
Luther's Catechisms-450 Years

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

Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dr. David P. Scaer, Editor

Dr. Robert D. Preus, Editor

Luther's Catechisms — 450 Years

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

© 1979 Concordia Theological Seminary Press
Fort Wayne, Indiana

The New Translation of Luther's Small Catechism: Is it Faithful to Luther's Spirit?

by David P. Scaer

I.

Introduction

Translation is a difficult art which is subject to criticism. It must adequately preserve the sense of the original in terms which the readers can readily understand. These purposes can be at odds. On this account there can never be one once and for all translation. The multiple English translations of the Bible in the last thirty years support this view. Dr. Luther's Small Catechism presents special problems in translation. The Small Catechism was originally intended to be an educational instrument first for the clergy and then for children. At the same time it was put into use as devotional material in Lutheran homes. In the Book of Concord (1580) the Small Catechism was included as an official confession of the Lutheran Church. Thus the translation must serve educational, devotional, and confessional purposes. It must be easily understood without complicated or elaborate explanation and still not compromise any article of faith. The Small Catechism is an official document and any

translation put into use must undergo the same type of thorough scrutiny to which translations of government treaties and business contracts must be subject. Unlike long theological treatises and volumes where paraphrasing becomes a necessity for the translator, the Small Catechism is very short. Its brevity becomes especially obvious in comparison with other church writings. As an official document precision is necessary. As a brief official document precision becomes a distinct possibility. The purpose of this critique of the new version of the Small Catechism in English is not to examine the reasons that were offered for producing a new translation, but to judge it according to literary, confessional, and theological merits. A literary examination means comparing the translation with the original. Special attention must be given to the omission of some material and to paraphrasing. The choice of words must also be examined. Confessional examination requires that the final product be judged in accordance with other documents comprising the Lutheran Confessions, especially the content of the original German of the Small Catechism itself. In the Lutheran Church the

German and the Latin versions of the Small Catechism are the official confessional statements. For all practical purposes among Lutheran groups in English speaking countries, the translation serves as a confession. Of all the historic sixteenth century confessions, the Small Catechism is by far the most known and used. Through the Small Catechism the historic Lutheran faith is passed from one generation to another. In the 450 years since Luther wrote the Small Catechism, theology has been developed widely in many directions. A theological critique must also detect what theological influences if any have been incorporated in the translation.

II.

A Theological and Literary Critique of The Small Catechism by Martin Luther in Contemporary English¹

1.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The First Commandment's explanation presents a minor and insignificant adjustment from "all things" to "anything else," but the older rendering was not really more difficult than the new one.²

In the explanation of the Second Commandment the word "superstitiously" is added and the reference to "witchcraft" (*zaubern*) is deleted.³ Witchcraft is direct and deliberate alliance with Satan and much more serious than superstition. With the rise of the occult, "witchcraft" would have been more appropriate for our times. In the same explanation the Christians are used to call not upon the name of God but God Himself by replacing "it" with "Him". The German does not warrant this kind of change. One can only suspect a theological motive here where the impersonal and objective "it" is replaced by the more personal "Him". But Luther's apparent intention was to focus on the objective majesty connected with God's name itself as do the Old Testament in many places and Jesus in the Lord's Prayer without any fear of impersonalizing God. Luther's phrase "in every need" is also eliminated. Perhaps the translators were broadening the concept of prayer so that praying, praising, and thanking should take place even when Christians were not in need. But perhaps it was Luther's thought that there is no time when the Christian is not in need. He as a depraved sinner stands always as a beggar before God.

In the explanation of the Third Commandment the German word *verachten* is translated with "neglect" instead of "despise".⁴ It now reads "so that we do not neglect His Word and the

preaching of it". The German word *achten* means "honor" and *verachten* means just the opposite "dishonor" or "despise". Luther's sharp warning against the misuse of God's word is lost. The German *selig* is translated "holy" instead of the familiar "sacred". Ordinarily the German word *heilig* is translated "holy", as in the "Holy Ghost". Translating two different German words by one English word should be avoided.

