

The Apostles' Creed According to Martin Luther's Large Catechism: Overview with Practical Implications and Applications for Today

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I recently asked my Sunday School teachers, "What part of the Catechism is the gospel?" As I recall none of them were able to answer with any degree of certainty. Certainly the Lord's Supper and Baptism would jump out at us. But so should the Creed! The Creed is pure gospel. It tells how we are saved. It stands in bold contrast to everything the Commandments tell us about what God requires of us.

Martin Luther expected that we would see this important distinction between the law focus of the Commandments and the gospel focus of the Creed. Introducing the Creed he explains, "Thus far we have heard the first part of Christian doctrine, in which we have seen all that God wishes us to do or to leave undone. Now, there properly follows the Creed, which sets forth to us everything we must expect and receive from God, and, to state it quite briefly, teaches us to know Him fully." (Triglotta, p. 679)

Luther's comments succinctly capture an enormous truth and a distinction that must always be maintained as we teach our children the Apostles' Creed. The Ten Commandments do not tell us who God is. The Apostles' Creed teaches us to know him fully: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Consider this. If we have done a good job teaching the Ten Commandments, we will have depressed and frustrated our students. What the Ten Commandments demand of them they cannot do--neither can we. The Commandments ask too much of us. We can only throw up our hands and say, "What's the use!" We become frozen, not doing anything because the prospect of doing it all weighs so heavily upon us. It is beyond our ability.

The Creed motivates us to keep the Ten Commandments. "And this [that is, knowing God fully] is intended to help us do that which according to the Ten Commandments we ought to do.... Therefore it is as necessary to learn this part as the former in order that we may know how to attain thereto, whence and whereby to obtain such power." (Triglotta, p. 679)

What does it mean to "learn" the Apostles' Creed? Perhaps you have struggled with that question as a children's religious educator in your congregation. Does it mean to learn the words? Does it mean to master every thought that is found in the Creed? How much should we expect of our students? Luther believed that the Creed contained far more thoughts and doctrine than "simple-minded" children could handle. Luther was satisfied if they just learned the creed itself first (I am assuming he means the words themselves). Perhaps we might think about this in light of the fact that there is so much emphasis on making confirmation class practical. "Help the students to apply the truths to their lives, but don't make them do so much memorizing." I'm not against application, but in some cases I believe the practical problems that they will confront later are beyond the ability of 8th graders to comprehend. Perhaps at this age it is best if they learn the simplest truths but have a real arsenal of passages and chief parts in their minds to draw upon later as they are in Bible Class and listening to sermons.

Before discussing the creed itself I'd like to consider Luther's division of the Creed. Luther notes that prior to his time the Creed had been divided into as many as twelve articles (one for each apostle). He chooses to divide it into just three--following the revelation of our God as Triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Luther cites simplicity as the basis for this division: "That it may be most easily and clearly understood as it is to be taught to children" (Triglotta, p. 679). Quite obviously we still follow Martin Luther in both this simplicity and in the important doctrine emphasized by its three-fold division.

Article I

If you've ever watched *Touched by an Angel* you would have to agree that this is a show like none other on TV. It freely mentions God and speaks of his love for people--a trait not shared by many TV shows these days. I believe this show is striking a chord in many people's lives because on the whole, by nature people want and need to believe in God.

It is clear that the Ten Commandments teach our children to believe in and hold to the existence of *one God*. But which one? *Touched by an Angel* never identifies God--at least not in any episode that I have seen (I admit I haven't seen them all, or even close). Most people know the Ten Commandments. Most people do *not* know God--at least not the God of Scripture. Typically they think in terms of the God of *Touched by an Angel*. He is loving. He is everyone's God. He is a just God (although many question this). What a TV series such as *Touched by an Angel* and the Ten Commandments fail to do,¹ the Creed does. The Creed teaches us about the true God, who is triune, in his fullness.

