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# Luther's Catechisms-450 Years

Essays Commemorating the Small and  
Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther

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# **Luther's Catechisms — 450 Years**

## **Essays Commemorating the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther**

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# The Evangelical Character of Luther's Catechism

*by Edward C. Fredrich*

There are many reasons why the 450-year-old textbook we are honoring at this Congress is still in business as a textbook after all those years. One could point to the importance of the author and the desire of the church that bears his name to be faithful to his memory and to his message. One could mention the matchless skill of the Catechism in presenting the greatest and deepest truths in the clearest and simplest terms. One could praise the brevity which makes possible verbatim recall for the young learner and the veteran reviewer. One could emphasize the positive approach that shuns the polemical and lets the unnamed error be refuted by giving its opposite total way and sway.

All that would be true but it would not be the whole truth. The main reason for the amazing longevity and the eternal youth of the Catechism as the Lutheran Church's chief teaching tool is indicated in the title of this paper. It is its Evangelical Character. The adjective is to be understood, of course, not in a derived sense designating some specific denomination or theological tendency within a denomination, but

in the original meaning developed from the noun evangel or gospel.

The term evangelical may seem to give very specific direction and delimitation to the writing. It does in one sense. In another, as it touches on the heart issue in which our religious existence lives and moves and has its being, this concept evangelical opens before us a large vista that cannot be comprehended by any single treatment. If each of us were to develop the assigned theme, we would in all likelihood present finished products that differed widely from one another in specifics, but would fulfill the assignment adequately in their own individual way.

At the same time it is quite unlikely that anything radically new would be disclosed by such a variety of treatments or could be presented by this paper. For four and one-half centuries Luther's Catechism has survived just because its evangelical character has been appreciated and acknowledged. The praises sung to this aspect of the Catechism could fill volumes. At this late date and at best, about all that can be added is another

testimony, dated 1979, another witness of someone who with St. Paul believes that there are some things so precious that their repetition is less an occasion for trouble and grief than for safety.

From this viewpoint several of the familiar wordings of Luther's Small Catechism are being viewed in this paper for their gospel import. Companion writings in the Large Catechism are being drawn on for emphasis and elucidation. The first of such wordings is:

I

der mich verloren und verdamnten Menchen  
erlöst hat

"who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature"

In his Large Catechism commentary Luther points up the meaning of these cherished words when he, using the familiar question-answer technique, writes:

What do you believe in the Second Article of Jesus Christ?

I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord.

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.<sup>1</sup>

As conclusion to the Second Article discussion in the Large Catechism Luther supplies this summary paragraph:

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.<sup>2</sup>

For the whole Catechism Luther, as he says, supplies a Gospel foundation when he declares of Christ: "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature." This truth undergirds and permeates all else in the Catechism's teaching and in the Christian's life of faith.

As every good storyteller or photographer or painter knows, there is nothing like contrast to heighten effect. Here we have the ultimate contrast: "who has redeemed" over against "me a lost and condemned creature." On the one hand — the Lord, Son of God and Mary's Son, the Incarnate Eternal Word; on the other — the creature, not just a creature but a lost and

condemned creature, not just creature in the abstract but creature in the most individualized and personalized form possible, first person singular.

The Bible begins with a startling contrast: on the one hand — God who was the I-Am before the beginning; on the other — heaven and earth seen for the first time in new light. The link is the verb created with its overtones and undertones of love. The Catechism is summed up in another startling contrast: on the one hand — the God-man and on the other — the sinful creature. This time the link is the verb redeemed that sounds and resounds the love motif, not in undertones or overtones but clear as a bell and as the trumpets of eternity.

This is the Reformation's sola gratia spelled out simply as "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature." The angry God does not become the propitiated God because of anything else but His grace and His Son's merits. The lost and condemned creature had nothing of his own to bring, nothing of his own to offer, nothing of his own to trust. God in His grace effected redemption. It sounds simple. It was simple. But it turned the world upside down. It saves you and me.

One to whom temptation was no stranger makes his own personal confession when he says: "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature." In the "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" he describes how the gift of a God-given appreciation of the truth of redemption proved the hinge event in his theological development and in Reformation history:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God . . .