The same loss of language forcefulness can be detected in the explanation of the Fourth Commandment. *Wert haben* is given now as "respect" instead of "honor". Even the phrase "hold in respect" would have been preferable. The word "despise", (*verachten*) deleted in the explanation of the Third Commandment, is found acceptable in the explanation of the Fourth Commandment.⁵ The inconsistency in translation is not permissible according to the original translation or for pedagogical purposes. The reference to being hurt "in his body" in the Fifth Commandment's explanation is now replaced by the more general phrase "in any way". At first glance this might seem an improvement since it makes the commandment more generally applicable. But the purpose of each commandment and its explanation is to focus in on one area of life. In this case it is the bodily life. Luther sees each of the last seven commandments as uniquely covering one aspect of the bodily life. "Physical needs" replaces "bodily needs".⁵ "Physical" is a more difficult word and is capable of various applications. The rendering of the explanation of the Sixth Commandment "that in matters of sex our words and conduct are pure and honorable" may be considered a creative improvement. Luther's thought preserved in the older wording "that we lead a chaste and decent life"⁷ is certainly lost, but here is a case where an issue explicit in society must be explicitly handled.

The rendering of the Seventh Commandment's explanation is deprived of some of its original force when "any dishonest way" is substituted for "false ware or dealing". Luther's German pictures the actual bartering taking place to obtain another's possession.⁸ The Eighth Commandment is also submitted to the homogenization of language. The gutsy phrase forbidding a Christian to "speak evil" of the neighbor is simply omitted. The quite familiar "put the best construction on everything" is now substituted with the phrase "explain his actions in the kindest way".⁹ What Luther was suggesting in the German is not that we should attribute to the neighbor a quality which is not really there, but that we should look at the positive aspects of his actions and emphasize those. In the Ninth Commandment's explanation many of the original distinctive features are not carried across into English. "Pretending to have a right" to the neighbor's possessions replaces "a show of right". This latter

translation better parallels the German Schein des Rechts, which suggests that the person does indeed have a legal but not necessarily a moral right.¹⁰ The newer translation suggests that the claimant has explicitly broken the law by forging papers or the like. This thought is handled in the Seventh Commandment.

In the Tenth Commandment's explanation the German words abspannen, abdringen, abwendig machen, are simply translated "tempt or coax". Luther's German pictures the actual mental plotting. The newer translation makes the whole matter look too pleasant, as if it just was happening by chance. Felicitous is the omission of enticing away from the neighbor his cattle.¹¹

The conclusion to the commandments omits the phrase "not to do contrary to such commandments" in favor of the phrase "not disobey Him". Also "what He commands" replaces "commandments".¹² There is obviously no reason based on style. In fact for memorizing the new rendering is more difficult because it replaces a word with a phrase. The word "commandment" is used throughout this section, so it must be comprehensible. The use of the word "commandment" focuses the attention of the sinner on the particular moral infringement. Yes, God is offended in the breaking of each commandment; however, He is offended not directly but through the breaking of a particular commandment.

2.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

In the explanation of the Apostles' Creed there are a number of changes through substitution and elimination. In the First Article's explanation¹³ "all creatures" becomes "all that exists". The word "creature" puts the emphasis on its having been made and primarily refers to the animal kingdom. The substitution "all that exists" is linguistically more clumsy and introduces what might be for some a certain philosophical disposition. For some nothing exists except that which exists for the individual.¹⁴ Eliminated is Luther's enumeration of the parts of the body-soul life: "eyes, ears, and all members, reason and all senses". The replacement may be more efficient but the effervescence has gone out and we are left with the flat phrase "my body and soul with all their powers". It can hardly be said that Luther's original wording is unintelligible. Quite to the contrary! The new word "powers" may in effect be much more confusing and might even conjure images of some space war fantasy. Luther's listing of the parts that make up the body-soul life was not merely useless enumeration, but rather brought into focus the totality of human life as given by God. The word "powers" is a problem in translation and theology. It is clearly a paraphrase