It begins by teaching us that he is the Maker of heaven and earth. This teaching is essential to our entire outlook on life. In these words we express the proper relationship we have to the ONE GOD, whom the Commandments have taught us to revere and honor. This relationship is not a relationship of equals. This relationship is one of creature to creator. I don't believe it is an overstatement to say that this essential truth is not emphasized enough today--either in Christian circles or in society in general. On TV, in art, and in literature God is often reduced to being nothing more than a more powerful human-like being rather than the infinite creator of all. The creature, on the other hand, is elevated to god-like status. Consider this humorous anecdote and the sad truth which it relates:

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that man had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell Him that they were done with Him.

The scientist walked up to God and said, "God, we've decided that we no longer need you. We're to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don't you just go on and get lost."

God listened very patiently to the man. After the scientist was done talking, God kindly said, "Very well, how about this? Let's say we have a man-making contest." To which the scientist replied, "Okay, great!"

But God added, "Now, we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam."

The scientist said, "Sure, no problem" and bent down and grabbed himself a handful of dirt.

God looked at him and said, "No, no, no. You go get your own dirt!"

In Luther's Day people may not have been as confused about the creator-creature relationship as they are today. Today we have to spend more time refuting evolution--especially in settings where Lutheran Elementary Schools are not an option. Luther says less of this than we must. Today not only are there many people who do not know the true God in his fullness; they don't even know that God created them, that there is an almighty creating God.

The God many know today is nothing more than a force which they control and tap into when needed. He is not the personal, compassionate and approachable Father whom our fathers confessed when they said "I believe in God the Father."

What does it mean to confess that we believe that God made us and that he gave us our body and soul, eyes, ears and all our members, our mind and all our abilities and that he still preserves us by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, cattle and all I own (substitute paycheck, bank account, CD's, mutual funds, cars, house, stereo, VCR, microwave, computer, etc -- you get the idea)? In our possessions-crazed world do we only say with our mouth that these things are God's or do we believe this in our hearts? Can we really say with Luther, "Take they my life, goods, fame, child and wife, let these all be *gone*"? Or like the rich young ruler do we walk away saddened because of our great

¹ I am referring to the commandments themselves, not the gospel framework which surrounds them in Exodus.

wealth? To believe is to live that way. To say that we believe all these things are from our maker and that he provides them to us graciously--without any merit or worthiness in me--suggests that we truly separate ourselves from possessions of every kind. This means living with a willingness to give it all up at any moment because it isn't ours to begin with. As Luther says, "Thus we learn from this article that none of us has of himself, nor can preserve, his life nor anything that is here enumerated or can be enumerated, however small and unimportant a thing it might be, for all is comprehended in the word *Creator*." (Triglotta, p. 681)

I would ask you to test yourselves on this before teaching it to your children. How easily would you today give up your computer and go back to writing by hand? How easily would you give up your car and walk or ride your bike as the only means of transportation? How easily would you give up your workshop of tools collected by the sweat of your brow over 10 or 20 years? How attached are we to our possessions? I find myself lacking here. Luther reminds us, "If we believed it with the heart, we would also act accordingly and not stalk about proudly, act defiantly, and boast as though we had life, riches, power, and honor, etc., of ourselves" (Triglotta, p. 683)

On the other hand, as we look at our abundant possessions we see just how great and gracious is our Father who made heaven and earth. What a world he has put us in--even after the fall! He has given us vast goods--animals, fields, natural resources--especially in these countries we call home (both USA and Canada).

Recently, in a letter from the Central Africa Medical Mission (CAMM), I was reading how the people in Africa still live. Can we truly comprehend five or six people living, sleeping, existing together in a mud hut with a thatched roof, a home hardly bigger than the master bedroom in our homes? No shower. No indoor running water or plumbing. No screens to keep out malaria-carrying mosquitoes? Most of us here today have known nothing but the abundant life in these United States and Canada. God does not require us to live as many must in Africa. In fact I've been told that Africans would consider our missionaries to be mad if they lived as the Africans must when they don't have to. We have these blessings from our Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

Did you have an accident on your way to conference today? Did your house burn down to the ground today? Were your children shot at school today? Do we consider ourselves "lucky" that these things haven't happened to us? Or do we thank our Almighty Father who not only preserves us but guards and protects us from all dangers? Do we realize that his angels are daily averting many dangers from us? We aren't even aware of the many dangers that he has averted for us because we never see them. Yet he is there, guarding us daily. This too we are confessing in this article.

