

The Use of Luther's Catechisms in Our World Mission Fields

By Ernst H. Wendland

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In his *Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, J. Herbert Kane asks, "Why did the Protestant churches take so long to inaugurate their missionary program?" "The first, and perhaps the most potent factor," Kane replies, "was the theology of the reformers."

It is unfortunate that Kane, like others before him, identifies "the theology of the reformers" with a formal "Opinion" expressed in 1651 by the theological faculty of Wittenberg. This "Opinion" states that the Great Commission of Christ to disciple all nations pertained only to the first apostles, and that if later generations were without the gospel, it was their own fault.

One could quote endlessly from Luther's own writings in order to refute the allegation that this "Opinion" was a part of Luther's "theology." We think of Luther's statement, for example, in his exposition of Psalm 117: "If the heathen are to hear God's word, preachers who proclaim the word of God must be sent to them." Or his exhortation in his lessons on Exodus 12: "We must also go to those to whom Christ has hitherto not been proclaimed." And how often have our Lutheran churches not resounded with the words of Luther's hymn:

And also to the heathen show
Christ's riches without measure
And unto God convert them. (*Lutheran Hymnal*, No. 500)

One cannot deny, of course, that Lutheran missionaries put in a late appearance in many areas of the world. Several factors played a part in this. Admittedly some of Luther's epigones did manage to take a strange position on the matter of converting the heathen. And we dare not forget that countries which were predominantly Roman Catholic, such as Spain and Portugal, were doing most of the exploring and colonizing in the Reformation era. Whether we like it or not, colonialism and planting Christianity in new areas went hand in hand during those years. To many parts of this world Lutheranism was indeed late in coming.

This is regrettable. As Lutherans we should feel this way not because it hurts our pride. It is rather because we as a church have always had something wonderful to share, an unconditioned gospel, beautifully summarized in teaching aids which go back to Luther's day, and ideally suited for guiding the uninformed into the chief teachings of Scripture. We refer, of course, to Luther's Catechisms, particularly his Small Catechism. Luther anticipated this missionary use of his little handbook when he said, "Catechism is an instruction whereby heathen who desire to become Christians are taught and shown what they must believe, do, not do, and know in Christianity; hence the name catechumens was given to pupils who were accepted for such instruction and who learned the Creed previous to their baptism" (from Luther's *Deutsche Messe*, 1526).

An Adapted Use

Luther, of course, thought of "catechumens" chiefly in terms of children. His Small Catechism was to serve as a guide for their instruction, a work in which parents were to play a leading role. This use fit the needs

of his day. The Large Catechism, on the other hand, was intended to refresh the knowledge of pastors in the principal parts of Christian teaching, an area in which they were found to be woefully inadequate.

In our world mission fields today we find the immediate needs for instruction to be somewhat different from those of sixteenth century Europe. In most situations as first encountered in remote areas it is “the head of the family” who needs the instructing before he can be expected to “teach in all simplicity to his household.” Instruction classes in preparation for membership in the body of Christ are therefore initially held for adults.

In Africa even these adult classes do not begin with lessons from the Catechism. The stress first of all is rather upon a study of Bible stories. Beginning with the Genesis account, God’s plan of salvation for sinful mankind is historically unfolded through the Old Testament time of promise. This presentation reaches a climax in the stories about the life and work of Jesus Christ. Final lessons show how the Savior commanded His followers to proclaim this good news of salvation to people of all nations, and conclude with a presentation of the doctrine of baptism as God’s means of bringing people into His kingdom of grace. This preliminary course of instruction leads to a baptismal service for new converts with their children.

The post-baptismal instruction for adults which follows, then, is of a catechetical nature. The chief parts of Christian doctrine as outlined by Luther are taught, with special emphasis on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Again scriptural stories and illustrations are drawn upon heavily in this instruction which leads to confirmation.

In most of our world mission fields children’s confirmation classes as we know them in the United States are still very much in a process of development. The initial thrust as mentioned above is to plant congregations made up of Christian homes and families. Experience shows that if the parents are not gained, the children drift away. But as our congregations continue to develop, the need for simplified catechetical courses for children will grow as well. In Africa, for example, a much greater emphasis is now being placed upon children’s instruction classes based on Luther’s Small Catechism than previously.

