

CATECHISMS OF THE WELS

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The members of the Wisconsin Synod have always held three books close to their hearts: the Bible, the hymnal and the catechism. The Bible serves as the source of truth in teaching us about our Savior and in laying out the groundwork for Christian living. The hymnal guides our worship and gives expression to our praise. The catechism beautifully summarizes Scriptural truth and forms the basis for all doctrinal learning and instructing in our church body. These three books periodically go through changes--the Bible in its translation, the hymnal in its contents and the catechism in its form. Our synod has weathered the transition in adopting a modern translation of the Bible. In recent years the hymnal has caught the attention of WELS Christians, and with the appearance of Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal, it will for several years to come.

Although it has not received as much ink as the hymnal, our synod's third dearly-cherished book, the catechism, has also had its share of changes during the history of the WELS. This study will examine the various catechism texts which the pastors, teachers and parents of our synod have used for imparting to the upcoming generations the great truths of the Bible as summarized by Luther. Three general concerns will recur throughout. First, why have new expositions of the catechism appeared? Second, how did these expositions develop? And finally, in what ways have they changed?

During the Wisconsin Synod's early years no one catechism dominated the classroom and the home. For over the first quarter-century of our church's existence catechetical instructors had no synod-sponsored exposition. In the absence of such a catechism, pastors, teachers and parents had to look to other sources. The synod's book-distributing arm offered some

possibilities (1). There was the Ludwig edition, an exposition printed by a Henry Ludwig in New York and sanctioned by the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio (2). This appeared in German and in English. Catechists could do their instructing with the Hanover, or old Walther, edition. It was written not by C.F.W. Walther, but by Michael Walther, a court preacher and professor in Germany during the 1600s. It received some commendable marks in our synod. According to the Gemeindeblatt, this catechism "is in itself very good and has many an advantage over other similar catechetical expositions, chiefly because of its brevity and clear, easily understandable speech" (3). Yet it did have its faults. The chief part dealing with the keys and confession was treated "too shabbily," and the explanation of these doctrines could be misunderstood, in that it at least implied that the power to pronounce forgiveness was given to the called servants of Christ, and not to the church as a whole (4). Nevertheless, the astute teacher could add comments in class to offset the text's weaknesses (5). But if he was not pleased with the Hanover catechism, he could choose a version by Karl Heinrich Caspari, a nineteenth-century Lutheran pastor in Munich. This exposition, intended for young and old alike, won over many teachers, both in Germany and in America. It was printed in Milwaukee by a publisher named George Brumder. Its closeness, at least in one of its places of publication, to the heartland of the Wisconsin Synod may account for its use at the Watertown seminary when it opened in 1863 (6). Caspari's treatment was simple and direct in its question-and-answer format. Bible passages, which were occasionally followed by longer Biblical references, supported the answers. The teaching about the keys and

confession was not relegated to an appendix, as in Walther's catechism, but was listed as the sixth chief part (7).

A catechism published by the Missouri Synod probably grasped the widest circulation during our synod's early years. When the Missouri Synod was searching for an official catechism, C.F.W. Walther called attention to one authored by Johann Conrad Dietrich (8). This orthodox theologian from the seventeenth century and superintendent at Ulm published his catechetical lectures in a book form, titled Institutiones Catecheticae. This he later simplified into an edition for elementary schools. Walther and other pastors from Missouri adopted the simplified edition as the basis for their catechism, which appeared in 1858 (9). It treated the chief parts extensively in 611 questions. The answers were complete, and the Bible passages profuse. It is rather easy to see how a young synod struggling for confessional integrity would readily adopt such an exposition of the catechism. Its inclusion in the Gemeindeblatt's catalog of books silently testifies to this fact.

The first catechism which had a connection with the Wisconsin Synod also turned to Dietrich as its foundation. It was not a synod project, but more the production of one man: F.W.A. Notz, the esteemed professor at Northwestern. Apparently on his own impetus, Professor Notz undertook a translation of Dietrich's Institutiones Catecheticae, which he completed in 1875. Unlike Missouri's version, Notz's version retained the thorough, dogmatic presentation. It posited a question, answered it, and then offered long paragraphs of commentary, replete with Hebrew and Greek terms and rebuttals of contrary theological positions. A catechism for the children it was not. In the section dealing with the catechism

