

Luther's Small Catechism—Then and Now

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On a blustery, winter evening in 1529, Father Christopher of Hermannsburg was preparing for the next day's service. Suddenly someone was pounding at his door calling, "Father Christopher!" When he opened the door, a young man was standing there. The priest invited him in, and the stranger introduced himself as William Hauser. He explained that he was an apprentice on his way to Hanover, where he had been promised work in a carpenter's shop. Having heard of the kindness and hospitality of Father Christopher, Hauser had come at this late hour asking for a little food and shelter. After he had eaten, Hauser sat down by the fire, pulled out a little book, and began reading it. The priest was surprised. "You are able to read? And what is it you are reading, if I may ask?" The young man handed the booklet to his host. It was Luther's Small Catechism. "What kind of book is this?" the priest asked. "Where did you get it? Who has written it?" "Dr. Martinus of Wittenburg," was the reply. And then the young man proceeded to tell the priest that he had obtained it from a friend, who had transcribed it because the printers could not keep up with the demand. The priest asked permission to read it. After breakfast the following morning, Father Christopher said, "My good Hauser, this little catechism has strangely affected me. I had considered that strange monk Luther to be a rank heretic. But heretic or no heretic, blessed are the hands which have written this book, and blessed are they who believe its teachings. You must accept my poor hospitality until I have completed transcribing it."

The priest listened to the young man's accounts of the Reformer's work and teaching and began studying Luther's catechism. Later he wrote for a copy of the Large Catechism and was also fortunate to be able to obtain a copy of Luther's translation of the New Testament. Through his studies of these books Christopher became convinced that he had been an unfaithful shepherd of Christ's flock. He began to preach the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone and to instruct young and old alike in the truths of God's Word as Luther had summarized them in his catechism.

Although his newly-found teachings led to persecution and even to imprisonment, Father Christopher became Pastor Christopher, and after his release from prison he resumed the shepherding of his flock through the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of the catechism.

We have no way of knowing the profound effect that this little volume of Christian doctrine has had on the lives of people for the 450 years it has been in existence. But we do know that there are many lay people who still treasure this gem of the Reformation. After a meeting with pastors and Sunday school teachers last fall, an elderly man asked us if we knew where he could obtain a copy of a German-English catechism. He had given his catechism to a German-Russian immigrant and sorely missed it. He was overjoyed when we were able to obtain a copy for him. Was he the exception or the rule? We wonder how many of our youth look at their catechism after they have been confirmed. And perhaps we who are teaching catechetics year in and year out, do not prize it as highly as we should. This anniversary year gives us the opportunity to renew our appreciation of Luther's Small Catechism and rekindle our zeal for teaching it in our classrooms.

Its Development

Luther did not write his small catechism in one sitting, nor was it prepared in a matter of weeks. Rather, it was developing in his mind for over 10 years.

Luther described the spiritual darkness that prevailed in his day: "No one knew what was the Gospel, what Christ, baptism, confession, sacrament [were]; what were faith, spirit, flesh; what were good works, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer; what was praying, suffering, comfort; what was government, matrimony, parents, children, lords, servants, lady, maid; what was devil, angel, world, life, death, sin; what was righteousness, forgiveness of sins, God, bishop, clergy, Church; what was a Christian and the Christian cross. In a word, we knew nothing of what a Christian ought to know."

But this does not mean that there was no religious instruction before the dawn of the Reformation. When children were baptized, the sponsors were required to know the Creed and the Lord's Prayer and to promise that

they would teach them to their godchildren in case the parents should die. Although prayerbooks and communion-books were plentiful, many of them served to destroy faith rather than nourish it. Luther said of them: "Here was neither faith nor Christ, and the communicant could not be directed to the strength of the absolution, but was rather trained to count his sins and trust in the intensity of his repentance."

The catechism was incorporated into the Latin school in an attempt to bridge the gap between the German spoken at home and the Latin used in school. Memory material gradually increased. Besides the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the catalog of mortal sins, and the Ave Maria, the young had to memorize the seven charisms, the seven cardinal virtues, the seven sacraments, the seven works of mercy, the eight beatitudes, the twelve fruits of the Spirit, the Ten Commandments, the crying sins, the alien sins, and the five senses. Reu observes: "As the material increased, the possibility of inner appropriation decreased." This resulted in a mechanical memorization. In some places drill masters were hired, many of whom could not find other work.