In countries like Japan, Sweden, and Latin America, where our missionaries can often look for a higher level of literacy, adult instruction classes have been worked out which incorporate a study of both Bible and Small Catechism. Lessons adapted and translated from *What Does the Bible Say* by Oswald Riess or *The Wonderful Works of God* by Paul Eickmann are finding a good response. In Africa a similar combination Bible-Catechism course entitled *Go and Teach* is used in urban areas. These courses, while set up somewhat differently from the Small Catechism itself, emphasize the same basic truths which Luther considered as an essential requirement for anyone who wished to “be numbered among the Christians,” and use the Catechism for a summary statement of whatever lesson has been taught. Many a missionary has had reason to be thankful for Luther’s gift of explaining the chief teachings of the Bible in such a simple, concise way. Luther’s explanations to the Ten Commandments and his explanation to the Second Article of the Creed beautifully summarize the heart of our Law-Gospel message as we proclaim God’s truth in all parts of the world.

As a Worker-Training Tool

We in the United States would not ordinarily consider Luther’s Small Catechism, with explanatory materials as we use them in children’s confirmation classes, to be on a high enough level for use as a basic course in doctrine for the training of men as workers in the public ministry. In those world mission fields where we have set up Bible Institute programs as a pre-seminary form of theological education, both Small and Large Catechisms have been worked into the curriculum. The first-year course in basic doctrinal study is arranged according to the Small Catechism. The auxiliary material for this course is about on a level of our Synod’s Gausewitz edition of the Catechism. Students are expected to memorize the Enchiridion in the language in which their preaching and teaching assignments are to be carried out.

In their second year of Bible Institute work the students become acquainted with the Large Catechism as a part of their study of the Lutheran Confessions. Here one finds Luther’s bold manner of presenting and explaining doctrinal truths to be just as effective and relevant today as it was 450 years ago. Both African and Latin American Bible Institute programs make use of Luther’s Catechisms in this way. Bible Institute graduates

do their work of preaching and teaching in local areas under the supervision of pastors. Similar instruction programs are being used for the indoctrination of local lay leaders, who often for want of manpower must assist with teaching and preaching in their congregations.

In our world mission seminaries, where we train men for the pastoral ministry (Japan, Africa, Latin America), the students are taught how to use Luther's Small Catechism as a tool for instructing children and adults, preparing their own catechises on the basis of it. Our national pastors must be trained to work independently, and we can certainly be thankful that we can place into their hands these catechetical guides which we have been privileged to use for so many years. In Southeast Asia the worker-training program is presently in process of development. The missionaries there expect that the use of Luther's Catechisms will certainly be emphasized, since they are already being used in youth and adult instruction classes. In Sweden, of course, Luther's Catechisms have been in use since the time of the Reformation. Our work among the Apaches in Arizona, where we have many Christian Day Schools and a Lutheran High School, follows much the same general pattern as in other parts of our work as a Synod in the United States. Our Apacheland missionaries tell us that the problem is to get students to answer questions, and various methods are being developed in an effort to get more response through the use of worksheets.

Catechism Translations

Getting Luther to speak in other tongues isn't always easy. Not that the fault lies with Luther. Unfortunately many translators have failed to convert his words with the dynamic-equivalent methods he himself employed when translating. They have not been as successful, in other words, in getting Luther to speak Chinese or Swedish as Luther was in getting Moses to speak German. While one has to admire the zeal and dedication of the early missionaries, their translations have often been found too stilted and literal. In the light of more recent linguistic studies some of their expressions, translated in good faith, are ambiguous and even misleading. And the revisions of these translations have not kept pace with the times during which languages undergo inevitable changes.

The need for good translations is acute. Besides English our Synod on a worldwide basis is using the Small Catechism in 17 different languages: German, Swedish, Norwegian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Indonesia, Tamil, Telugu, Apache, Chewa, Tonga, Bemba, Luvale, Tumbuka, and Lozi. While other church bodies have done much of this translating, we have done the pioneer work in seven of these languages: Apache, Chewa, Tonga, Bemba, Luvale, Tumbuka, and Lozi.

