

# Luther's Small Catechism: An Old Book for LBK's Future

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[For occasion was the introduction of the translation of the catechism,  
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*"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."*

*Leopold von Ranke*

*Note that in this lecture I will be talking about pages 9 to 30 in our new Catechism. These pages contain the actual Small Catechism of Martin Luther (called the enchiridion), which was written to be memorized by each student. The rest of our new book is a guide to help us understand more fully the Biblical doctrines summarized in the enchiridion.*

The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther is without a doubt known to more people than any other writing of the Reformation. It is a little book, nearly 500 years old, which is totally relevant for us and our LBK today and will remain relevant throughout the future until the day Jesus returns.

## Luther's Small Catechism - some history

The word Catechism stems from the Greek word *κατηχέω*, meaning, "to teach orally." The word is generally used in the New Testament with the meaning "to instruct" (cf. Rom 2:18; 1 Cor. 14:19). Since other Greek words for "teaching" were available, it seems that St. Paul used this word, rare in secular Greek and foreign to Jewish religious vocabulary, as a technical term for Christian instruction. In the early church, "catechumens," appear as a distinct group, namely those who are being instructed in preparation for Baptism. The fact that in our day the word catechism is used almost exclusively for a book of religious instruction is consistent with Biblical usage.

There were, of course, Christian instructional materials many centuries before Martin Luther. Jesus' Great Commission says: *make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them.* Hence instruction in Christian doctrine, followed by confession of one's faith in those truths, was a part of the New Testament church from its start. There was need, therefore, for a concise and accepted summary of Christian teaching. This need led to the development of the Apostles' Creed as the confession of faith before baptism.

By 600 A.D. a change had taken place in catechetical instruction. With fewer adults seeking baptism and more infant baptisms, instruction grew less and less. The papacy's power was dependent on a people not well grounded in Scripture, but rather held in the bonds of superstition. The Roman church developed a system in which salvation came, not from God, but from "the church." Real instruction became almost non-existent, and what instruction did exist failed to enlighten or to lead to Christ. Luther said of the books and instructional materials he had known in the Catholic Church: *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.* In other words, catechetical instruction in the centuries prior to the Reformation reflected the Roman Church's doctrine that we are justified because of our own works.

The church did retain the concept, however, that certain knowledge was desirable for the people. From earliest times, the Lord's Prayer and the Creed were regarded as essential. It wasn't until the 13th century that the Ten Commandments were added to the list. These three chief parts were the main essentials in catechisms up to Luther's time. Thomas Aquinas had arranged them as Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Ten Commandments, and they generally retained that order. But, bigger is better, they say, so other parts were added. One instructional manual listed: The Ten

Commandments, the Nine Strange Sins, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Six Works of Mercy, the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Creed, the Seven Sacraments, and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. Several church councils in the 1400s ratified four chief parts: The Lords Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. No doubt this is the arrangement Luther knew as a child. The inclusion of the Ave Maria points to the idolatry prevalent in those times when Mary was called the Mediatrix between God and man, the Restorer of the lost grace of all men, the Illuminatrix who dispels the ignorance which leads to eternal death, the Advocate before the throne of God, the Mighty Queen of heaven, the Holy Empress of the Angels.

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. To trace the roots of Luther's Catechism, we must first go back before the 95 Thesis in 1517. Luther was a professor at the University in Wittenberg and helped as a substitute for the local parish priest. In the summer of 1516, Luther preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. Then he used the Lenten Season of 1517 to preach on the Lord's Prayer. About the same time, in order to help the people prepare for confession and self-examination, Luther wrote and published a brief exposition of the Ten Commandments. In 1520 Luther compiled these labors into a book intended to serve the common people in their preparation for communion. It bore the title: "A Short Form of the Ten Commandments; a Short Form of the Creed; a Short Form of the Lord's Prayer." In 1523 Luther published "Five Questions in Regard to the Holy Supper," also intended as an aid for communion preparation. Here the Sacraments received independent treatment as chief parts of Christian doctrine for the first time.