Inevitably children (and adults) have difficulty with this article. For if God guards and protects us and sends his angels to watch over us, why do Christians die in automobile accidents or in shootings at Columbine High School? Did God forget? Did the angels lose track of where we were? Did someone blow his assignment? Here we need to draw our eyes heavenward to the perfect and wise Father who knows when it is best to have his angels preserve our earthly life and when those same angels should carry us out of this life to heaven. Both options are part of God's guarding and protecting us from all evil.

Luther reminds us: "We ought, therefore, daily to practice this article, impress it upon our mind, and to remember it in all that meets our eyes, and in all good that falls to our lot, and wherever we escape from calamity or danger, that it is God who gives and does all these things, that therein we sense and see his paternal heart and His transcendent love toward us." (Triglotta, p. 683)

The main thing to remember is that we thank and praise, serve and obey him. This really speaks of the goals of our lives. What is your goal? More and more today the goal of people--also people in our congregations as I have heard it said--is to retire and enjoy life, do the things they haven't been able to do. Indeed this goal is leading to much anger and frustration as the fluctuating labor market and shrinking wages for the common worker no longer give any promise of an early retirement. Is this the goal that "thank and praise, serve and obey" suggests to us? Is it too early to begin to help our students see what the goal of their lives really is?

I submit that we ourselves have to be careful of buying into the world's thinking on this. I have heard pastors in our brotherhood of the WELS go on and on about how eager they were to retire and go traveling and pursue what they really want to do. They speak of being tired and wanting to take it easy for some good years

before they die. Hasn't some of this thinking come to my own consciousness as well? Is this the goal which our maker lays before us? Is this the purpose for his providing for us daily? Am I saying pastors should never retire? No. What I am suggesting is that retirement isn't an end of service, just a change of venue. The goal is still to thank and praise, serve and obey our Maker. "Soon, soon to faithful warriors, comes their rest." (CW 551:6)

That's the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. Luther writes of it briefly. I have attempted to expand a bit because the world today has confused the issue more than it did in Luther's Day. Now on to the Second Article.

Article II

Question: What word in Luther's explanation to the Second Article would you consider to be the key word? Usually, I believe we focus on the word "redeem." The exposition in our catechism emphasizes this word. Three of his diagrams specifically focus on the words "redeem" or "redemption." Interestingly this was not the key word in Luther's mind as he wrote his explanation to Article II of the Apostles' Creed. Luther emphasized the word "Lord." This is very clear in his explanation since the main sentence of the explanation is, "I believe that Jesus Christ...is my Lord." It is interesting that our current catechism has made a subtle shift in the wording which changes the emphasis ever so slightly. Luther's German says, "Ich glaube, dass Jesus Christus...sei mein Herr, der mich verlorren und verdammten Menschen erloest hat" (Triglotta, p. 544) The sentence actually does not end until after "Ewigkeit." Everything after the main clause is part of a dependent clause modifying the main clause which is "Ich glaube dass Jesus Christus...sei mein Herr." Our catechism exposition has broken the dependent clauses into two separate independent clauses. While this doesn't destroy or change doctrine, it does separate thoughts which Luther in his Large Catechism shows us are very closely related, in fact, inter-related.

Luther says that to keep it simple we should teach the second article of the Creed to our children using one main word. That word is "Lord." He writes, "Now, this article is very rich and broad; but in order to expound it also briefly and in a childlike way, we shall take up one word and sum up in that the entire article...we shall base this on these words: *In Jesus Christ, our Lord*. If now you are asked, 'What do you believe in the Second Article of Jesus Christ?' answer briefly: I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord" (Triglotta, p. 685).

This is not to say that Luther doesn't have in mind the work of redemption, which is pivotal to the Second Article. What he is saying is that we teach the concept of redemption by directing the children to the fact that Jesus is our Lord. A little later Luther actually equates confessing that Jesus is our Lord to the act of redemption. He explains, "Let this, then, be the sum of this article that the little word *Lord* signifies simply as much as Redeemer" (Triglotta, p. 685).