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'." There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith.<sup>3</sup>

Luther's personal confession, "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature," has remained the great confession of the

Lutheran Church for four and one-half centuries. That Church has stood for sola gratia. It has endeavored to win and keep redeemed sinners in the Redeemer and Savior by proclaiming to them the heart-truth of the explanation of the Second Article.

Unfortunately in our day there have been instances, at Helsinki, for example, and elsewhere, where this confession has been blurred and blunted. The fault is not with Luther and his Catechism. The remedy is a return to them and to their clear confession to the truth of justification by grace through faith in Christ's meritorious and substitutionary work of redemption.

Most important of all, these words, "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature," remain the personal, heart-felt conviction and confession of you and me, living or dying. Pastors in the gathering who have ministered at the deathbed of a believer know what comfort and joy these words "who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature," can occasion, even when only dimly heard or barely murmured. These words present to the believer the pure gospel and promise him eternal life. The link between the benefits this gospel word offers and the redeemed creature is of course faith.

## II

denn das wort "Für euch" fordert eitel gläubige Herzen

"for the words, 'For you,' require only believing hearts."

This Catechism statement applies obviously in the first instance to the Sacrament of the Altar. It occurs in the last section of Luther's treatment of the Sacrament of the Altar dealing with worthy reception. After noting the value of "fasting and bodily preparation" Luther emphasizes the basic Bible truth that it is faith and faith alone that makes the always efficacious sacrament efficient in the individual case.

The same truth, however, prevails in the case of the other sacrament, Holy Baptism. When Luther in his Catechism explains how the great blessings of the Sacrament of Baptism are effected, he is careful to point out that "it is not the water that does them indeed, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word of God in the water." Again, it is faith that lays hold of the promises and blessings offered in the Sacrament of Baptism.

That same role is played by faith when these promises and blessings are presented in the gospel word without visible sacramental

elements. The proper response to a sincere confession of sins is, as the Catechism teaches, the declaration: "Be it unto thee as thou believest." Absolution is to be pronounced because the believer has grasped in faith the merits of the Redeemer.

When the Catechism treats of the benefits and blessings presented in the Means of Grace, it reminds us that for them to become ours "requires believing hearts." This description of faith as receiving blessings but not earning them, as essential for salvation but not in itself meritorious looms large in the Catechism and establishes its evangelical character beyond a shadow of doubt.

In this the Catechism is adding its voice to the Reformation testimony that sola gratia is properly emphasized when it is linked with sola fide. The gospel of free grace is proclaimed in truth and purity without strings attached when it is said to effect only one reaction, to call for only one response, to supply and meet only one requirement — the believing heart. And that is the very essence of an evangelical character.

We who have been bequeathed the long heritage of Scripture truth presented in the Catechism tend to take for granted the declaration: "for the words, 'For you,' require only believing hearts." A cursory glance at the extensive rejection of an ex opere operato view of the Sacrament in the Apology indicates that the matter was by no means all that obvious and easy 450 years ago.<sup>4</sup> The sacramental system that had been built up for centuries had amounted to an inordinate increase in quantity accompanied by a deplorable decrease in quality. With one bold stroke Luther put things back on the right track with his: "for the words 'For you,' require only believing hearts."

At once emphasis moved from what man was doing to win blessings from God to what God had done and was doing to bless man. Instead of the old concern about what was demanded of the believer, attention could now shift to the truly evangelical matter of the promises that were offered to faith and accepted by it. The first and foremost of these promises is the forgiveness of sins.

## III

in welcher Christenheit er mir und allen Gläubigen täglich alle Sünden reichlich vergibt.

"In which Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers"

In his own commentary Luther sums up this

truth in the following words:

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 Holy Ghost does not allow them to injure us, because we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but forgiveness of sin, both in that God forgives us, and in that we forgive, bear with, and help each other.<sup>5</sup>

In this discussion of forgiveness, as well as in other treatments of the theme, Luther is so eloquent and so evangelical because in the matter of God's forgiveness of sins "to all believers" he always thinks of himself in the first instance. "To me" stands in the forefront when forgiveness of sins is praised. This one pearl of great price that Luther had sought for so long was finally thrust upon him by the Spirit through gospel words he heard and read. He treasured it daily thereafter for the rest of his life.