Although Luther had realized the need for a catechism for the church for a long time, other work prevented him from writing it. The Reformation was already a decade old. In that time, Luther had given the German people the New Testament in their own language and was working on the Old Testament. Many sermons and tracts had been published, as well as the first hymnal. Still, the Lutheran Church was hard-pressed for capable clergy. In 1528, Luther himself visited churches and schools to see just what the needs were. His reaction to what he saw is well-known, being recorded in the opening words of his Small Catechism:

*The deplorable destitution which I recently observed during a visitation of the churches has impelled and constrained me to prepare this Catechism or Christian Doctrine in such a small and simple form. Alas, what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, know nothing at all of Christian doctrine, and many pastors are quite unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet all are called Christians, have been baptized, and enjoy the use of the Sacraments, although they know neither the Lord's Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments and live like poor brutes and irrational swine. Still they have, now that the Gospel has come, learned to abuse all liberty in a masterly manner.*

*O ye bishops! how will ye ever render account to Christ for having so shamefully neglected the people and having never for a moment exercised your office! May the judgment not overtake you! You command Communion in one kind and urge your human ordinances, but never ask, in the meantime, whether the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or any part of God's Word. Woe, woe unto you everlastingly.*

*Therefore I entreat you all, for God's sake, my dear brethren who are pastors and preachers, to devote yourselves heartily to your office and have pity upon the people who are committed to your charge. Help us to inculcate the Catechism upon them, especially upon the young.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> How deplorable were conditions? It is reported that in a certain village the congregation and the priest became Lutheran during the course of the Reformation. Since they were now Lutheran, it was expected that the pastor would not only conduct the liturgy, but also preach and instruct. The pastor, being a brewer on the side, and a good one at that, preached a series of sermons on the history of brewing and instructions in the art of brewing!

Several catechisms had already been issued by others. In fact, it is estimated that between 1522 and 1529 no less than thirty catechisms were published by individuals connected with the Reformation. Melancthon had published at least two. None of these catechisms were judged to be adequate, however.

Luther could procrastinate no longer. He realized that there was an immediate need for a catechism, and he moved the task to the top of his “do now” list. During the winter of 1528-29, he preached no less than three series of sermons on the five chief parts. In January, 1529, he writes to Martin Goerlitz, with his usual plain-spoken honesty: *I am busy preparing the Catechism for the ignorant heathen*. So important was getting out the Catechism for the “ignorant heathen” (German Lutherans) that Luther followed the practice of his day, publishing each chief part on tablets (posters) as soon as it was ready. And so eager were the ignorant heathen German Lutherans to become Christian that the tablets always sold out within a few days.

The completed edition of the Small Catechism was published in spring of 1529, with the title *Enchiridion: Der kleine Katechismus*. Recall that worship services were still conducted in Latin at Luther’s time. When Luther instituted needed liturgical reform, he entitled his work “Deutsche Messe” (The German Service). This means, quite simply, a service for the unlearned people who would get nothing out of the Latin. Just as the Deutsche Messe was to be a service for the common people, so the Small Catechism was for the common people.

Luther used the designation, Enchiridion or “Little Handbook.” He was not the first to use that term, and why he did is not clear. That title, however, indicates that Luther intended the Catechism to be a handy little book that the average person could purchase and carry with him. Remember that in the 16th century the Bible and most religious books were beyond the financial means of the common people.

Not only did Luther popularize his catechisms by writing in the language of the people, he also understood the value of visual aides. He included illustrations, taken mostly from the Bible, in all editions except for the first one.

Luther also knew the value of popularizing by singing, and wrote hymns for the commandments, “The Ten Commandments Are the Law” in 1524 (CW 285) and the Creed: “We All Believe in One True God” in 1525 (CW 271). For Lord’s Supper, he added verses to “O Lord, We Praise You” (CW 317). The metric version of the Lord’s Prayer, however, did not appear until 1538 (Our Father, Who from Heaven Above – CW 410). While many may not consider these hymns popular today, they “sang the pope right out of the church” in Luther’s day!

Luther’s Catechism was well received throughout Lutheran lands, except for some reservations on the part of Melancthon who perhaps was peeved that Luther had rejected his earlier efforts at a catechism. Translations of Luther’s Catechism were soon made, not only into foreign tongues such as Polish, English (Cranmer’s Catechism, 1548), Latvian, Estonian, Danish, Norwegian, and others, but also into various German dialects. Every effort was made to make the Catechism available to the people in the language which they spoke and understood, no matter how corrupt that language might be.