The catechetical instruction prior to the reformation reflected the work-righteous doctrine of the Roman Church. It soon became apparent to Luther that if the unconditional Gospel of salvation was to be restored to the Church, the basics of Christianity had to be preached from the pulpit and taught in the homes and classrooms.

As early as 1516 Luther began to preach sermons on the Ten Commandments, and the next year he delivered a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. In 1518 Luther had his sermons of the Ten Commandments printed in Latin and German. Both were highly acclaimed. A book censor of Venice wrote: "Blessed are the hands which wrote this; blessed the eyes that read it; blessed the hearts that believe the book and so earnestly call upon God." This marked the beginnings of Luther's two catechisms. In 1520 Luther added a third part - the explanation of the Creed. Instead of adhering to the traditional twelve divisions of the Creed, Luther divided it into three parts.

Although the idea did not originate with him, Luther purposely listed the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer in that order. He explained:

Three things a man must needs know in order to be saved. First, he must know what to do and what not to do. Secondly, when he recognizes that by his own power he cannot do what he should, nor leave undone what he should not do, he must learn where to receive, seek and find such power and strength. Thirdly, he must know how to seek and obtain it. Just as a sick man must know first of all what his sickness is and what he may do and what he may not do. Next he must find where the remedy is which may cure him, so that he can do what any healthy person does. Fourthly, he must desire such remedy and seek and fetch it or have it brought to him. Accordingly, the Commandments teach man to know his sickness, so that he may see what he can do and what he cannot do, and to acknowledge himself as a sinner and a wicked man. After that the Creed teaches him where to find the remedy that helps him to become godly and to keep the Commandments; it shows him God and His mercy, revealed and offered in Christ. Fifthly, the Lord's Prayer teaches him how to seek, fetch, and obtain such mercy, namely through proper humble confident prayer; thus it shall be granted him, and he shall be saved through the fulfillment of God's Commandments.¹

Luther's sermons were the immediate source of both his Large and Small Catechisms. Annually he would preach sermons on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. Later he added sermons on the Lord's Supper and Baptism. The three series on the catechism which he preached in 1528 had a great bearing on the catechisms he prepared the next year. The German scholar Buchwald states: "Luther's Catechism sermons of 1528 are the Reformer's preparatory work of his two catechisms and more immediately, for the Small Catechism, which, accordingly was written before the Large. The very text of the Small Catechism is here seen in course of development." Buchwald also claimed that Luther had these three series of

¹ M. Reu, *Luther's Small Catechism* (Wartburg Publishing House, 1929) p. 9

sermons before him either in his own hand or in the form of a copy when he was preparing his Large Catechism.

Although Luther apparently felt the need for a catechism for a long time, other work prevented him from writing it. Luther first mentioned the plan of publishing a catechism in a letter dated February 2, 1525, and addressed to his good friend Nicolaus Hausmann. (Incidentally, the word ‘catechism’ is used in this letter for the first time in reference to a book. Before, catechism signified a type of oral instruction.) Luther states that he had commissioned Justus Jonas and Agricola to prepare such a catechism. When they failed to produce it, Luther decided to write the catechism himself, even though several catechisms had already been issued by others. It is estimated that between 1522 and 1529 no less than thirty catechisms were published by others connected with the Reformation. And some of them were published in many editions. One of them bore the name “catechism” in its title for the first time.

The urgency of the need for a catechism was especially felt by Luther during his pastoral visit throughout Saxony in 1528. His own words best describe the conditions he found in the churches there.

The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare [publish] this catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Good God! What manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas, many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach (so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it). Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians, have been baptized and receive the holy Sacraments. Yet they do not understand and cannot even recite either the Lord’s Prayer or the Creed of the Ten Commandments; they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts.