or interpretation and not merely a translation. In what sense theologically, scientifically, or philosophically can the senses be described as "powers" of the body and soul? And in what sense are eyes, ears, and members "powers"? Also abridged is Luther's enumeration of what God gives to preserve human life. The phrase, "clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and child, fields, cattle", is transformed into "He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work and all I need from day to day". But what was the reason for such changes? Lost are the distinctions between hunger and thirst and between the equipping of the feet with shoes and the body with clothing. Any parent who has to put shoes on his child's feet with the cheapest shoes running at least \$20 a pair knows that a financial miracle is frequently required. Luther's phrase, "He daily and richly cares for the necessity and nourishment of this body and life" becomes simply "all that I need from day to day". The God who is extravagant towards us with His rich providence becomes merely the God who meets the budget. Lost in the shuffle is Luther's "body and life". This phrase is simply abbreviated "me". The personal pronoun "me" is certainly not equivalent with "body and life". Luther's "all danger" becomes "in time of danger". Certainly the substitute is no improvement for the child doomed to the task of memorization. The original suggests something concrete, while the substitute points to a fluid situation. The phrase "guards and protects" is now simply "guards". Luther's "guards and protects" has a certain militaristic flavor as the Christian is confronted by Satan.

Luther's "without any merit or worthiness" dissolves into "though I do not deserve it". The change is subtle, but theologically serious. The German Verdienst and the Latin meritis are justification language for the Lutheran Reformation. Both these words are used in Augustana IV, the article on justification.¹⁵ In both this explanation of the First Article and in Augustana IV, the words are used to describe the sinner's standing before God in the matter of justification. The rendering "though I do not deserve it" suggests that the individual may have tried to please God but failed. Sin is thus placed in the person's actions and not in his condition. Thus the rendering, "though I do not deserve it" is an inadequate reproduction of the Reformation anthropology which sees man in a rebellious condition before God.

The older phrase "without any merit or worthiness in me" must be compared with the newer "though I do not deserve it" to determine if this is a real improvement. The words "merit" and "worthiness" are both common in colloquial English. Every school pupil knows the system of merits and demerits. More significant is that the

distinctive Lutheran anthropology in which a man is in such a condition that he cannot and hence does not follow God's will is lost. The newer rendering fits more the Roman Catholic concept of sin according to which a person before he comes to faith is capable of pleasing God and even contributing to his salvation. The generally accepted Protestant concept of sin as something which is done and left undone fits comfortably into the words "though I do not deserve it".

The changes in the explanation of the Second Article are perhaps a bit more striking.¹⁶ In our circles the older rendering has become classical through repetition: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord." There is a certain cadence in this translation which gives the language a beauty all of its own, not unlike the King James Version. The older translation here was not however without fault. The word "begotten" failed to do justice to Luther's understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The word "born" would be preferable linguistically and theologically. Luther following both the theology of the New Testament and the early church saw the relationship between the Father and the Son as that of an eternal birth. Parallel to the birth of Jesus in time from the Virgin Mary is His eternal birth from the Father.¹⁷ Here the translators had an opportunity to make an improvement. The newer phrase, however, "true God, Son of the Father from eternity", is not only not an improvement but a deterioration. Luther's meaning in the original German was the doctrine that the Son coexisted with the Father in eternity and that this existence was to be understood in terms of an eternal birth. Within the Holy Trinity this is the mystery of mysteries. The question which must be faced is whether the proposed phrase, "true God, Son of the Father from eternity", carries Luther's meaning of the Son's eternal coexistence with the Father. The phrase "from eternity" is ambiguous and not entirely clear. The matter would have been clearer if Jesus were described as "the eternal Son of the Father". But what does the phrase "from eternity" mean? Does it mean from the center of eternity or from the edge of eternity where it meets time? The former is Nicene Christology and the latter Arian. The proposed rendering can also allow for the meaning that Christ was chosen to be the Son of the Father in eternity. This would allow for either adoptionism or Arianism. In this sense each Christian may be called "son of God from eternity". The phrase "eternal Son of the Father" would have been preferable. All doubt would be removed by simply translating Luther's phrase "born from the Father in eternity". Here is the picture of that eternal act by which the Father gives birth to the Son in such a way that both may be called God because they share in the same substance. The translation of

this phrase should be precise as it is the one, the only one in the Small Catechism, which specifically addresses our Lord's pre-temporal existence.