Perhaps we are less comfortable with the emphasis on the Lordship of Jesus Christ because we interpret it with the gloss of the evangelicals and reformed in front of us. Their understanding of Lordship focuses primarily on the last part of Luther's explanation which says that "I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him." In other words, for them the Lordship of Jesus Christ has an overriding sanctification emphasis. "Turn yourself over to his Lordship" replaces justification in a subtle way. So we perhaps shy away from using the term and prefer to stay with the concept of redemption which cannot be something we do, but must be what God has done for us.

Luther proclaims Lordship loud and clear. Yet the overriding emphasis of this Lordship is not sanctification, but justification. This is clear from the way he worded his explanation and the fact that after he proclaims that Jesus Christ "is my Lord" he proceeds by using a dependent relative, "who," to continue the thought and immediately addresses our redemption by Jesus Christ: "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature."

In his Large Catechism Luther expands on this in a typical catechetical question and answer format: "But what is it to become Lord? It is this, that He has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and all evil. For before I had no Lord nor King, but was captive under the power of the devil, condemned to death,

enmeshed in sin and blindness." (Triglotta, p. 685) This is the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It begins with the clear understanding that Satan, sin, death and evil held me captive. I was in chains. In modern day terms I was in jail, the federal penitentiary, a prison camp or whatever other picture can be used to convey to children a life without freedom that ends in certain death and destruction. Perhaps in our world where we are to a great extent isolated from "real" suffering and "real" imprisonment (that which is seen in the movies is rarely realistic, failing to convey the true torment of the captive and incarcerated) we have a difficult time leading our children to a true understanding of what it is to be enslaved, to have your will bound, your rights negated, your life confined to what you do not want to do.

Here is also the place to convey something to our children that nothing in the created universe can convey to them: the reality of eternal damnation. I don't know what words you can use other than what Luther does in the Large Catechism: "We fell under His wrath and displeasure and were doomed to eternal punishment." (Triglotta, p. 685) We can pile up words--terrible, fiery, gnashing of teeth, damned, horrific--but can any words truly convey the agony and emptiness of hell? Yet the children need to understand that this is the captivity, this is the deserved doom of the whole human race, which includes us. It is a helpless situation for us. We cannot escape. There is no other person who is not in prison with us so there is no one like us outside the prison to come to our aid.

Into this grim graveyard of souls comes the Lord Jesus. He is the hero who appears at the 11th hour of the human race. He is the champion who walks out onto the battlefield on our behalf. He is the denouement to a tragedy that suddenly becomes a victory. He is different than we are, yet he is the same. He is the God-Man--begotten of the Father from eternity and born of the virgin Mary. He loves us. He feels for our miserable condition. He is filled with desire to help us. So he confronts the jailer--Satan. He grips the chains--sin and death. He is not a private first class, a neophyte who is no match for such a formidable task. He is the Major-General of God's military. He is the Lord. He has the power. He has the authority. He overcomes the enemy. He expels the jailer and all his tyrants as Luther so aptly describes it. He breaks the chains and bars and confinements of sin and death and all evil. He leads us out in the sunlight of his love, of his salvation, of his righteousness. We are free!

This first and most importantly is the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is redemption. What a wonderful picture Luther has provided us in this explanation of the Second Article. No matter what picture we use, the concept of a leader who rescues his people from their captivity has to capture the imagination and understanding of children who have entered the 21st century. It is still the common theme of show after show on TV and the big screen. The emphasis is on Jesus--who he is and what he has done. He is the Lord. He is the only Lord, for he is the only Son of God who could accomplish such a great feat.

The means by which Jesus freed us is of great importance. Today heroes are depicted as bulging with muscles or intellectually superior. Heroes are often depicted as boastful, cocky, even vain. They are the type who can kick your face in or outwit their foe. Jesus' strength is far different. His strength is his lowliness. It is his willingness to put himself aside, to hold back the "in your face" comment, to keep his feet firmly planted in the dust rather than in someone's face. He didn't wield his power by paying off our captors. He wielded his power by submitting himself to our captivity. He became man--under the law, servant of all, able to die. Yet, his is the power of an indestructible life. He allowed death to lock its chains around him, but then he snapped them as if they were yarn. He allowed sin to take his innocent body to the sacrificial altar and then put out the fire of hell with his flowing blood. This is the way he became our Lord. Not with force and coercion. He became our Lord by showing us his love. He assumed leadership by going to the front lines for us, not barking commands from the rear. Luther explains, "He became man, conceived and born without sin, of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin, that He might overcome sin; moreover, that He suffered, died and was buried, that He might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owe, not with silver nor gold, but with His own precious blood. And all this, in order to become my Lord." (Triglotta, p. 687)