O ye bishops (to whom this charge has been committed by God), what will ye ever answer to Christ for having so shamefully neglected the people and never for a moment discharged your office? You are the persons to whom alone this ruin of the Christian religion is due. You have permitted men to err so shamefully; yours is the guilt, for you have ever done anything rather than what your office required you to do. May all misfortune flee you! (I do not wish at this place to Invoke evil on your heads.) You command the Sacrament in one form (and is not this the highest ungodliness, coupled with the greatest impudence, that you are insisting on the administration of the Sacrament in one form only and on your traditions?) and insist on your human laws, and yet at the same time you do not care in the least (while you are utterly without scruple and concern) whether the people know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or any part of the Word of God. Woe, woe, unto you forever!²

As late as 1534 a priest was found who had no Bible because it had been destroyed by fire twenty-six years before.

Luther’s *Small Catechism* sprang from a compassion for the people who were spiritually starved. And yet a catechism which contained evangelical doctrine would come to be of great benefit for clergy and laity alike.

Besides the three series of sermons on the catechism preached in 1528 mentioned above, the *Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer* of 1520 and the *Booklet for Laymen and Children* of 1525 are regarded as the forerunners of Luther’s catechisms. The *Short Form* is a summary and explanation of the three traditional chief parts. These Luther considered the heart and core of the catechism. In 1522 he embodied the *Short Form* into his *Prayer-Booklet*, and it was given extended circulation. Bugenhagen was probably the author of the *Booklet for Laymen and Children*, but the text closely follows the thoughts of

² Th. Graebner, *The Story of the Catechism* (Concordia Publishing House, 1928) pp.40-44

Luther's earlier works and contains some of his explanations. Here for the first time Baptism and the Lord's Supper appear as chief parts.

After the development of the printing press, charts came into vogue. Thus when Luther had completed the first three parts of his catechism, they were printed in the first week of 1529 and published in the form of charts. They were an instant success and almost immediately sold out. What a blessing they must have been for the Christian home! From the charts on the wall young and old alike could read and reread the principal doctrines of the Christian faith. Two months later all five chief parts (excluding the keys and confession) were available in chart form.

Confession was the last part that Luther himself added to the catechism. He felt that since compulsory confession was abolished, there was a tendency on the part of the people to abuse their new-found liberty by neglecting confession and the reception of the Lord's Supper. To overcome this he added confession to his second edition of the *Large Catechism* which appeared in 1529.

In the *Small Catechism* edition of June 13, 1529, Luther included a "Short Form for the Unlearned to Confess to the Priest." This was not in the earlier editions of the *Small Catechism* of that year, and even in this edition it was not part of the catechism proper but was an addendum. It consisted of two suggested liturgical forms in which confession could be made.

In this edition Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers are included, as well as the Table of Duties. This edition is the first to use the designation, *Enchiridion*, or "Little Handbook." Luther was not the first to use it, and why he did is not clear. He, no doubt, thought of it as a handy little book that the average person could purchase and carry with him. Remember, in the 16th century the Bible and most religious books were beyond the financial means of the common people.

In this Wittenberg edition of the *Enchiridion*, illustrations are used for the first time. There was one for each of the Commandments, one for each article of the Creed, one for each petition of the Lord's Prayer. These illustrations depicted the same events as those represented by the illustrations of two editions of the *Large Catechism* printed in the same year. Luther had urged the teachers to use Bible stories as the primary source of intuitive material for teaching the catechism.

In the 1531 edition of the catechism a section between Baptism and the Lord's Supper was added, entitled, "How the Unlearned Should be Taught to Confess." Also, for the first time, the introduction to the Lord's Prayer with its explanation was offered. This was the final form of the catechism which Luther worked on. For that reason the edition of 1531 was used for inclusion in the *Book of Concord*.

That leaves only the Ministry of the Keys unaccounted for. No edition of the *Small Catechism* issued during Luther's lifetime contained the Ministry of the Keys. In 1533 Osiander and Sleupner wrote and published the *Nuernberg Sermons for Children*. Each of these sermons expounded a portion of Luther's Catechism based on a Scripture text. Each sermon concluded with a brief summary of the main thoughts of the sermon in the words of Luther's *Enchiridion*. Between the sermon on Baptism and the sermon on the Lord's Supper there is a sermon on the Office of the Keys. The text is John 20:22,23; the summary is almost word for word the answer to the following question in our present *Enchiridion*: "What do you believe according to these words?" Because of the popularity of these sermons throughout Germany, this statement on the Ministry of the Keys was included with the other parts of the *Enchiridion* written by Luther. The first two questions (What is the Ministry of the Keys? Where is this written?) were added in areas in which the *Nuernberg Sermons for Children* were in use. The Ministry of the Keys assumed several very similar forms. The one chosen for use in our catechism is the form used for many years in Saxony and Thuringia.