The truth of the forgiveness of sins runs through the whole Catechism like an evangelical thread, drawing the parts together into a harmonious whole. The Ten Commandments are concluded with God's own assurance of "showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments." The Creed provides the opportunity to confess that the Holy Ghost in the Christian Church "daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers." In the Fifth Petition the believer is taught to plead that "our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins" as he prays, "Forgive us our trespasses." Baptism, we are instructed, "works forgiveness of sins." The Ministry of the Keys is defined as "the authority of the Church, given by Christ to His Church on earth, to forgive the sins of penitent sinners unto them . . ." Confession is to conclude with the minister's declaration: "I, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." In the last chief part Luther instructs us that, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," signifies "that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

This evangelical occupation and preoccupation of Luther's Small Catechism with forgiveness of sins more than anything else endows it with its abiding relevance and its evangelical stance. Bible promises, Catechism texts, author's explanation are all so woven together that the

resultant lesson aims at meeting the learners' greatest needs, the forgiveness of their sins. Here and there one hears in the church that bears Luther's name suggestions that the time has come to replace the Small Catechism with an instructional medium more suited for learning and living in a come-of-age world. If the suggested replacement maintains or improves on the old in the matter of thematic treatment of the forgiveness motif, one might be willing to give such suggestions a hearing. Previous experience, however, indicates that it is just at this sticking point of evangelical presentation and penetration of the heart doctrine that the replacements fail to achieve the standard Luther set 450 years ago when he said, "In which Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers."

This recurring emphasis on the forgiveness of sins was surely on Luther's mind when he wrote his well-known comments on his own daily praying of the Catechism. While the comments apply to other Catechism truths as well, they are especially meaningful when heard in this connection. Lecturing on Psalm 126 Luther states:

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 merely pass over the words hurriedly, but I carefully observe what the individual words mean. And really, if I do not do this but am preoccupied with other business, I feel a definite loss because of the neglect. For God gave the Word that we should impress it on ourselves, as Moses says (Deut. 6:7) and practice it. Without this practice our souls become rusty, as it were and we lose ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Luther stresses this truth of the forgiveness of sins, not only for its own sake and for its own gospel value, great as this might be. He enlarges the evangelical thrust of his Catechism by relying on the truth of the forgiveness of sins as the impulse and source of the life of faith and the life of prayer. To these points attention now turns. The next Catechism words to be highlighted are:

#### IV

Wir sollen Gott fürchten und lieben dass wir . . .

"We should fear and love God that we . . ."

Which one of the chief parts generally given

place in Catechisms seems to offer the least opportunity for evangelical treatment and afford the unwary most opportunities to stray on byways tending in the opposite direction? To this question most of us would promptly reply: The Ten Commandments. It is, however, just in his handling of the first main part of his Catechism that Luther's evangelical approach is so much in evidence. In summary, without ever minimizing sin and its effects, Luther presents the Ten Commandments as the goal of the believing child of God, eager to do the loving Father's will. God's law in Luther's Catechism, not only points ahead to the need of the sinner for the Savior presented in the gospel, but also points from that gospel to the life that conforms to God's will and is pleasing to Him.

This is said in full knowledge that there has been an old battle raging between those who insist that Luther mainly intended the first part of the Catechism to serve as a mirror for sinners and those who argue that the chief purpose was to present a rule for life. Within the latter group can be discerned two contending camps, one declaring that Luther was trying to keep all men on the pathways of outward decency and order, while the other emphasizes that the Reformer's first concern was the life of faith in the Christian. Involved also is the contention of some that the tertius usus legis is an invention of the post-Luther church and was not acknowledged by him.

It is obvious that a brief treatment of a large theme will find it impossible to enter fully into all these debates with all their ramifications. Our purpose will be sufficiently served, however, by calling attention to the key words, "We should fear and love God that we . . ." The crux of the matter is the meaning of "fear." Is the basic connotation an afraidness which would rule out an evangelical motivation for doing God's will or is the proper synonym to be a reverence born of faith and expressing itself in a willingness to keep God's commandments?

No one could deny that the unbeliever has reason to be altogether afraid of God's wrath and punishment. We all know that our abiding old man is hindered in his evil intentions when he is made afraid of God and His commandments. Everyone in this gathering confesses that he sees his sin in the mirror of the law. These points are beyond dispute in this or in any other connection.