Inexplicable is the deletion of the little word "also" from the phrase "also true man". The German here is auch and the Latin idemque. The word accentuates that unlike other human beings Jesus is unique in being both God and man. The word "also" is a subtle defense against any Eutychianism, in modern or ancient form, which would suggest that Christ has one nature only. Luther in his Christology of the explanation of the Second Article certainly does not want to give a history of the Christological controversies of the first five centuries, but his use of language shows that he was totally committed to the ancient and orthodox Christology and wanted to make it part of the devotional and confessional life of the people.

The next section of the explanation deals with the work of Christ. Here there are some significant changes. The phrase "at a great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person" replaces "He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature." The word "saved", which generally translates the German retten is simply not found in the German text. Erworben and gewonnen, which the older translation adequately rendered as "purchased" and "won" are simply excluded. This is not a translation or even a paraphrase but a new theological construction.

The word "saved" is general enough to permit several concepts of the atonement. Luther's German at this point however is quite specific and points to the Anselmic view in which the purchase concept is most prominent. The words erlösen and erworben point to the concept of God's buying something. The Latin translation redemit means literally to "buy back" and should be rendered in this way instead of resorting to the cognate "redeem". In Luther's German the concept of the price actually paid is clear in that the purchase takes place because of the blood, sufferings, and death of Jesus. The use of the words "gold and silver" puts the emphasis on a transaction which is parallel to a financial transaction.

The newer translation offers the phrase, "He has freed me from sin, death and the power of the devil — not with silver or gold, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death." This rendering follows the Latin, but deviates from the German. But there seems no valid reason to follow the Latin and surrender the German, as the German is the language in which the Small Catechism was written and still breathes. The phrase, "He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil" can easily fit

into the context of either a liberation theology or Aulen's Christus Victor theory.¹⁸ I do not want to suggest that the Latin translation is inadequate or that its writers anticipated more modern views. The concept of redemption is found in the Latin quite clearly in the use of the word redemit, which should be translated not merely "redeem" but "buy back". Luther's German gives the strong trust to the Anselmic view, however.

Difficulties in the explanation of the Third Article are few.¹⁹ Vernunft previously translated with "reason" now comes across as "understanding". In the explanation of the First Article the word was simply left untranslated and was assumed under the general category of "powers", which was not, as mentioned a translation but a literary creation. The translators in eliminating the word "reason" have abused the inner linguistic unity of the catechism. Luther viewed the reason given in creation (First Article) as so perverted that it cannot without the help of the Holy Spirit (Third Article) accept what Jesus Christ has done for me (Second Article). Amazing is the retention of the words "enlightens" and "sanctifies". Certainly such terms do not fit the description of contemporary language. One cannot avoid the impression of literary arbitrariness in the translation.

3.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

In regard to the Lord's Prayer, the critique is essentially linguistic rather than theological. "Tenderly invites us" is replaced by "encourages".²⁰ The German here is locken. Lieben is translated as "loving" and no longer "dear". The reason for such changes is not obvious. In the famous triad "the world, the devil and flesh" in the Third Petition, "flesh" is transformed into "our sinful self".²¹ But is the phrase "flesh" so antiquated that it is without contemporary meaning? In common non-theological usage, "flesh" is understood as man's degenerative nature. "Flesh" is regularly used by Jesus in the Gospels to describe the unregenerate self and is used to describe those who are absorbed with sinful pursuits. The common usage bears thus the Biblical imprint. Luther seems to be aware that some might identify the "flesh" with the bodily or physical part of man, but overcomes this by speaking of "the will of the flesh". Such phrases as "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" and "the world, the devil, and the flesh" are so a part of the common religious language that no linguistic reductionism is required here for intelligibility. In the section on Baptism, the phrase "our sinful self" will be reintroduced not as a translation for "flesh" but for "the old Adam". The same English word should not be used to translate two different German words or phrases. For years the Small