Ultimately, we need to help our children understand that when Jesus freed us from Satan's rule and the rule of death and sin, he placed us under his rule. This is, of course, the benevolent rule of a king who blesses and cares for his people. Perhaps this too is a difficult concept for us to convey in a land that emphasizes

personal rights and freedoms rather than loyalty to a leader and which has so few leaders who are worth looking up to because they truly think of their constituents more than themselves. Nevertheless, we are now under Jesus' dominion. He purchased us for himself. We belong to him.

Oh, how that word pricks our sin-tainted ears. "Belong! I belong to no one, thank you. I can do what I want." "Belong? That sounds like slavery, like someone else can tell me what to do." I feel in my heart just how much the mindset of our times has affected my understanding of Lordship. That Jesus has set me free sounds like a good deal. That he set me free to be under his Lordship isn't exactly what I had in mind. So it is that we lead from the Lordship of Jesus which set us free to the Lordship that Jesus now exercises in our lives.

The leading to Lordship in my current life has to begin, however, with the Lordship which makes my current life possible. Jesus is my Lord because he redeemed me. If he had not redeemed me I would still be a slave, in prison, no life before me at all. This is Luther's starting point. In fact, he says relatively little about all the other things contained in the creed--namely, the conception, virgin birth, suffering under Pilate, crucifixion, death and burial. He suggests that for young children we might limit ourselves to this one word: Lord. "But to explain all these single points separately belongs not to brief sermons for children, but rather to ampler sermons that extend throughout the entire year..." (Triglotta, p. 687)

I'm afraid I find myself often trying to do too much in my confirmation class. Sometimes we try to "fully indoctrinate" our 7th and 8th graders. Perhaps part of that comes from the feeling that this may be the last or only time we have them so we better do this well now. Yet I have found too that there are often blank stares even from the best of my students on various "theological concepts." Justification is a very difficult word for an 8th grader (not to mention many adults). Luther is saying to those who would teach children, "Keep it on their level." Take one thought and drive it home. That is enough for children. Don't expect theologians. Expect children who are captivated by the love of their Lord--not children who know all the right doctrines.

At the end of his comments on the Second Article, Luther writes, "Ay, the entire Gospel which we preach is based on this, that we properly understand this article as that upon which our salvation and all our happiness rest, and which is so rich and comprehensive that we never can learn it fully." (Triglotta, p. 687) I found this particularly interesting considering that the comments Luther makes on this article are less than he makes on the First or Third Articles. Perhaps this is the teacher practicing what he preaches. He emphasized that the Second Article could be best taught by focusing on one word, "Lord," and then he does this and moves on. Is there more that the children can learn? Yes. But let them learn this one thing first. Then let us be satisfied. Who of us has grasped all that Scripture says about the person and work of Jesus Christ? We must all learn continually. Luther understood and seems to encourage this approach.

One concluding thought on the Second Article. Luther makes the transition from the First to the Second Article with this thought: "Here we learn to know the Second Person of the Godhead, so that we see what we have from God over and above the temporal goods aforementioned; namely how He has completely poured forth Himself and withheld nothing from us that He has not given us." (Triglotta, p. 685) How we need to help our children see this very point! It is easy for them to see the First Article and to understand the goodness of our Almighty Father who provides for us and protects us daily. To them this seems to be God's greatest goodness to us. Yet we need to take them to a higher plane. They need to comprehend that providing food is nothing compared to the unbelievable spiritual benefit that God has given us in Jesus Christ. With Luther we need to move from the lesser to the greater and impress on them that our possessions and attachments to this world have no value eternally. The most important thing which our Father gives us is himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, and the salvation that comes through him. Now on to Article Three.