and the Scriptures, Notz listed forty-three questions, many of which had material that few children could comprehend. (The Missouri Synod version, which was based on the abridgment of Dietrich's work, contained seven questions, with eleven in an appendix.) Professor Notz seemed to have relished Dietrich's catechetical presentation, which was characteristic of the theologians of the 1600s. According to J.P. Koehler, when Notz was doing his translating of Dietrich's Institutiones, "in religion. . .he sought to interest the students in its presentation of the scholastic scheme of Lutheran dogmatics, the notorious Causalschema, which the budding theologians among them, as they didn't learn to like it then, learned later thoroughly to dislike" (10). Although Notz hoped that the Institutiones would "prove themselves useful and profitable in the home, the school and the church" in their translated form (11), they never found a wide audience. It took another twenty years for a second edition to appear. A review in an 1896 Gemeindeblatt justified its high cost of two dollars by noting the long interval between editions. Since it had taken so long for the first edition to sell out, and since the sale of the second might require an even longer time, paying two dollars for the second was justified "from the business point of view" (12). The review also noted that Notz's contribution was going to serve the needs of pastors and teachers as a compendium of dogmatics, and at the most, this was probably all that it did serve.

Perhaps because Notz's edition was not meeting its needs, our synod ventured to publish its own catechism in the early 1880s. In its 1880 convention the synod noted that the catechisms commonly used in the schools were too difficult and that a new exposition was needed. The Winnebago Conference suggested the Dresdener

Kreuz-Katechismus, a popular catechism from the home country. The delegates decided to adopt this catechism as the basis of a synod edition. It was required that this new catechism not be "abstractly dogmatic," and that it "not merely be applied to the intellect, but in an edifying manner win hearts" (13). The convention selected a committee, which included Adolph Hoenecke and August Ernst, to complete a draft that was already in the formative stages. This was to be presented to a pastoral conference at Columbus in the fall (14). It was available for purchase at a cost of thirty cents in May of the following year (15).

The new catechism, entitled Dr. Martin Luthers Kleiner Katechismus mit Erklaerung, differed dramatically from Notz's exposition. The Kleiner Katechismus had Luther's introduction to his Small Catechism, the Enchiridion and then a simple question-and-answer format which developed the thoughts of the chief parts (in this order: the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, the Keys and Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar). The Bible passages appeared printed out in full under the answers. Most of the material from the Dresden catechism was included in the synod's edition. Some questions regarding God's attributes were omitted, as well as numerous points of application, which explained the comfort and direction which certain Scriptural truths give us (16).

Despite some omissions of good material from the Dresden catechism, the Kleiner Katechismus delivered on the goals of the synodical convention. And its advantages over other catechisms of the time became clear in the reception given to it by the pastors and teachers in the synod. In the 1881 convention it was

acknowledged that the new catechism had experienced a favorable judgment and that it was worthy of introduction into the congregations of the synod (17). In 1882 a member of the catechism committee reported to the convention that the second printing had nearly sold out and that a third printing was necessary (18). A new edition which was produced in 1892 went through many large printings:

1893	5000
1895	1500
1896	6000
1897	5000
1899	6500
1900	5000
1901	5000
1903	4000
1905	5000. (19)

Only the synodical proceedings and calendar exceeded the catechism in the numbers printed. Many congregations must have followed the synod's encouragements by introducing and keeping the Kleiner Katechismus.

Large volumes of this catechism were produced and distributed in the Wisconsin Synod. And it served very capably as an instructional tool for pastors, teachers and parents in their catechetical endeavors. Yet in time, our synod sensed the need for an updating of the catechism. The reasons for this were not stated, at least not explicitly in print. But we can fairly judge that changes in language were inclining the synod to begin expressing its teachings in English, and perhaps pastors and teachers wanted a catechism text with timeliness for twentieth-century Lutherans. For these reasons, and perhaps others, the 1907 convention ratified the proposition that "a double committee should be named, which should have the one duty to undertake a revision of our German catechism

and the other duty to present a good English translation of this newly worked German catechism" (20). The delegates left it up to the president and the vice-presidents of synod to appoint a committee that would study the extent and sense of such a revision. The following year President von Rohr reported that he had named Professor Ernst, Professor Schaller, President Soll and Pastor Carl Gausewitz to the study committee (21). This catechism committee, "which could have rivaled any synodical committee of that time in prestige and ability," proved that "catechism work was serious business in those days" (22). For whatever reason, this prestigious group took its time in completing the charge of the synod. A committee at the 1910 convention urged the synod to proceed "as quickly as possible" with the production of the German catechism (23). The committee was to continue its duties, with the addition of a teacher, R. Albrecht. In 1912 it was reported that the catechism would appear in the fall (24), yet this announcement seemed premature. The next year, some delegates expressed their dismay that the new edition had not appeared, and the convention decided to disband the present committee and entrust the work to one man (25). This one man, whose name would be associated with the catechism for the next sixty years, was Carl Gausewitz.