Catechism has been a determinative factor in establishing language usage, but surrendering certain phrases which are now classical, the catechism loses its role as a linguistic and a theological standard.

In the Fourth Petition there is a subtle change with major theological implications. Luther's German was adequately translated by the older form: "God gives daily bread indeed without our prayer, also to the wicked".²²

The phrase "also to the wicked" now reads "to all people, though sinful". The German phrase is alle bösen Menschen. The German bösen would better be translated "evil" or "bad", because "sinful" translates sündhaftig. Luther's phrase makes a distinction between Christians who acknowledge God as the Giver and unbelievers who refuse to acknowledge God. They are described evil persons, etiam malis hominibus, as the Latin translates the German phrase. Luther makes the same distinction as Jesus does in saying that the rain and the sun come on both the good and the evil, the just and the unjust.²³ The translators for whatever reason deemphasize the distinction between believers and unbelievers and put all people in the category of sinful. One can only conjecture the reason for eliminating the distinction between believers and unbelievers.

Luther's enumeration of the things belonging to daily bread is revised, apparently for the sake of modernization. For example, "pious wife, pious children" become "a devoted family". But the newer translation leaves the question open of to whom they are devoted. The German word frumme and the English word "pious" speak specifically to the religious quality of the family. Even an unbeliever can have a devoted family. Added in this explanation is the phrase "an orderly community", but this approximates no phrase in Luther. The concept of "discipline" (Zucht) is however omitted.

Missing from the Fifth Petition's explanation is the phrase "for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them".²⁴ Throughout the catechism's new translation there is a tendency to weaken the concept of total depravity. The omission of this phrase only further tends to substantiate this hypothesis.

In the Sixth Petition "our sinful self" again replaces the more traditional word "flesh".²⁵ Strikingly modern is the first phrase of the Seventh Petition which speaks of the Lord's Prayer as an "inclusive prayer". A simple reference to "summary" would have been adequate and less clinical. I pity the poor children who must add to their theological baggage the phrase "inclusive prayer". The phrase "property and honor" is omitted after "every evil of body and

soul" without recognizable reason. Perhaps it was considered baggage left over from a capitalistic society not appropriate from a socialistic perspective. The new translation's description of death in the Seventh Petition does not match Luther's original wording. The phrase "and at our last hour would mercifully take us from the troubles of this world to Himself in heaven" is no match for "when our last hour comes, grant us a blessed end and by His grace take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven".²⁶ The new translation eliminates "blessed". "By His grace" becomes "mercifully" and this is neither linguistically or theologically quite accurate. The proposed phrase "troubles of this world" is prosaic and does not catch the picturesque language of Luther's "this vale of tears".

4.

BAPTISM

The sections on the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper raise certain difficulties. Lutheran theology on the sacraments attained their distinctive features in the polemic with the Reformed. Therefore any possible Reformed interpretation should be assiduously avoided. Such care however does not seem to have been exercised.

The well known phrase, "Baptism is not simple water only" is now changed so that the word "simple" is eliminated, perhaps on the grounds that the words "simple" and "only" are redundant and duplication serves no purpose.²⁷ But non-Lutheran Protestantism has continued to say that Baptism is simple water only. Luther's original rendition is a clear and sharp polemic against such a view. The new translation's phrase "but it is water used together with God's Word and by His command" is linguistically confusing and theologically inadequate. In both the German and the Latin "command" is mentioned before the "word". In the defense of the baptism of infants, the prime motive for Lutherans has been the divine command. Reversing "command" and "word" is indefensible. The familiar "it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word" is changed into "it is water used together with God's Word and by His command". One suspects that the translators want to understand the word "Word" in the hypostatic sense of John 1:1 as a reference to the Son of God, though it is clear that Luther refers it to a verbal command given by Jesus. This matter demands further discussion below. Equally disturbing is that the newer translation allows for a Reformed understanding of Baptism. In Reformed thought the use of the water may provide the opportunity for the working of the Holy Spirit as a separate and distinct act, but not necessarily connected with the Baptism itself.