Article III

The Third Article is obviously about the Holy Spirit. But what about the Holy Spirit? It is not about who the Holy Spirit is, but rather about the work of the Holy Spirit, just as the First Article spoke about creation, the work of the Almighty Father, and the Second Article spoke about the work of the Son, becoming Lord--redemption. What is the work of the Holy Spirit? His name suggests it: the work of the Holy Spirit is to make us

holy. Our catechism study usually spends time discussing who the Holy Spirit is. Perhaps we are again spending too much time on things which are better left for another day. Perhaps it is enough to simply state that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the triune God without a mass of "proof passages" and then on to the important work of the Holy Spirit and the means by which he carries that work out. This is not to say that the person of the Holy Spirit is not important. It is to say that in the name of simplicity we might use our time more wisely in letting the simple statement, "The Holy Spirit is God, the third person of our triune God," stand and moving on to the important work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

What is the work of the Holy Spirit? Does the Third Article express it? The answer is "Yes!" However, while reading this article the student may not readily grasp this. It is important for us help our students see the relationship between the opening statement, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" and the following statements, "the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting." Luther's explanation to the Third Article shows that he understood the latter statements as the means by which the Holy Spirit accomplishes his work of making us holy (both in the justification and sanctification sense). He expresses this quite plainly in the Large Catechism when he writes, "But how is such sanctifying done? Answer: ...the Holy Ghost effects our sanctification by the following parts, namely, by (German *durch*) the communion of saints or the Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting; that is, He first leads us into His holy congregation, and places us in the bosom of the Church, whereby He preaches to us and brings us to Christ." (Triglotta, p. 687)

In connection with this Luther expresses beautifully the distinction between objective and subjective justification. He notes, "The work is done and accomplished; for Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, resurrection. But if the work remained concealed so that no one knew of it, then it would be in vain and lost.... Therefore sanctifying is nothing else than bringing us to Christ to receive this good, to which we could not attain of ourselves." (Triglotta, p. 689)

The Third Article then relates to us how our Triune God takes the accomplished work of our Lord, the victory and rescue, and brings that Good News to the hearts of his people so that they might believe and benefit from it. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this. By what means? By the means of the church in particular, that is, by means of the proclamation of the gospel which the church does in the world. Again Luther notes, "That this treasure ... might not lie buried, but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Ghost to bring this treasure home and appropriate it." (Triglotta, p. 689)

This is spelled out more clearly as Luther then discusses the first of the means by which the Holy Spirit does this, namely, through the church, the communion of saints. "He has a peculiar [German: *sonderliche*] congregation in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which He reveals and preaches, and through which He illumines and enkindles hearts, that they understand, accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it." (Triglotta, p. 689)

As mentioned earlier, Luther writes more on the Third Article than he does on the First and Second. We might have expected more on the Second since this was and is the article on which the church stands and falls. Yet he spills a bit more ink on the Third Article, not so much because it is relatively more important, but rather because the Creed is less clear for young children in this article.

Consider this example. How many times have you asked your confirmation class what the church is and they answer by pointing to the building in which you worship? Or when you ask what St. Paul Church is, don't they respond that it is the facility where people worship? Luther likewise feared this. He notes that "we are accustomed to the word *church* [German: *Kirche*], by which the simple do not understand an assembled multitude, but the consecrated house or building, although the house ought not to be called a church, except only for the reason that the multitude assembles there." (Triglotta, p. 691)

Luther then discusses at length the various German words which are used for the communion of saints. It is good for us to note as best we can the nuances which these words carry so that our understanding of the church [*ecclesia*] might be enhanced. A list of the various words follows:

- Gemeinschaft* = community, communion, partnership, association; based on the idea of commonality
- Versammlung* = an assembly; comes from the verb *versammeln* to assemble, bring together, collect, gather

Gemeinde = congregation, parish, corporate body
Sammlung = collection, a collecting of something

When the Creed identifies the church with the words "communion of saints" Luther points out that this should not be translated in the German language with the word *Gemeinschaft* but rather with *Versammlung* or *Gemeinde*. He points out that the Greek word *ekklesia* means a common assembly and therefore it is more appropriate to use the German words which mean a gathering or assembly for the church than the word which simply emphasizes a commonality. I don't think we'd deny (especially on the basis of Acts chapter 2) that the church doesn't share a commonality. I suspect that most of us have even said something like "communion means that the saints are united, they have something in common in Christ." Luther is simply reminding us that the word used in the creed is pointing more toward the working of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gathers, collects, assembles the church. He elaborates,