Of interest to us here today is the fact that in 1643 John Campanius came to America to minister to the spiritual needs of the Swedish Lutherans who had settled in “New Sweden.” He became the first protestant missionary to the American Indians. Campanius set out to learn the language of the Delaware tribe, and then translated Luther’s Small Catechism into their language. This book, printed in Sweden at the personal expense of King Charles XI and sent back to the colony, became the first book translated into an Indian tongue.

### **Luther’s Small Catechism -- its outstanding features**

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As we said earlier, an arrangement of chief parts was already in use toward the end of the Middle Ages. While some added various odd things as chief parts, the usual number was three, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in that order. Luther held the retention of these three to be almost sacred, but he changed the order, Ten Commandments first, then Creed, then the Lord's Prayer. He explains why:

*The commandments teach a man how to know his disease and to perceive that he is a sinner and a wicked man. Thereupon the Creed holds before his eyes and teaches him where to find the medicine, the grace, which will help him become pious that he may keep the commandments, and shows him God and His mercy as revealed and offered in Christ. Finally the Lord's Prayer teaches him how to ask for, get and obtain it, namely by proper, humble and trusting prayer.*

The Ten Commandments are an Old Testament summary of the Law. They apply to us to the extent that they agree with the New Testament's teachings about the moral law. What is not confirmed by the New Testament must be understood as civil and ceremonial law for Old Testament Israel only. So Luther Christianized the fourth commandment. In place of "*that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving*," Luther used: "*that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth!*" Where did Luther find these words? Directly from the New Testament from St. Paul's inspired translation in Ephesians 6:3. In the third commandment Luther left out those parts which were part of the ceremonial law (*On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter...*). Luther substituted "holy day" or "festival-day" (Feiertag) for "Sabbath Day" and then proceeded to explain that we keep this commandment when we hear and learn God's Word. What about the numbering of the Ten Commandments? The division that Luther used was made by Augustine about 400 A.D. The Reformed divide our first commandment into two and combine our ninth and tenth into one. Lutheran exegetes maintain that verses 2-6 in the Hebrew are actually two sentences. Suffice it to say that, while it makes no difference how we number the commandments, the numbering of Augustine, which Luther used, has a basis in the original text.

Although it would probably surprise us today, the biggest innovation in Luther's Small Catechism was his division and treatment of the Apostles' Creed! Until Luther's time, the Creed was divided into twelve unrelated articles (according to medieval tradition, one by each of the Apostles at their last meeting). What a simple, yet meaningful innovation when Luther divided the Creed into three articles, treating the three persons of the Triune God in their relation to us; one on creation and preservation, another on our redemption, the third on our sanctification. Luther's explanations to these articles are simple, yet complete summaries of the Christian faith. If a person knew nothing but Luther's explanation of the second article, he could face death without fear.

But the question remained: How does God nourish my faith and sustain my spiritual life? Luther answered that question by adding the fourth and fifth parts, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. The sacraments had appeared in catechisms of the Middle Ages, but there usually was only a listing of the seven sacraments. Luther's catechism was an innovation in its treatment of the sacraments.

Luther's Catechism included the Table of Duties, Scripture texts applying sanctification to various callings and stations in life. The Table of Duties was revolutionary in Luther's day! It taught something dangerous, namely that every honest calling in life is a Christian calling and that all Christian callings are equal before God. Up to the time of Luther and the Reformation, the church maintained that service as a priest, monk, nun, or in some other religious position was superior to work as a laymen in some secular job.

Confession was the last part that Luther himself added to the Catechism. He felt that, since compulsory confession was abolished, people had a tendency to abuse their new liberty by neglecting confession and the Lord's Supper. Luther, therefore, included between Baptism and the Lord's Supper a section, entitled "Short Form for the Unlearned to Confess to the Priest." It

consisted of two suggested liturgical forms for making confession. (No edition of the *Small Catechism* issued during Luther's lifetime contained the Ministry of the Keys.)

The Catechism's 1531 edition was the final edition which Luther worked on. It is the version included in the *Book of Concord*.