It can, however, be emphatically stated that Luther's treatment of the Ten Commandments in his Small Catechism is evangelically based. Ten times we encounter the deliberate juxtaposition of fear and love and cannot forget that the latter is born of faith and casts out the fear that has torment.<sup>7</sup> In the First Commandment the trilogy of fear and love and trust stands as identification of

what is in the heart of the believing child of God. "It is the intent of this commandment," says Luther, "to require true faith and trust of the heart which settles upon the only true God, and clings to Him alone."<sup>8</sup>

In the explanatory sections the "Thou shalt not" and "Thou shalt" have become the "We do not" and "We do" that simply describe the life of faith promoted by the gospel. The sum of the whole matter, the concluding word of the first chief part, "willingly do according to His commandments," strikes a positive, evangelical tone. It pulls together all that has been previously said in the several commandments by way of describing how a child-like faith busies itself in activities of love, such as, "call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks"; "hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it"; "honor, serve, and obey them and hold them in love and esteem"; "help and befriend him in every bodily need"; "lead a chaste and decent life and each honor and love his spouse"; "help him to improve his property and business"; "put the best construction on everything"; "help and be of service to him."

It might not be amiss to mention in this connection how that same evangelical approach to the believer's life of sanctification is in evidence in other sections of the Catechism. The "fatherly divine goodness and mercy" of the Creator and Preserver is the reason why it is our "duty to thank and praise, and to serve and obey Him." The redemption motivates the believer's confession: "I should be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." When we are nurtured by the true, pure Word of God, then "we as the children of God lead a holy life according to it." The gift of the Fourth Petition leads "us to appreciate and to receive with thanksgiving our daily bread." We who have received forgiveness from the Father in heaven will "surely also heartily forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us." Baptism "signifies . . . that again a new man should daily come forth and arise who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

This procedure in teaching sanctification, which is consistently followed throughout the Small Catechism from the first to the last part, is the truly evangelical way. There is no need for the old Catechism lists and classification of sins and virtues and virtuous works. There is no room for the unevangelical imposition of long-outdated ordinances or of newly invented human regulations upon free, justified believers. These believers are rather encouraged to let their faith express itself and their justification produce sanctification, quite naturally and inevitably. Good works are expected to abound, not because they are necessary and meritorious in earning

salvation, but simply because good works are produced by faith.

This evangelical teaching of sanctification is nowhere more clearly in evidence than in Luther's use of the Catechism word under consideration, "We should fear and love God" to introduce the explanation of the Third Commandment: "that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it."

With clarity and facility the man who had been taught to live by the gospel moves from what he refers to as the Commandment's meaning nach dem groben Verstand to the all-important and abiding expression of God's inimitable will for His children, namely that they hear and learn His Word.<sup>9</sup> In one simple statement Luther surmounts all the obstacles and overleaps all the pitfalls that have brought so many others, some even in the Lutheran Church, to a doctrinal fall into sheer legalism or flagrant violation of evangelical freedom.

Sabbatarianism obviously would find no room in Luther's theology. He is equally concerned, however, that more subtle misinterpretation of the Third Commandment should not re-enslave those whom Christ has made free and reshackle the gospel with unevangelical bonds. Luther stands firm on the principle that the New Testament believer in Christ is free of all requirements save God's abiding will for His believers.

The Third Commandment therefore, Luther declares, "according to its gross sense, does not concern us Christians; for it is altogether an external matter, like other ordinances of the Old Testament, which were attached to particular customs, persons, times, and places, and now have been made free through Christ."<sup>10</sup> "In the gross sense" there may be no great issue at stake, for both the legalist and the free Christian may well go to church on Sunday. In the essential matter, however, Luther wants to be understood as espousing churchgoing that is evangelical, not legalistic. It is to be regretted that some Lutherans have not been willing to abide by this soundly evangelistic teaching that flows naturally out of Luther's Ten Commandment theme, "We should fear and love God that we . . ."<sup>11</sup> Another Catechism word with deep evangelical import is:

## V

Auf dass wir getrost und mit aller Zuversicht ihn bitten sollen wie die lieben Kinder ihren lieben Vater.

"That we may with all boldness and confidence ask Him as dear children ask their dear father."