A close scrutiny of the words, "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ ... exclude manifestly impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation: can raise some serious questions. Are these words in harmony with Matthew 18? Do they describe the practice of our congregations today? After explaining the steps of brotherly admonition, Jesus makes it clear what should be done with the manifestly impenitent. "Tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to even the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Mt 18:17). Jesus didn't say, "Tell it to the pastor and then let him exclude the impenitent from the church." He

stated that the final action should be taken by Christ's church on earth. This is the practice commonly carried out in our congregations today.

But in these early days of the Reformation there was not the congregational organization that we enjoy today. To our knowledge voters of a congregation did not gather to carry out the business of the church, which would also include disciplinary action against a member. Then how did the 16th century Luther church use the Ministry of the Keys? Luther gives an explanation in the *Smalcald Articles*, Article IX, Of Excommunication. "The true Christian excommunication consists in this, that manifest and obstinate sinners are not admitted to the Sacrament and other communion of the church until they amend their lives and avoid sin." At that time the pastor alone acted in the name of the church as its called servant by refusing to admit the manifestly impenitent to the Lord's Supper. While a faithful pastor may do the same today, final action against the manifestly impenitent is taken by the congregation.

In describing the gradual development of Luther's *Enchiridion*, we have only related the major changes that took place. The others may be found in Reu's classic work written in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the *Enchiridion* entitled, *Luther's Small Catechism*. It might be noted, however, that Reu, in his chapter on the expositions of Luther's catechism from 1530-1600, points to the many changes in wording that took place during that period and then makes this statement: "Thus it is evident that the *Small Catechism* in the 16th century has often been treated, even by staunch Lutherans, with a liberty few of us would dare to exercise today. The change in attitude took place when the *Small Catechism* acquired the character of a confessional writing, but even then only gradually."

Its Genius

The historian Leopold von Ranke evaluates Luther's *Small Catechism* in this way: "Luther's Catechism is at once child-like and profound, lucid and unfathomable, simple and sublime. Happy is the man who constantly returns to it to nourish his soul. To him it will ever remain a living fountain of comfort, a frail shell that contains the heart of truth which satisfies the wisest of the wise." Catechisms have come and gone, but Luther's has remained to this present day. Together with Bible history it is an important part of our educational system today. Why? There are any number of reasons. One is its unexcelled simplicity.

You can only make something simple to others which you have mastered yourself. A young pastor was invited by his doctor friend to attend a medical society meeting being held in town. A brilliant young doctor was the main speaker. But the pastor didn't understand what the doctor was talking about. When he was invited to attend a similar meeting again, he refused. "But this will be different," his doctor friend assured him. "The main speaker this time is both well-versed and experienced in his field. You will understand him." And the young pastor did. Luther's catechism came only after many years of studying the Bible and after coming to a personal knowledge of the simple truths of the Scripture. Luther knew what was essential for every Christian to know and believe in order to be saved.

Always mindful that he was writing for children and the unlearned, Luther strove for simplicity. For example, he eliminated the reference to the ceremonial law of the Jews as it was given to the Israelites in the Third Commandment. For "Sabbath Day" Luther substituted "holy day" and then proceeded to explain that we keep this commandment when we hear and learn God's Word. Christ and his Word alone bring true rest to sinners who are laboring under the demands of the law and carrying the burden of sin.

For better understanding, Luther removed the words, "I the Lord your God am a Jealous God, etc." from the First Commandment and placed them at the conclusion of the commandments, introducing the conclusion with the question, "What does God say of all these commandments?" Thus the threat of punishment for the disobedient and the promise of a gracious reward for the obedient applies clearly to all Ten Commandments and not to just the first one.