Luther writes: *The Catechism is an epitome and brief transcript of the entire Holy Scripture.* He says in another place: *The Catechism is the Bible of the laymen. In it the entire body of Christian doctrine, which every Christian must know in order to be saved, is contained.* This synopsis of our faith is no ordinary work. It has stood the test of time, and even after 500 years there is no better summary of the Bible's truth. Why? What are the outstanding features that make it as precious today as when it was written nearly 500 years ago?

One is its unexcelled simplicity. The *Small Catechism* came only after many years of Luther's studying the Bible and coming to a personal knowledge of its simple truths. Luther's goal for the *Small Catechism* was not to reach or impress the learned. They could learn Scripture for themselves. The goal was to present Scriptural truths in simple teachable form for children and the uneducated.

But simplicity was not accomplished at the expense of meaningful doctrine. For example, the word "grace" is retained. The word "love" would be simpler, but it would not convey the thought of unworthiness. With Luther we recognize the importance of retaining words such as redeemed, sanctified, contrition, and repentance, because they could not be simplified without loss of important meaning. Certain words and concepts must be taught repeatedly to children, so they grasp the divine meaning.

Not only its simplicity and brevity, but also its wording contributes to memorization. Consider the harmony and rhythm in such phrases as: "*lügen und trügen*" (lie and deceive), "*reichlich und täglich*" (richly and daily), "*verloren und verdamnten Menschen*" (lost and condemned creatures), and many other artful phrases with their alliterations, so adapted for memorizing. Luther's explanation to the Second Article has often been called the most beautiful sentence in the German language! These literary qualities of Luther's genius are ones that translators have great difficulty in capturing. It seems, by the way, that in our translation only one of the three examples I just cited shows the alliteration in the original.

Another outstanding feature of Luther's *Small Catechism* is the absence of polemics. Luther was constantly contending for the truth, and he was constantly under attack from both the papal and reformed camps, but he showed amazing self-control in the Catechism. We know that Luther could attack bluntly and harshly when he felt that was necessary. But in the Catechism, instead of attacking anyone, he made positive statements explaining the Bible's truths. (Is there something here which we can learn about how to prepare our children to defend Scriptural truth?)

Many catechisms have been written, but none equals Luther's. Its clear proclamation of the Gospel causes the *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.* Or consider the beautiful words of the explanation to the Second Article: *He 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. All this he did that I should be his own....* The third article's explanation is pure gospel: *I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.... In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers. On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.*

Neither should we overlook the way Luther uses the gospel to motivate godly living. *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.... All this he did that I should be his own, and live*

*under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.*

### **Luther's Small Catechism -- its present and future value**

In his introduction to the Small Catechism, Luther explains to pastors how he intends the Catechism to be used. He lists four points:

*First, the minister should above all things avoid the use of different texts and forms of the Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Sacraments, etc. Let him adopt one form and adhere to it, using it one year as the other.... When you preach among the learned and judicious, you may show your art and set these things forth with as many flourishes and turn them as skillfully as you wish; but among the young adhere to one and the same fixed form and manner, and teach them, first of all, the text of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc., so that they can say it after you word for word and commit it to memory.*

Over the years some have criticized Luther for stressing memorization. Among those accusers were the pietists who asserted that instruction had become only head-knowledge. They charged that, if the students could recite the Catechism word for word, everyone mistakenly believed that they really understood it. The pietists wanted to "bring the head down to the heart." They believed that it was more important to bring about a deep, emotional feeling concerning the truths of Scripture than to memorize "dead formulas." They did have a point; Catechism instruction should affect the heart and not only the mind. Luther, however, never meant that memorization was an end in itself. In fact it was only the beginning, the first step. He continues in his introduction:

*Secondly, when they have well learned the text, teach them the sense also, that they may know what it means.... And take your time to do it, for it is not necessary to take up all the parts at once, but take one after the other.*

Luther did not intend that the people should be satisfied with the milk of the Word. He wanted them to go on to meat. Deeper study in the Bible's truths was to follow the Catechism's simple beginning:

*Thirdly, after you have taught them this short Catechism, take up the Large Catechism, and impart to them a richer and fuller knowledge; dwell on each commandment, petition, and part, with its various works, uses, benefits, dangers, and harm, as you may find them abundantly pointed out in many books treating of these subjects. Especially give most attention to the commandment or part which is most neglected among your people. For example, the Seventh Commandment, which forbids stealing, you must particularly enforce among mechanics and merchants, and also among farmers and servants; for among such people all kinds of unfaithfulness and thieving are frequent. Again, you must urge the Fourth Commandment among children and the common people, that they may be quiet, faithful, obedient, peaceable, always adducing frequent examples from the Scriptures.*