The effort to espouse evangelical instruction in

Bible truth encountered great difficulty also in the third main part of traditional catechetical instruction, the Lord's Prayer section. Some insight into Luther's problems in this area can be gained from his own testimony. In his writing of 1522 on praying he feels compelled to complain:

Among the many harmful books and doctrines which are misleading and deceiving Christians and give rise to countless false beliefs I regard the personal prayer books as by no means the least objectionable. They drub into the minds of simple people such a wretched counting up of sins and going to confession, such unchristian tomfoolery about prayers to God and His saints! Moreover, these books are puffed up with promises of indulgences and come out with decorations in red ink and pretty titles, one is called Hortulus animae, another Paradisus animae, and so on. These books need a basic and thorough reformation if not total extermination. And I would make the same judgment about those passionals or books of legends into which the devil has tossed his own additions.<sup>12</sup>

Pre-Reformation aberrations in the teaching of the Lord's Prayer will certainly be detailed in other presentations to this gathering. In the interest of avoiding duplication, let just one point be emphasized here: an evangelical direction in prayer doctrine and practice had to be charted and Luther did just that in his Catechism.

Because prayer is both the beginning and end of the observable manifestation of the life of faith in the believer and because evangelical prayer looms so large in the Reformation heritage of the universal priesthood, we tend to take the whole matter almost for granted. Always and again we need to refresh our grasp of two key terms as the basis of all evangelical praying. They are "dear Father" and "dear children."

What Luther really meant and felt when he said, "dear Father" can best be seen by what he himself tells us about his early conceptions, rather misconceptions, about the God he endeavored to approach in prayer.<sup>13</sup> This was an angry deity so intent on His judgments that the sinner dared not approach Him directly. A byway was safer. A mediator like Mary or Anna might provide an "in." If the count in the prayer totals passed the minimum requirement so much the better. One had to work at the task of approaching and appeasing God. This is the "unchristian tomfoolery" that hampered the prayer life of the troubled Luther in the early years. This "tomfoolery," one might add, perpetrated that incalculable loss in heavenly blessings effected by



the tragic misdirection of so many prayers that never reached the throne of grace on high during long centuries before the Reformation and also afterward.

The truth revealed to Luther that God in heaven had been reconciled and had become the "dear Father" enabled him to imbed in his Catechism and in those who would learn from it an evangelical prayer theology revolving around the simple words, "as dear children ask their dear father."

In this prayer theology the way to the throne of grace is open. The Father who raised the Son is reconciled. The believer has a "dear Father" whom he as a priest in his own right can approach in prayer. The result was for Luther an exemplary, heroic prayer life and for the adherents of his Reformation "a wall of iron" that saved their cause on more than one occasion.<sup>14</sup>

The evangelical note struck in the term, "dear Father," is matched by the companion term, "dear children." As such, the believers are encouraged to make their petitions with all boldness and confidence. There is no need to set up all sorts of stipulations regarding number of prayers, kinds of prayers, places for prayers and the like. Luther's way of inculcating the right prayer attitude and practice is simply to remind those praying of the status as God's "dear children." This gospel-based approach, Luther is certain, will produce the desired result: boldness in prayer, confidence in prayer, sincerity in prayer, perseverance in prayer, loving concern in prayer, spirituality in prayer, submission in prayer, gratitude in prayer and whatever else is pleasing to our true Father and in the prayers of His true children.

The content of the prayers can and will vary widely according to time and circumstance. Luther, however, following ancient practice, deemed it advisable to include in his Catechism instruction in the Lord's Prayer. In his explanation of the very first of its petitions, "Hallowed be Thy name," Luther supplies the final Catechism word which will be employed to underscore its evangelical tone. That word is:

## V

Wer aber anders lehrt und lebt, denn das Wort Gottes lehrt, der entheiligt unter uns den Namen Gottes; da behüte uns vor, himmlischer Vater!

"He that teaches and lives otherwise than God's Word teaches, profanes the name of God among us. From this preserve us, Heavenly Father!"

This is the one utterance in the Small Catechism that verges on the polemical and almost reminds one of the damnant and salvus esse non poterit of other confessions.<sup>16</sup> Even though the final utterance is a fervent prayer of deep personal concern, "From this preserve us, Heavenly Father!" there might be those who would consider the explanation of the First Petition the least evangelical section of the Catechism. Quite the contrary! This essayist does not hesitate to include this material in a select list of choice evangelical expressions of the Catechism.

It is not unevangelical for Luther and for every believer to name conduct contrary to God's will what it is, a profaning of God's Word. In this age which places a premium on the doing of one's own thing and has developed a system of situation ethics to provide a halo for the things that result, no matter what they are, there will be objections to the view that living contrary to the teaching of God's Word is nothing else but profaning God's name.