Reformed theology insists that the Spirit or the blood of Christ saves from sin, but not Baptism itself.²⁸ The Reformed would have no difficulty in seeing Baptism as commanded by God not in the sense of providing salvation for the recipient, but as legally required by God. For the Reformed, Baptism belongs to the Law and not to the Gospel as it does in Lutheran theology. Luther's original German and the subsequent Latin translation were amply served by the older translation, "comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word". The German gefasset and the Latin inclusa has the same type of a flavor as the triad "in, with, and under". The meaning is that God's command is tied down to every drop of Baptismal water. The German verbunden and the Latin comprehensa suggest the indissoluble link between water and the word. God's word surrounds Baptism's water as the body of an expecting mother surrounds her child. The newer phrase, "water used together with God's Word and by His command", destroys the depth of Luther's thought. We are faced not with a paraphrase but a theological interpretation which could easily accommodate Reformed thinking.

As mentioned above the German Gottes Wort is rendered "God's Word" with the "w" capitalized. Personal pronouns referring to the Deity are consistently capitalized throughout the translation. The suggestion cannot be avoided that the translators are referring to the hypostatic Word, i.e., the Son of God, in a Johannine sense. Christ rather than a verbal word of God is seen as Baptism's power. No other conclusion seems possible since in the question immediately following the word "word" appears in lower case in the question "What is this word?" The translation here is a totally unacceptable editorializing.²⁹ For Luther, Matthew 28 was God's word.

The question introducing part two is changed from "What does Baptism give or profit" to "What does God give in Baptism?" The newer rendering is more than just another translation.³⁰ It is a theological readjustment. The newer rendering certainly fits Reformed thinking which sees God as the only Forgiver while denying that He works specifically through earthly means. The separation between the water and the word so that they become parallel actions, noted in the first section, is perpetuated in the second section. Here it is not only perpetuated but re-enforced because faith is directed to what God "has promised". Luther's thought was not that Baptism should evoke faith in God's general promises, but rather that faith should concentrate on God's activity through the word in the water. The older translation says Baptism "gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare". As Luther follows with a quotation from Mark 16, he is referring to the institution of Baptism as the promise which faith believes and not some other

word of God regardless of its inherent value. Conspicuously dropped is any reference to "words" which is originally used by Luther twice: "as the words and promise of God declare" and "What are such words and promises of God?". In these cases the translators were not able to editorialize these phrases to make them refer to the hypostatic Word, so it seems as if they simply eliminated them. There is a definite detectable tendency to move away from any thought that the Bible or its passages should be equated with the word of God, even though this was Luther's clear intention. This will be shown also in the section on the Lord's Supper. Luther wants the citation from Mark's Gospel to be understood as God's word. By omission this concept is ignored.

Luther chose to refer to those places where he cited Bible passages as the last chapters of Matthew and Mark. Now the children will have to keep the numbers 28 and 16 straight in their heads.

Part III in the new translation perpetuates the divorce between the water and the word already noted in the first two parts.³¹ The question about the water's ability to perform great things remains the same. The answer is no longer that it is "the word of God which is in and with the water and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water", but "God's Word with the water and our trust in this Word". The English phrase "with the water" simply does not capture either the German mit und bei dem Wasser or the Latin juxta et cum aqua. With definite purpose Luther used two prepositions instead of one to tie word and water together. The removal of the word "faith" in favor of "trust" is inexplicable. The word "faith" is one of the rallying cries of the Lutheran Reformation and all should be familiar with it. The word "trust" dissolves the inner connection between Baptism and faith. Putting "Word" in capital letters suggests that trust is directed to Christ, while Luther's intention is that faith should be directed to Christ but through the word in the water of Baptism.