The greatest achievement of Luther's catechetical efforts can be found in his explanations of the three articles of the Creed. In the Middle Ages the Creed was broken up into twelve sections, and each was treated as an independent part unrelated to the other. But Luther divided the Creed into three parts, which reflected the

gracious work of the Trinity - Creation, Redemption, Sanctification. In the First Article Luther leads me to acknowledge my creation and preservation flowing from the goodness of God's heart and resulting in my thankful praise and willing obedience. In the Second Article he leads me to confess faith in the human and the divine in one person, Jesus Christ, who redeemed me that I may serve him now and live with him forever. In the Third Article he leads me to contemplate that my faith in Christ is alone the work of the Holy Ghost, who has by that faith made me a member of the one Holy Christian church.

But simplicity has not been accomplished at the expense of meaningful doctrine. For example, the word "grace" is retained. "He promises grace and every blessing." "So that by his grace we believe his holy Word." "The gracious good will of God is done indeed without our prayer." Baptism is called a "gracious water of life." The word "love" would make it simpler, but it would not convey the thought of unworthiness. With Luther we recognize the importance of retaining words such as redeemed, sanctified, repentance, because they could not be simplified without stripping them of some of their meaning. Certain words and concepts must be taught repeatedly to children, so they can begin to grasp their divine meaning.

Luther was able to condense Christian doctrine into a brief form while at the same time keeping difficult concepts at a minimum. And he employed a rhythmic flow that aids memorization. These qualities are his genius, qualities that a translator often has great difficulty in capturing.

Another outstanding feature of Luther's *Small Catechism* is the absence of polemics. When one considers how Luther was constantly contending for the truth, how he was constantly under attack from both the papal and reformed camps, it must have taken an unusual amount of restraint not to refute specific, current error. How easily he could have slipped into warning against the false notions of good works which had tyrannized the people in the Roman Catholic Church! How easily he could have, in rather simple terms, answered the attacks of Zwingli and others regarding the doctrines of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Instead, he made positive statements explaining the various truths under consideration.

But don't certain questions in the *Enchiridion* have polemical overtones? For example, "How can water do such great things?" may be viewed as an attempt to answer the Reformed doctrine that baptism is only a reminder that our sins are washed away and not truly a Means of Grace. Something similar could be said of the question, "How can bodily eating do such great things?" But aren't these important questions even when there are no doctrinal aberrations? We would still have to contend with man's sinful reason. The above questions can easily arise in someone's mind after he was taught that "baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe..." or after he had learned that "through these words we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in the Sacrament."

Many catechisms have been written, but none equals Luther's. It is the simple proclamation of the Gospel message that causes Luther's *Small Catechism* to stand head and shoulders above all others. After enumerating the many temporal blessings that the Lord has showered on us, Luther adds in the explanation to the First Article "And all this God does because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it." In the Second Article Luther does more than enumerate and explain the historical facts in God's plan of salvation, for he also writes that Jesus Christ "has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death." The full measure of God's grace is brought out in the explanation to the Third Article, when we are led to confess: "The Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me In the true faith." We have already indicated how the terms grace, forgiveness of sins and salvation were used by Luther in explaining the sacraments, all rich in gospel content.

And we should not overlook the way Luther uses the gospel to motivate godly living. In his explanation of the commandments Luther did not merely catalog the do's and the don'ts. He knew that only with the proper motivation could anyone begin to keep God's commandments. For that reason he explained the negative of the First Commandment with a positive statement, and then proceeded to begin the explanations for the rest of the commandments with, "We should fear and love God." While the demand to love God is a demand of the Law,

Christians are mindful that they love him because he first loved them. And notice the gospel motivation in the Conclusion to the Commandments when Luther says: “But he promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these Commandments. Therefore we should love and trust in him and gladly obey his holy will.” The thanking and praising, the serving and obeying God in the First Article explanation is preceded with gospel motivation. And Luther says that Christ’s redemption should move us “to live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” In the Fifth Petition after explaining how freely and graciously God has forgiven all of our sins, Luther says, “So we too will forgive from the heart and gladly do good to those who sin against us.”

There is also gospel motivation for a sanctified Christian life embodied in Luther’s explanation to the Sacraments. In Fourthly of Baptism Luther describes the battle that goes on daily in the heart of the Christian. He supports his statement that the “new man should arise... to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever” with St. Paul’s inspired words in Romans 6:4: “We were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” The blessings of Christ’s redemption offered and received through our baptism is the Christian’s life-long sustainer in his temptation-filled life.