Be that as it may, we here who appreciate the heritage of the 450-year-old Catechism will regard it as an evangelical fruit of our faith that we abhor living contrary to what God's Word teaches and that we react to all such sin with the plea, "From this preserve us, Heavenly Father!" The thrust of Luther's explanation of "Hallowed be thy name" is unmistakable. The sin of others is a profaning of God's name, indeed, but what is of prime concern is that such profaning should not mark and mar our lives. That is an evangelical concern, born of a realization of the cost of redemption that the Second Article teaches, and committed to a daily drowning of the old Adam that baptismal grace fosters.

Likewise, it is not unevangelical to mark each and every doctrinal deviation from what God's Word teaches as a profaning of God's name. The old designation of union churches that strove to harbor and harmonize false and true doctrine as "evangelical" does violence to the honored meaning of the term. Luther is right, and most evangelical, when he makes it crystal clear in the First Petition explanation that deviation from the doctrines of God's Word is always a profaning of God's name. The gospel truth is precious. The Word that provides it must be held inviolate. Any damage to the Word, does damage to its evangelical content. "From this preserve us, Heavenly Father!"

It is part and parcel of Luther's evangelical approach that in his love and concern for the gospel he minces no words when he scores and scorns false doctrine. He makes no subtle distinctions between doctrines that matter and doctrines that can be sold down the river.

“Profaning” is the blanket label for everything and anything that falls short of teaching God’s Word in its truth and purity.

In his evangelical concern for the Word of God Luther has taught us to react to deviation from the truth and purity of the Word with the immediate recognition of the profaning that is involved and with the prompt heartfelt plea, “From this preserve us, Heavenly Father.” Those who pray thus will on their part shun all such profaning like the plague. They will have no spiritual fellowship with it and will be convinced, as Luther and by Luther, that this is what being evangelical is all about.

Luther’s own commentary on the First Petition in the Large Catechism is worth noting and quoting:

We ought by all means to pray without ceasing, and to cry and call upon God against all such as preach and believe falsely and whatever opposes and persecutes our Gospel and pure doctrine, and would suppress it, as bishops, tyrants, enthusiasts, etc. Likewise also for ourselves who have the Word of God, but are not thankful for it, nor live as we ought according to the same. If now you pray for this with your heart, you can be sure that it pleases God; for He will not hear anything more dear to Him than that His honor and praise is exalted above everything else, and His Word is taught to us in its purity and is esteemed precious and dear.<sup>16</sup>

To sum up this presentation on “The Evangelical Character of Luther’s Catechism” Luther’s own evaluation of this aspect of his catechetical endeavors may well be employed. Writing in 1531 his “Warning to His Dear German People,” he declares:

Our gospel has, thanks be to God, accomplished much good. Previously no one knew the real meaning of the Gospel, Christ, baptism, confession, the sacrament (of the altar), faith, Spirit, flesh, good works, the Ten Commandments, the Our Father, prayer, suffering, comfort, temporal government, the state of matrimony, parents, children, masters, manservant, mistress, maidservant, devils, angels, world, life, death, sin, justice, forgiveness, God, bishop, pastor, church, a Christian or the cross. In brief, we are totally ignorant about all that is necessary to know. All of this was obscured and suppressed by the popish asses. They are, as you know, just that — great, coarse, ignorant asses in Christian affairs. For I too was one; and I know that I

am telling the truth in this matter. All devout hearts will bear witness to this; for they would gladly have been instructed about even one of these items, but they were held in captivity by the pope as I was and could gain neither the opportunity nor the permission to be instructed. We did not know otherwise than that priest and monks alone were everything, and that we relied on their works and not on Christ.

But now — praise be to God — it has come to pass that man and woman, young and old know the Catechism. They know how to believe, to live, to pray, to suffer and to die. Consciences are well instructed about how to be Christians and about how to recognize Christ.<sup>17</sup>

It is this gospel treasure in the Catechism and the blessings it brings that should make us all eager teachers and learners of this old, old textbook that is still so relevant after 450 years. Even those in our midst who can like Luther claim, Ich bin auch ein Theologe, should be willing with him to pray and to ponder daily the Catechism and its blessed “Evangelical Character.”<sup>18</sup>