Pastor Gausewitz, former president of the Minnesota Synod and the current president of the Synodical Conference, took the task in hand. According to Koehler, he was assisted in his work by Schaller, his assistant pastor at Grace in Milwaukee (26). The finished product went to the presses in 1917. The Gemeindeblatt hailed it as "the new catechism, whose appearance pastors and teachers have awaited with longing" (27). The English edition was



ready in mid-February, and a German-English one about a month later. After many years of disappointing reports on the project, the synodical convention in 1917 noted that with the completion of the new catechism "an old wish of the synod has been fulfilled" (28).

Many praised the Gausewitz catechism. A review in the Gemeindeblatt took note of the following features:

A careful revision of the text, especially in the English, which is more fitting to a Lutheran sense; definitions, which are added to the text in brief footnotes; arrangement of the larger sections into smaller paragraphs, which essentially promote understanding and heart-learning; and, what is chief, a fundamental reworking of the catechetical exposition into essentially improved questions and answers, with rich Bible passages and the proof of Bible history, and the inclusion of many things of great practical worth.

The review concluded, "There can be no question that this edition of the catechism must facilitate and enrich understanding in a high measure over against all earlier editions" (29). With much praise Professor Schaller reviewed it in a lengthy article in the Quartalschrift. The catechism addressed the learning processes of children, employed the Scriptural material in a masterful way and touched the emotions. Schaller wrote, "As the most excellent and best characteristic of this small book I finally note its thoroughly evangelical tone" (30). Some voices had criticized certain features of Gausewitz's catechism, but Schaller quickly dismissed these criticisms (31).

In its presentation, the Gausewitz catechism proceeded along the same lines as the Kleiner Katechismus of 1881. It opened with some snatches of Luther's introduction to his Small Catechism, included the Enchiridion (with explanations of archaic German words) and then commented on the chief parts in the same order as the

previous catechism. Under the answers, it placed the longer Biblical sections before the individual proof passages. The exposition treated the material in 457 questions, with greater explanation of the first two chief articles. One reviewer commented on this as a possible weakness, but then added that "this was necessary in order not to make the book too voluminous" (32). But despite some weaknesses, the Gausewitz merited Schaller's judgment that "our publishing house has up to this point produced no book which would be of greater practical significance for the edification of the church as this expositional catechism" (33).

When the years passed by and the time approached for a new catechism, our synod testified to the excellence of the Gausewitz catechism by deciding to revise it instead of adopting a new one altogether. In the late 1940s a committee was once again assembled for the purpose of catechism revision. Under the direction of Pastor Henry Koch, six other pastors (E. Behm, H. Eckert, P. Gieschen, W. Gieschen, L. Koeninger and H. Pussehl) and two teachers (Wm. Hellermann and M. Zahn) undertook the task. At the 1949 convention it was reported that "the Catechism Revision Committee is working diligently, meeting about every two weeks" (34). As the committee did its work, it put each section into the teachers' publication, The Lutheran School Bulletin. The committee wrote, "We are striving to retain the spirit and thought sequence of the Gausewitz catechism. Some changes, however, have been made for the sake of clarification and simplicity." While it endeavored to simplify the terminology to a sixth-grade level, it also intended "to build up the vocabulary and understanding of our pupils, so that they are in a position to follow and understand a Lutheran doctrinal

sermon in the best sense of the term" (35). Throughout its revising work the committee welcomed suggestions and criticisms. It admitted to some snags. "We are having our difficulties. We are not masters," the members wrote (36). Yet by May of 1953 the seven men on the committee finished their revision. As another committee reviewed their work, a report to the 1955 convention stated, "We hope that everyone will continue to be patient while this last important task is carried out in the production of our new catechism" (37). It was finally published in 1957. Because of the color of its cover, this edition became affectionately known as the "brown catechism."

True to its goals, the 1956 catechism adhered closely to the Gausewitz edition. It had fewer questions than the 1917 catechism (418, as opposed to 457), yet much of the material was grouped differently under subpoints, instead of being presented in separate questions. Probably as a response to liberal Bible scholarship, the revision more clearly defined the doctrine of inspiration. And as a mirror of declining morality in American society, more attention was given to the sixth commandment. What God expects of the unmarried, as well as married people, received greater emphasis than it did in the text of the original Gausewitz catechism. One question (#88) asked, "How is the temple of God defiled by the married and the unmarried?" Were the morals of younger Americans, and younger WELS Christians, slipping more quickly than they had in 1917?