The gospel motivation for Christian living is also found in the second part of the Sacrament of the Altar. Luther explains that through the words, “Given and shed for you for the remission of sins” we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. What life does Luther mean here? His own words in the *Large Catechism* give us the answer.

On this account it [the Sacrament] is indeed called a food of souls, which nourishes and strengthens the new man. For by Baptism we are first born anew; but (as we said before) there still remains, besides, the old vicious nature of flesh and blood in man, and there are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes also stumble.

Therefore it is given for a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so as not to fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger. For the new life must be so regulated that it continually increase and progress; but it must suffer much opposition. For the devil is such a furious enemy that when he sees that we oppose him and attack the old man, and that he cannot topple us over by force, he prowls and moves about on all sides, tries all devices, and does not desist, until he finally wearies us, so that we either renounce our faith or yield hands and feet and become listless or impatient. Now to this end the consolation is here given when the heart feels that the burden is becoming too heavy, that it may here obtain new power and refreshment.³

The gospel of forgiveness in the Sacrament promotes godly living in our lives.

We may rightly conclude that Luther used his God-given gifts to the full when he prepared this simple treatise on the Law and the Gospel for children to learn and to remember. While some will contend its genius is found in the form, others in the simplicity and clarity of the language, I believe that it is still held in such high regard because it effectively presents the gospel message.

Like the gospel, Luther’s Catechism has had its friends and foes. Bente in his historical introduction to Luther’s Catechism, quotes the pedagogue and historian, Dr. Ludwig Gurlitt:

Its [the catechism’s] contents already are so antiquated that parents reject almost every sentence of it for themselves; true. the man of today understand its language only with difficulty - what of it, the children must gulp down the moldy, musty food. How we would scoff and jeer if a similar report were made about the school system in China! To this Lutheran Catechism, which I would best like to see In state libraries only, are added many antiquated hymns of mystical turgidity, which a simple youth, even with

³ *Concordia Triglotta* pp. 757-758

the best will, does not know how to use. All outlived! Faith in the Bible owes its existence only to the tough power and law of inertia. It is purely mechanical thinking and speaking which the schoolmaster preaches to them and pounds into them. We continue thus because we are too indolent to fight, or because we fear an enlightened people.⁴

On the other hand, Polycarp Leyser wrote in his introduction to Chemnitz's summary of Christian theology:

The sainted Luther never applied greater care to any work than to his brief summary of all those extended works which make up the body of his writings. In his Small Catechism, more precious than gold and gems, we find the ecclesiastical doctrine in prophetic and apostolic purity. The whole of Christian doctrine is there so concentrated and so clearly set forth that it may not improperly be called a standard of the Church, being throughout taken from the sacred Scriptures. It can truthfully be said that in this tiny book such a wealth of truth is contained that if all faithful preachers of the Gospel treated nothing else in their sermons throughout their days, if only they explained to their people the mystery of divine wisdom comprehended in these few words and set forth the Scriptural evidence on which they are based, they could never exhaust its immensities.⁵

One's attitude toward the gospel is reflected in one's evaluation of Luther's *Enchiridion*.

Its Use

At times the value of a classic is not recognized immediately. But such was not the case with Luther's *Small Catechism*. The charts mentioned previously were an instant success and very quickly the first printing was sold out. The same was true of both the Low German and the High German editions printed in the spring of 1529. In the same year two Latin translations appeared and the catechism began its spread throughout Europe. Both the pastors and rulers wanted the catechism in the language of the people. Thus it was translated into Dutch in the regions along the Rhine, into a Frisian dialect spoken on the islands of the North Sea. For many centuries immigrants from Russia, Poland, Lithuania and other eastern countries settled in various parts of Germany. For many, the Catechism was the first book published in their native tongue.

As the Reformation swept across Europe, the catechism became the chief book from the pen of Luther. In Austria it became customary to conduct a catechetical hour on Sunday afternoons. Because of Luther's contacts with the noblemen in Bohemia, Christian preachers were sent there, and with them came the purified church service and the catechism. In Hungary the catechism was introduced as the official instruction book for all schools. And in 1544 the catechism first appeared in the tongue of the Rumanians. Even during Luther's lifetime translations of his catechism appeared in Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian. It also spread quickly to the Baltic and Scandinavian countries. Although the Netherlands, Belgium, and France came under the Reformed influence, Luther's Catechism was one of the first books of the Reformation published in those countries.