I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it. For formerly, before we had attained to this, we were altogether of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ. Thus, until the last day, the Holy Ghost abides with the holy congregation or Christendom, by means of which He fetches us to Christ and which He employs to teach and preach to us the Word, whereby He works and promotes sanctification, causing it [this community] daily to grow and become strong in the faith and its fruit which he produces. (emphasis added, Triglotta, pp. 691 & 693)

Allow me a slight digression at this point. In connection with the word usage in the Creed, Luther makes this comment: "The expression has become so established by custom that it cannot well be eradicated, and it is treated almost as heresy if one should attempt to change a word." (Triglotta, p. 691) Luther recognized that the wording of the Creeds is not inspired. He labored to get the German language to convey as accurately as possible the thought which God's Word expresses in the Greek (or Hebrew). So also today we labor not to be misunderstood. There were many who questioned the changes made to the Creed when our new/revised hymnal was being developed. Some felt that the wording could not be changed lest we become unfaithful to Scripture. Yet the wording in many cases is not found in Scripture. It is human language conveying the divine truths of Scripture. Frivolous disregard for the workshop in which those words were forged would be wrong. But so too would it be wrong to make the wording sacrosanct as if this is the only way to say it correctly. As language changes we may have to re-translate to correctly convey the Bible's teaching--as, for instance, seems to have been the case with "according to the Scriptures" and "in accordance with the Scriptures." To see in such a change a capitulation to false doctrine would be wrong. To make sure that this is the best way to speak this truth is worthy of our constant labor. Back to the subject at hand.

We always want to choose our words carefully. But Luther understood that most important is that the words we choose convey the correct understanding. Do our children understand (or for that matter do we and the adults) that the communion of saints is the gathering of believers who are collected, gathered, called together by the effective working of the Holy Spirit through the gospel in Word and Sacraments? Do we and they understand the relation between "the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints" and the work of the Holy Spirit? These are not just different concepts which were all lumped together in the last article of the Creed to get them in somewhere. The latter concepts are the means by which the Holy Spirit works. If there is no true church and true teaching of the gospel through the true church, then there is no working of the Holy Spirit. "For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost who creates, calls, and gathers the Christian Church without which [I prefer "whom"] no one can come to Christ the Lord." (Triglotta, p. 689)

Luther likewise ties the forgiveness of sins to the true Church. Only in the true church will the gospel in Word and Sacraments be truly and faithfully proclaimed, therefore only in the true church will there truly be the

forgiveness of sins which is announced and proclaimed in connection with the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Sacraments. Luther's comments are uplifting and comforting:

Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. Thus, although we have sins, the [grace of the] Holy Ghost does not allow them to injure us, because we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but [continuous, uninterrupted] forgiveness of sin, both in that God forgives us, and in that we forgive, bear with, and help each other. But outside of this Christian Church, where the Gospel is not, there is no forgiveness (Triglotta, p. 693).

Here again we see how the work of the Holy Spirit is conveyed to us in the words of the Creed. Forgiveness of sin is not separate from the existence of the Holy Christian Church nor from the work which the Holy Spirit desires to do through the Church and the preaching of the gospel which takes place in its midst. In his explanation in the Small Catechism Luther captured that thought when he wrote, "In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers."

Likewise, this work of the Holy Spirit, namely sanctification, which is begun in our conversion and continues in our daily walk of faith, must be completed when we finally rid ourselves of the sinful flesh which daily shows itself in countless ways. The only way, then, that our complete and final sanctification can be accomplished is when this corrupt flesh in which we dwell is destroyed and buried. Yet even then the Holy Spirit is accomplishing our sanctification. For it is also the work of the Holy Spirit through which our body will be raised to life eternal just as surely as the Holy Spirit first called us to life when he converted us (Romans 8:11). Luther states in his explanation to the Third Article, "On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead." Only then we will be raised gloriously without sin, completely sanctified through and through. "For now we are only half pure and holy, so that the Holy Ghost has ever [some reason why] to continue to dispense forgiveness, until we attain to that life where there will be no more forgiveness, but only perfectly pure and holy people, full of godliness and righteousness, removed and free from sin, death and all evil, in a new, immortal, and glorified body." (Triglotta, p. 693)