Like the original Gausewitz, the revised version quickly became the standard for the catechetical instruction in the synod. In 1959 the publishing house reported that more and more congregations were using it (38). It printed 10,000 copies in 1956 and 38,000 in the

next two years combined (39). The revision found a firm niche in our church body's instruction. It is present still today, both in its original form and in a slightly updated version (published in 1984) that features current English in the Enchiridion and exposition, and the New International Version in the Bible passages.

The Gausewitz catechism endured for many years. But change inevitably came. Just as a transition in language and the needs of a new generation harked the need for a replacement to the Kreuzer Katechismus of 1881, so also change necessitated a replacement for the Gausewitz. Within recent years, two new expositions of the catechism have appeared. The first is the Fehlauer edition. Adolph Fehlauer, the former executive secretary of the Board for Parish Education, perceived weaknesses in the teaching of fifth- and sixth-grade catechism in Lutheran elementary schools. Catechetical instruction was filled with too many abstractions, and the structuring of material in the education of upper-grade children allowed for too much repetition. And so Mr. Fehlauer hoped to avoid these weaknesses (40). He undertook the work of revising the catechism for fifth and sixth graders, together with the occasional help of Pastor William Fischer. Mr. Fehlauer began his work on this project during the last years of his active service to the synod and concluded it in the early years of his retirement (41). The catechism was published in 1981.

In its presentation, the Fehlauer catechism differs, though not drastically, from earlier versions. It contains two expositions of the catechism in one book. The first course focuses on the Ten Commandments and the Sacraments, with a seventeen-lesson treatment of the Creed. The second course expounds on the Creed in thirty-two

lessons, presents material on the Lord's Prayer and places lesser emphasis on the Ten Commandments. With their different areas of stress, the two courses avoid much repetition, as Mr. Fehlauer intended to do. The question-and-answer sections do not brim over with Bible passages. Instead, the Scriptural truths of each lesson are drawn from Biblical accounts which the previous lesson assigns the students to read. Since Bible history forms the basis for the catechetical instruction, students build on previous knowledge and cross a learning bridge to the more abstract instruction of later grades. In this way, the Fehlauer text further steers clear of repetition and also relies more on concrete accounts than on abstract concepts.

The Fehlauer catechism met with overwhelming success. According to one estimate, by the mid-1980s approximately ninety percent of our synod's day schools were using this catechetical exposition (42). Some teachers have noticed weaknesses, especially in the meaningfulness of the applications. Yet a possible revision of Mr. Fehlauer's work within the next five to ten years will correct such weaknesses (43).

The Fehlauer catechism was aimed at students in fifth and sixth grade. The second revision of recent years targets the older students, and really WELS Christians of all ages. This is the Kuske exposition, which, in keeping with the color-coded names our synod often assigns to its books, has also become known as the "blue catechism."

The impetus to develop this catechism came from Pastor William Fischer, a member of the Board for Parish Education and the partial contributor to Fehlauer's edition. He observed how different WELS

pastors were basing their catechetical instruction on different catechisms. Among these were the Gausewitz and the principal Missouri-Synod-text, the Schwan catechism. Fischer sensed that the abundance of different texts signaled the time for a new synod edition (44). A committee consisting of Fischer, Erich Sievert, James Raabe, Pastor James Frohmader, Pastor Wayne Mueller and Professor David Kuske determined the course for the new catechism. They would base it on the Gausewitz exposition and would incorporate an updated version of the Enchiridion, which after almost nine years was nearing its completion (45). The committee wrestled with the question of the intended audience for the revised exposition. Should they write it for children and so produce a textbook for the classroom, or were they to direct it at the level of adults? They sought the input of synod, which recommended that the catechism should reach both age groups. After the committee had chartered the course for the new catechism's development, they laid the work on the shoulders of one man, Professor Kuske. He spent two summers and the time available during the school terms on his work. The other members of the committee critiqued his drafts and field-tested the completed work themselves, or lent it to others to use for one year, on the condition that they make suggestions for improving the exposition (47). After this thorough revising process, the Kuske catechism (which carried the title Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English) was made available to the synod's pastors and teachers in 1982.