Of special note is the first English translation prepared by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. A Latin translation had been imported into England as early as 1529, for already in that year it was listed on the "Index of Prohibited Books." Cranmer was sent on a political mission to Germany by Henry VIII and met some of the reformers. In 1548 he published his book of instruction for the common people, which was a translation of Oslander's *Children's Sermons*. Graebner regarded Cranmer's translation of the *Enchiridion* as the most beautifully done in English, for the "phrases have a melodius quality, a gentle cadence, which gives this translation an appeal later translators have never been able to capture."

Luther's *Small Catechism* has been in use in most countries of the world. At the time of its 400th anniversary the catechism had been translated into 161 languages and dialects. It accompanied the first settlers

⁴ Ibid, pp.

⁵ Th. Graebner, *The Story of the Catechism*, p. 136

to our country. In fact, Luther's *Catechism* was the first book to be translated into the tongue of the American Indian. Pastor John Campius, a Swedish Lutheran and the first Lutheran missionary to the American Indians, translated it into the language of the Delawares. The German settlers came with their catechisms. In 1747 Muhlenberg wrote: "I could find in my congregations more than fifty different kinds of catechisms and hymn books which the people brought with them." After the founding of the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1748, a uniform catechism was produced which was used for over 100 years.

This, however, was not the source of our WELS Catechism. Our first official catechism was published in 1881 and was a revision of the Dresden Cross Catechism of 1688. This was also the first catechism used in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. This is understandable because a great number of the Saxons who emigrated to America, settled in Perry County, Missouri, and organized the Missouri Synod, came with their leader, Stephen, from Dresden. It may very well be that our contacts with Missouri in the 1860's and 70's prompted our synodical fathers to base their first catechism on the Dresden edition. This version contained both the *Enchiridion* and an exposition.

By the turn of the century a committee formed by the Synodical Conference was working on a catechism. One of the members of that committee was the Wisconsin Synod pastor, Carl Gausewitz. In 1907 our Synod resolved to form a committee which had the assignment of revising the German catechism and providing a good English translation of it. Apparently, the committee never got off the ground. Six years later the Synod dismissed the committee and resolved that the production of the catechism be put into the hands of one man. President Bergemann selected Carl Gausewitz.

In comparing our present *Enchiridion* with that which is printed in the *Triglotta*, we find a number of discrepancies. For example, the words of the doxology of the Lord's Prayer are not included in the *Book of Concord*. This was not part of Luther's 1531 edition, the last one that he personally worked on. This has caused some difficulty in catechizing because Luther's explanation only addresses itself to the word, "Amen."

As we mentioned earlier, the Ministry of the Keys was not written by Luther, but it was added later. The Fifth Chief Part in the *Book of Concord*, therefore, is only Confession. After the first three questions (What is confession? What sins should we confess? Which are these?), there is a section entitled, "Pray, Propose to Me a Brief Form of Confession." This has been omitted in the *Enchiridion* we use for catechetical instruction. That section of confession may have been omitted for practical reasons, because it would have discouraged memorization of the entire part. The very last paragraph is also missing. It reads: "But those who have great burdens upon their consciences, or are distressed and tempted, the confessor will know how to comfort and to encourage to faith with more passages of Scripture. This is to be merely a general form of confession for the unlearned."

While Luther's Small Catechism has been one of our confessional writings since 1580, it is well to bear in mind that Luther's primary intention for writing the *Enchiridion* was to offer a book of instruction for children, one that they could quite easily commit to memory.

In recent years we have seen a growing concern on the part of our members that our Bible and our religious materials should speak the language of today. At the urging of the CCL and according to the directive of the Synod, the BPE appointed a committee to revise the *Enchiridion*. This work began two years before the New Testament of the NIV came on the market. The *Enchiridion* committee set for itself the following goals:

1. To remain faithful to Luther's thoughts and words;
2. To provide a translation which speaks clearly to our youth, as Luther's original German spoke to his generation;
3. To retain Luther's genius for expression; his rhythmic, poetic flow of language.