Another reason Luther has given more attention to the Third Article is indicated in this statement: "This, now, is the article which must ever be and remain in operation. For creation we have received; redemption, too, is finished. But the Holy Ghost carries on His work without ceasing to the last day." (Triglotta, p. 695) This is not to diminish in any way the importance of creation or redemption. For without the first two articles there would be no Third Article. Yet, the work of the Holy Spirit is ongoing. We are part of it. That makes this a particularly exciting article for us to share with our children. We can see the Holy Spirit working through the church as we see it grow. Just as we see the images on our computer screens but do not see the processing that is going on deep within a chip somewhere inside our computer, so we cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can know that he is working deep within Christians as we watch the saints of the Holy Christian Church living and serving the Lord. We hear the forgiveness spoken on Sunday mornings. We see the baptismal waters washing sins away. We taste and smell the bread and wine as in, with, and under them the true body and blood of Jesus is dispensed, and forgiveness is received. This is now. It is everyday. You and I are participants in this work. Luther was too. We can easily sense the excitement and awe in Luther's writings on the subject. We can let our students see our excitement and awe of being part of this "work in progress" by the Holy Spirit. This is what we mean by "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

Conclusion

We began by asking the question, "Who is God?" The Ten Commandments teach us to know that there is a God. The First Commandment teaches us that we dare not worship any other than the true God. But it does not tell us who that true God is. This is the role of the Creed. The Creed reveals to us what natural man cannot know. It reveals the Triune God and, more importantly, the work of the Triune God by which he accomplished our salvation. No other religion on earth has the true God. That is why no other religion but the Christian

religion has the Creed. Luther warns, "They abide in eternal wrath and damnation. For they have not the Lord Christ, and, besides, are not illumined and favored by any gifts of the Holy Ghost." (Triglotta, p. 697)

In the religious climate of our world today this is a very unpopular thing to say and teach. Yet when we confess the Creed each Sunday we are saying it. We are saying that this alone is the true God and without the truths which this Creed proclaims one cannot be saved. Belief in "God" is not good enough. "God" without Christ and the Holy Spirit is not the true God. We confess faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This alone is the true and saving faith.

Which do you spend more time on in your confirmation class, the Ten Commandments or the Creed? Sometimes it seems that the Ten Commandments are easier to teach and get more time. After all, you can point to things in the newspaper that demonstrate the breaking or keeping of the Ten Commandments in various areas of life. Recently I sampled some materials from Cook Publishing for the teen class at our church. I was hoping to use them as an interim study until the *Christ-Light* materials for that age level are available. After going through them I realized I couldn't use them. They were very "biblical," quoting many passages from the Bible and leading the teens into a study of the passages' meaning, but they were all law. The passages all pointed to how to live, but nowhere were there passages that promise us forgiveness when we fail or remind us of what Christ has already done for us on the cross. Such studies of the Ten Commandments without the Creed are doomed to failure. While it is important to know the Ten Commandments, it is far more important that our children know, understand and *believe* the Creed. Luther explains to those who would teach these simple truths to children: "The latter doctrine [of the Law], ... makes no Christian, for the wrath and displeasure of God abide upon us still, because we cannot keep what God demands of us; but this (namely, the doctrine of faith) brings pure grace, and makes us godly and acceptable to God" (Triglotta, p. 697).

Brothers, you know this. You too would have perceived this weakness in the Cook materials. Yet it is good to be reminded by one of no less godliness than Martin Luther to keep our focus on the gospel. The Creed is the substance of our faith. It reveals the true God to us. To believe what it says is to have eternal life. In our Catechism classes let us lay simply the foundation of faith and create a passion for more. In our lives let us strive to attain the fullest and deepest riches which the Creed offers us as we learn to know who the true God is in all his awesome wonder, love and salvation.

Soli Deo Gloria!