day). See Luther's *Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament*, 1522 (LW 36:249), and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520 (LW 36:19–28; TAL 3:9–129).

25. For Luther, the Reformation reshaped the pastoral office, shifting it, for preachers, from moral exhortation to the proclamation of the gospel and, for pastors, from dispensing a grace effective “by the mere performance of rites” (*ex opere operato*) to the declaration of God's grace in audible and visible forms.

26. The titles for each section of the *Small Catechism* stem from the broadsheets of 1529 and were retained in subsequent booklet editions. (The Latin translation of 1529 addresses schoolteachers and students.) In 1531, this sentence was placed on a separate title page, which depicted the Lamb of God above and Luther's coat of arms (the “Luther rose”) below. In the booklet form, Luther followed his ordering discussed in the *Little Prayer Book*, moving from Commandments (which diagnose human sin), to the Creed (which describes God's grace), to the Lord's Prayer (which begs God for the very grace needed to fulfill the Commandments). This differed from many medieval catechisms that were oriented toward the Sacrament of

or place for it. Instead, we should preach in such a way that the people make themselves come without our law and just plain compel^g us pastors to administer the sacrament to them. This can be done by telling them: One has to worry that whoever does not desire or receive the sacrament at the very least once or four times a year despises the sacrament and is no Christian, just as anyone who does not listen to or believe the gospel is no Christian. For Christ did not say, “Omit this,” or “Despise this,” but instead [1 Cor. 11:25], “Do this, as often as you drink it. . . .” He really wants it to be done and not completely omitted or despised. “DO this,” he says.

Those^h who do not hold the sacrament in high esteem indicate that they have no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no dangers, no hell. That is, they believe they have none of these things, although they are up to their neck in them and belong to the devil twice over. On the other hand, they indicate that they need no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nor any other good thing. For if they believed that they had so much evil and needed so much good, they would not neglect the sacrament, in which help against such evil is provided and in which so much good is given. It would not be necessary to compel them with any law to receive the sacrament. Instead, they would come on their own, rushing and running to it; they would compel themselves to come and would insist that you give them the sacrament.

For these reasons, you do not have to make any law concerning this, as the pope did.²⁴ Only emphasize clearly the benefit and the harm, the need and the blessing, the danger and the salvation in this sacrament. Then they will doubtless come on their own without your forcing them. If they do not come, give up on them and tell them that those who pay no attention to nor feel their great need and God's gracious help belong to the devil. However, if you either do not stress this or make it into a law or poison, then it is your fault if they despise the sacrament. How can they help but neglect it, if you sleep and remain silent? Therefore, pastors and preachers, take note! Our office has now become a completely different thing than it was under

^g German: *dringen, und . . . zwingen*, a rhymed couplet. The Lord's Supper was celebrated each Sunday at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, although not many received it that often.

^h The German text uses the third person singular.

the pope.²⁵ It has now become serious and salutary. Thus, it now involves much toil and work, many dangers and attacksⁱ and, in addition, little reward or gratitude in the world. But Christ himself will be our reward, so long as we labor faithfully. May the Father of all grace grant it, to whom be praise and thanks in eternity through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Ten Commandments: In a Simple Way in Which the Head of a House Is to Present^j Them to the Household²⁶



Worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32)²⁷

The First [Commandment]^k

*You are to^l have no other gods.*²⁸

What is this?²⁹ Answer:

We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.

ⁱ German: *Anfechtung*.

^j German: *fürhalten*, used for each section of the catechism, except for the prayers, where Luther suggests they be “taught” (i.e., memorized).

^k This word, lacking in the editions of 1529–1535, is present in all other editions of the *Small Catechism* and in the *Book of Concord* of 1580.

Penance and thus began with the Creed, which a person in a state of sin could admit was true, moved to the Ten Commandments as one of many lists of sins the penitent was required to confess, and finally to the Lord’s Prayer, often without explanation, as one prayer necessary to recite to satisfy one’s remaining temporal punishment for sin.

27. In the printings of the *Small Catechism* during Luther’s lifetime, each commandment, article of the Creed, petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and sacrament was accompanied by a woodcut and (from 1536) references to the Bible story on which each picture was based. Woodcuts similar to those used in the *Small Catechism* were also included in the *Large Catechism* (see WA 30/1:133–210).

28. Luther uses a common form of the Decalogue that does not always correspond to the texts of either Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5 in the Luther Bible. As a result, some later editions, including the Nuremberg editions of 1531 and 1558, correct the text here and elsewhere according to the biblical text. The italicized portions throughout the *Small Catechism* were originally printed using larger type.

29. German: *Was ist das?* This question indicates that Luther viewed his responses more as paraphrase than as a disclosure of hidden meaning. The sense is “In other words” or “That is to say.”



Blasphemy of Shelomith's son
(Lev. 24:10-16)



Breaking the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36)

30. Luther uses these two verbs to refer back to the First Commandment. See *Instruction by the Visitors*, 1528 (LW 40:276-77) and LC, Ten Commandments, par. 321-27 (BC, 429-30).

The Second [Commandment]

You are not to take the name of your God in vain.^m

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love³⁰ God, so that ⁿ we do not curse, swear,^o practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

The Third [Commandment]

You are to hallow the day of rest.^p

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

- l* Throughout the Commandments the German word *sollen* is translated "are to," as a way of avoiding the confusion in English, where "shall" can mean either "ought to" or "will," and to clarify the paraphrastic nature of Luther's explanations.
- m* Following the editions of 1529-1535. The Nuremberg editions of 1531 and 1558 add "for the Lord will not hold that one guiltless who takes his name in vain."
- n* German: *das*. This may be rendered either modally ("by not doing") or consequentially ("with the result that we do not").
- o* German: *schweren*, here used in the sense of false oaths. See the LC, Ten Commandments, par. 65-66 (BC, 394-95).
- p* German: *Feiertag*, literally, "day of rest" (like the Hebrew word *sabbath*), but generally for Sunday and other "holy days." This (traditional) rendering differed from Luther's translation of the text in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, where he used the terms "holy day" and "Sabbath."

The Fourth [Commandment]

You are to honor your father and your mother.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority^q but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect.



The drunkenness of Noah
(Gen. 9:20–27)

The Fifth [Commandment]

You are not to kill.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors,^r but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.



Cain slays Abel (Gen. 4:1–16)

^q German: *Herrn*, literally, “lords,” but used here to denote those in authority, e.g., *Landesherrn* (princes), *Hausherr* (head of the house), or *Pfarrherr* (pastors).

^r Here and in the following explanations, the word *neighbor* is singular in the German.



David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)

The Sixth [Commandment]

You are not to commit adultery.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed and each person loves and honors his [or her] spouse.



The theft by Achan (Joshua 7)

The Seventh [Commandment]

You are not to steal.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbors' money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income.