The first draft was published in 1973 and sent to all pastors, professors, and teachers in the Synod, soliciting their reaction. Over 600 replies were received, many of them containing helpful suggestions. A second draft was written and made available. The 1975 Synod convention decided that it should be submitted to

district, pastoral, and teacher conferences. More revisions were made, and in 1977 the third draft was made available. One final review will be made this summer before it is submitted to the Synod.

The committee has struggled and, at times, agonized over this translation. Let me share with you some of the changes that have taken place from the first to the third drafts of the *Enchiridion*, changes which reflect the suggestions which members of the Synod offered. In the Second Commandment “turn from it [God’s name] to superstitions” replaced “turn from it to the secret arts.” Interestingly, the NIV uses the expression “secret arts” in Exodus 7:11, and the NIV is the contemporary translation of the Bible quoted in the new *Enchiridion*. In the Eighth Commandment “ruin his good name” was changed to “given him a bad name.” In the Ninth Commandment “obtain it [neighbor’s house] by pretending it belongs to us” was strengthened when it was changed to “obtain it by false claims.” At times words were changed simply for the sake of variety, as was the case in the Conclusion to the Commandments with the expressions “God’s Commandments” and “His will.”

In the First Article of the Creed the word “powers” was replaced with the word “abilities.” To improve the flow, the sentence “all this God does purely because he is good and merciful as my Father in heaven, and not because I have earned and deserved it” was reworded to read, “All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it.” The same is true of the last line in the explanation to the Third Article. The final rendition is, “And he will give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.”

There were times when a wording could be changed and thereby help the children avoid confusion in their catechism recitations. Most children have difficulty remembering whether to say, “dear Father in heaven” or “heavenly Father” in the Second Petition. The new translation simply uses “dear Father in heaven” in both instances. The last sentence in Luther’s explanation to the Fifth Petition, has been translated, “So we too will forgive from the heart and gladly do good to those who sin against us.” This should be easier for children to memorize than the present one.

One of the most difficult sections which the committee struggled with was The Fifth Chief Part, The Use of the Keys and Confession. As we stated before, the section on the Ministry of the Keys was not a part of Luther’s *Enchiridion*, although Confession was. First of all the committee simplified the expression, “manifestly Impenitent sinners,” to read, “those who are plainly impenitent.” Then it substituted “Christians” for “the called pastor.” recognizing that the ministry of the keys has been entrusted to every Christian. The third revision, however, was changed to the following: “How does a Christian congregation use the Keys? A Christian congregation with its called pastor uses the keys in accordance with Christ’s command, etc.” It also added Matthew 18:18 in support of that statement. In Confession the first draft stated, “Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we do not know” as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. “But before our fellow-Christians we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.” The words, “even those we do not know” are a restoration of Luther’s original. The second draft had, “But before our pastor or any fellow-Christian we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.” By the third draft almost a full circle has been made since it is close to our present translation: “But before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.” To compensate for any misunderstanding, a note was added at the end of this part which stated that a Christian may also confess his sins to his fellow-Christians. All of the above versions can be supported by Scripture, but the question the committee had to answer constantly was this: Which approach should we take in our *Enchiridion*?

At least one word in Confession was clarified. “Lazy” was substituted for “slothful.” And the last two questions were made more understandable: “How can we recognize these sins?” and “How will the pastor assure a penitent sinner of his forgiveness?”

There is a growing conviction among pastors, teachers, and lay people that our children should learn God’s Word in the language of today. Those congregations which use a contemporary translation of the Bible will desire a contemporary translation of the catechism. The two go hand in hand. Since the catechism is a text that should be memorized, we should settle on a contemporary translation for those who wish to use it in their catechetical instruction. Luther did not make any changes in his catechism after 1531. And for good reason. In

his introduction he stated: “Young and simple persons must be taught a definite text, otherwise, if you teach a certain form this year and another next, you will simply confuse them, and your labor will be lost. Settle on a certain form and stick to it forever, then drill it word for word until they are able to know and recite it.”

In the call forms of both pastors and teachers, Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism is mentioned in connection with the instruction of our children. Thus, we are to be teachers of the catechism. But let us also continue to be its students.

Once Luther asked his son Hans how much he knew. Hans answered rather proudly, “The whole catechism, Papa, because I know that by heart.” “Is that so!” Luther replied. “If you know that much you are wiser than I. I still have to study it every day.” Should we be satisfied with doing less?

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