Besides English we use the Large Catechism in six languages: German, Swedish, Norwegian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, and Chinese. Since English is used as a medium of instruction in our Central African Bible Institute and Seminary because of the many vernaculars, the need to translate the Large Catechism into one or the other of the African vernaculars has not been a matter of priority.

An Unfinished Task

Reports from our fields emphasize the need for better translations. "We're still trying to become familiar with our Chinese Catechism," writes Missionary Gary Kirschke of the one produced in 1943. He hopes that a "recent revision" will be of help. ... "The 1878 Swedish edition," writes Dr. Seth Erlandsson, "is not completely free from Pietist deviations." He adds, "We are working on a new and modern translation, but it is not so easy to translate Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments to fit our modern society." ... Our Latin American missionaries, on the other hand, are finding a translation of Dr. Melendez, which goes back to the year 1909, more usable than a more modern Spanish Catechism put out by "a variety of synods." Missionary Venus Winter comments, "Judging from the erudite style of these people and the size of many of their words it would seem that they forgot Luther was writing for children." ... The men from Japan do not mention any particular translational problems. Missionary Richard Poetter reports that even the Large Catechism is frequently quoted, and also studied by church elders. "A separate edition of the Small Catechism has been printed," he states,

“adding the phonetic readings to the characters so that even little children can read it.” One wonders in this connection what Luther would have to say about seeing his Catechisms in the form of Chinese characters. ...The sainted Pastor F. Uplegger not only had the work of translating into the Apache tongue. Like Luther he first had to formulate a written language into which to do the translating. What painstaking efforts must have gone into his Apache version of the Small Catechism at our San Carlos mission station! Today, however, Missionary H.E. Hartzell reports, Apache is rarely used as a printed language. Though the people still speak it, they are not literate in their own tongue. The biggest problem in Apacheland, he adds, is to present the divine truths of the Catechism in such a way that their meaning is clearly understood. One might say that it becomes a matter of translating our own familiar English terms and expressions into an even simpler English. But one has to work in places where English is used as a second language in order to appreciate this problem fully.

The biggest translational problems, of course, are in Africa. Here in Zambia and Malawi no other Lutheran church has travelled this way before us. Pioneer work must be done in no less than six African vernaculars. Very often theological terms and concepts are being linguistically formulated for the first time. Expatriate missionaries and their African coworkers sit together in translation teams and discuss for hours how some expression can best be put into a certain vernacular. “In the effort to produce a dynamic-equivalent translation of Luther’s Enchiridion from English into an African vernacular,” reports Missionary E.R. Wendland, our Language Coordinator in Africa, “difficulties of four major types are encountered: lexical (words), syntactical (grammar), semantic (meaning), and exegetical (doctrine).” He lists no less than 89 problem areas which were encountered in the Chichewa translation alone. The Chewa word for “fear,” for example, has only a negative, servile connotation. The word “flesh,” when translated literally into any Bantu language, simply means “meat.” The term “superstition” has such a wide cultural significance that one has to list specific examples of what it means to “practice superstition” in order to convey any real meaning for the African. To say that “baptism works forgiveness” would give people the idea that the water of baptism is some high-powered medicine or some type of magical holy water. One has to say: “Through baptism God works forgiveness.” These are but a few examples of the difficulties faced by those who do translation work in entirely new language areas, as some of our missionaries are called upon to do.

A Precious Tool, Worldwide

In reply to our quest for information concerning the use of Luther’s Catechisms in our world mission fields, Missionary R.G. Cox, Superintendent of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa, reminds us of Luther’s own words in his preface to the Small Catechism: “Alas, good Lord, of all the misery I saw. The people, especially in the villages, know nothing at all of Christian doctrine.” Superintendent Cox suggests that wherever possible in our mission fields we should strongly encourage a memorization of the Enchiridion by young and old alike. This is from a man who has spent many years in every phase of our work in a foreign situation.

How thankful we in our church should be that Luther felt himself “impelled and constrained” to put Christian doctrine “in this short, plain, simple form.” How we, too, ought to feel ourselves impelled and constrained to put this same precious gift into the hands, mouths, and hearts of people everywhere!