The goal was growth in faith and Christian living. Faithful use of the Catechism will lead to such growth because the Catechism will lead one to use of the Means of Grace -- the Bible and the sacraments:

*Lastly, since the people are freed from the tyranny of the pope, they no longer desire to go to the Sacrament, but despise it. It is necessary to be urgent on this point, remembering,*

*however, that we are to force no one to believe, or to receive the Sacrament, nor to fix any law, time, or place for it, but so to preach that they will be urged of their own accord, without our law, and will, as it were, compel us pastors to administer the Sacrament.*

Luther had additional advice for pastors:

*My advice is not to discuss matters that have not been revealed but simply to stay with the Word of God, especially with the Catechism. For there you have a very precise course in our entire religion.... The Catechism is doctrine at its best. Therefore it ought to be constantly preached. My personal wish is that it be preached daily and simply read from the book. I will do it myself when called on to preach.*

In turn, Luther encourages the church's members to cherish Catechism-preaching pastors:

*Those should be regarded as the pick of the bunch and as the best and most useful teachers who are able to drill the Catechism well, that is, to preach aright the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed. They are rare birds, for no great glory or splendor is achieved by doing so, but still a great benefit; for it comprises, in brief form, the entire Scripture.*

Luther addressed his introductory remarks to the pastors. Since fathers themselves were ignorant of the Bible and many weren't able to read, a great share of the instruction would need to be done by pastors and teachers. This was not the ideal, however, and not a situation to be satisfied with.

Luther's will was clear. He intended that his Catechism primarily to be used for instruction of children in the home. Above each chief part in the Small Catechism, Luther wrote: "*as the head of the family should teach them in all simplicity to his household.*" Luther zeroed in on the responsibility of parents in training their children. He pointed out that children should be instructed individually, a procedure impossible for a large church but possible if in each family the parents would teach their own children.

Luther actually wrote *Hausvater*, which means "the father of the house" or "the family's father." This duty was given first and foremost to the fathers. Luther stated that every father should be considered a priest in his own home. To the father falls the duty to instruct the children, to bring them to church to hear the Catechism sermons, and make sure they know the Catechism. In this Luther is echoing the Bible's words: *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord* (Eph 6:4).

I think that the LBK's translation makes a serious mistake when it translates "housefather" as "parents." Are we perhaps afraid to say what the Scriptures say, namely that the father is the head of the family and has an important responsibility in the family? As the LBK looks to the future, we would do well to listen seriously to Luther's words: *If ever the church is to flourish again, one must begin by instructing the young.* To accomplish this, we need to enlist fathers in this important spiritual work! That means that we need to instruct fathers - and mothers - in what it means to be the family's head.

The Catechism's great value is as a tool to train the young. Directly behind that comes the Catechism's value for our lifelong personal devotional life. Luther spoke of daily mediating on the Catechism by daily recitation of its chief parts:

*I act as a child who is learning the Catechism. In the morning and whenever I have time, I read and also recite, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, psalms, etc.... I must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism and am glad to remain one. I, too, am a theologian who has attained a fairly good practical knowledge and experience of Holy Scriptures through various dangers. But I do not so glory in this gift*

*as not to join my children daily in prayerfully reciting the Catechism, that is, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer and meditating on them with an attentive heart. I do not pass over the words hurriedly, but I carefully observe what the individual word means. And really, if I do not do this, but am preoccupied with other business, I feel a definite loss because of the neglect.*

One time 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 have to study it every day."

Should we be satisfied with doing less?

Luther's Small Catechism is an old book which, when we use it faithfully, can be a rich blessing for our future and our church's future. Let's always make the words of the hymn our prayer:

*Lord, help us ever to retain  
The Catechism's doctrine plain  
As Luther taught the Word of truth  
In simple style to tender youth.  
Help us your holy law to learn,  
To mourn our sin and from it turn  
In faith to you and to your Son  
And Holy Spirit, Three in One. (CW 514)*