Like all the catechism revisions that had preceded it, the Kuske catechism did not herald a change in the teachings of the

Wisconsin Synod. An article in the Northwestern Lutheran that ran during the revising process hoped to quell whatever fears people may have felt over a new catechism. "Though we may soon have a new exposition, the truths of the Catechism will not be changed. They are the truths of God's Word" (48). Instead of altering the truths of the Bible as taught in Luther's catechism, the Kuske catechism has made them clearer to the WELS Christians of the late-twentieth century. As regards the arrangement of the material, the blue catechism did some readjusting of the chief parts. The Sacraments were placed after the Creed, on the rationale that since the Third Article deals in part with the Means of Grace, questions on Baptism and Communion logically follow. The Lord's Prayer was shifted to the end of the exposition, since it summarizes many of the Scriptural truths developed in the other chief parts (49). The answers to the questions appear after the pertinent portions of Bible history and relevant passages are listed. This undergirds the aim of all catechetical instruction to base every point on Scripture and to draw the inferences from the Bible. The charts, two-color printing and bracketing of the questions have facilitated the teaching and learning of the Enchiridion's truths. Due to the tenor of our times, Professor Kuske had to expand the catechism's treatment of certain areas. The authority God has given to his representatives and the Bible's stand on abortion, mercy killing and homosexuality come across clearly in the exposition. The topic of evolution, which the 1956 Gausewitz catechism mentioned in a footnote, has received considerably more emphasis. The catechism also highlights teachings especially pertinent to twentieth-century WELS Christians: the inerrancy of Scripture, fellowship and the

ministry. For all these reasons, the Kuske catechism is truly "an exposition for our times" (50).

Within another generation, our synod will once again get into the business of revising the catechism. As it has happened with all new editions in the past, the truths of the Bible and Luther's masterful summary of them will remain the foundation of such a new catechism in the future. It will strive to solidify the Scriptural knowledge of the young and to guide them as they grow into adulthood and as they develop spiritually throughout their lives. Our next catechism will be timely, and by God's grace it will also rest on the truths of God's timeless Word.



## ENDNOTES

1. Gemeindeblatt, 15 October 1876, pp.4,5.
2. Ludwig, Smaller Catechism, p.2.
3. Gemeindeblatt, 1 August 1876, p.7.
4. ibid., pp.7,8.
5. ibid., p.8.
6. The Northwestern Lutheran, 4 February 1979, p.37.
7. Caspari, p.233.
8. Carter, p.58.
9. ibid., p.59.
10. Koehler, p.137.
11. Notz, Institutiones Catecheticae, p.xii.
12. Gemeindeblatt, 15 April 1896, p.64.
13. Synodal-Bericht 1880, p.10.
14. ibid.
15. Gemeindeblatt, 1 May 1881, p.136.
16. Questions such as these occurred again and again (cf. pp.214,215):  
    "How does this serve for our godly living?"  
    "How does this serve for our powerful comfort?"
17. Synodal-Bericht 1881, p.59.
18. Synodal-Bericht 1882, p.85.
19. See the following synodical minutes:

1893, p.60	1897, p.100	1901, p.99
1895, p.65	1899, p.99	1903, p.99
1896, p.90	1900, p.96	1905, p.97.
20. Synodal-Bericht 1907, p.92.
21. Synodal-Bericht 1908, p.32.
22. Fredrich, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, April 1979, p.151.
23. Synodal-Bericht 1910, p.95.
24. Synodal-Bericht 1912, p.113.

25. Synodal-Bericht 1913, p.115.
26. History, p.225.
27. 1 February 1917, p. 44.
28. Synodal-Bericht 1917, p.105.
29. Gemeindeblatt, 15 March 1917, p.93.
30. Schaller, Quartalschrift, April 1917, p.168.
31. ibid., p.170.
32. Gemeindeblatt, 1 February 1917, p.44.
33. Schaller, Quartalschrift, April 1917, p.165.
34. Proceedings 1949, p.104.
35. Lutheran School Bulletin, December 1948, p.6.
36. Lutheran School Bulletin, December 1949 (Note: The pages of the draft of the catechism in this issue are not numbered.).
37. Proceedings 1955, p.69.
38. Proceedings 1959, p.113.
39. ibid.
40. personal interview with Prof. Kuske, 2/21/94.
41. ibid.
42. ibid.
43. ibid.
44. ibid.
45. Proceedings 1979, p.94.
46. Kuske interview.
47. ibid.
48. 4 February 1979, p.37.
49. Kuske interview
50. Paul Kolander, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Winter 1983, p.77.

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