Other changes in this section also do not contribute to the best possible understanding of Baptism. The phrase "Water by itself is only water" hardly does justice to the phrase "For without the word of God the water is simple water and no Baptism". Pedagogically the new translation is a disaster. Let's first consider how Luther handled the situation. In answering the question "How can water do such great things?" there are two parts, a negative and a positive: (1) water by itself accomplishes nothing; (2) with the word of God it, i.e., water, becomes a Baptism. Basically it is a repetition of Part I which defines Baptism as water connected with God's word. While Luther repeated the word "Baptism" twice in Part III, the translators have omitted it entirely. While there is

some type of definition here, it is never stated what exactly is being defined. Luther repeated the word "Baptism" twice for sound pedagogical reasons. Since there is no explicit reference to Baptism in this section, the little pronoun "it" in the phrase "it is a life-giving water" stands awkwardly without a clear referent. The definition amounts to saying that water plus the word of God is a life-giving water. But this is tautology. Obviously God's word plus water gives life. Clarity could have been retained by leaving the word "Baptism" in its proper place and then we would have been dealing clearly with a definition.

The phrase "life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit" replaces "a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost". Again the translators have offered a paraphrase with perhaps a different theological direction. "Life-giving water" simply does not handle Luther's ein genadenreich Wasser, a water rich in grace. Lost is Luther's idea that God's gift of salvation to the individual is encapsulated in Baptism's water. Luther's concrete thought is dissolved by being transformed into the dynamic. The phrase "a life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit" not only does not reflect Luther's thought, but it presents some theological difficulties. If it is already a life-giving water, it does not need or require a special infusion of grace. Neither would it require an additional act by the Holy Spirit. The new translation moves away from the idea that the Holy Spirit is actually working through the Baptism because of the word. At best the phrase is confusing. Luther put the two phrases in apposition to each other so that one explained the other. The water of life which is rich in grace is the same as the regenerating bath of the Holy Spirit. Luther was directing the learner's attention to his doctrine of Baptismal regeneration. Because the new translation is vague, the doctrine of Baptismal regeneration is vague. The emphasis is placed on Jesus, the hypostatic Word, and the Holy Spirit as the regenerating agents and not Baptism. This also falls comfortably into Reformed thinking. In the citation from Titus 3 the phrase "washing of regeneration" is retained while in the explanation it was dropped. The translators must have felt that the children could still handle the word "regeneration". But since the word Baptism is never mentioned in this entire section, Part III, it is quite possible to follow the Reformed thinking that the topic at hand is simply regeneration and conversion and not Baptismal regeneration.

The question initiating Part IV is changed from "What does such baptizing with water signify?" to "What does Baptism mean for daily living?"³² The omission of the word "water" in the question makes the answer meaningless. The center of the answer is that in Baptism something is drowned.

But without the mention of “water”, the drowning activity loses its punch. Luther as a superb pedagogue used “water” to display graphically the drowning. The word “Baptism” by itself does not conjure up a Baptismal font, either small or large, in which anyone recently has been drowned. In this section Luther’s “Old Adam” is replaced by the phrase “sinful self”. One would like to quip the “Old Adam” has drowned and the “sinful self” has been resurrected by the translators.

5.

THE LORD’S SUPPER

There is no shortage of difficulties in this section. Completely unnecessary and theologically shocking and unacceptable is the change of the designation of this sacrament from the Sacrament of the Altar to the Holy Communion.³³ Holy Communion is simply not good Lutheran usage and has crept into Lutheranism from Protestantism through the door opened to Anglicanism. The phrase “Holy Communion” is simply not used in the Lutheran Confessions. In the Small Catechism in both the German and the Latin it is called the Sacrament of the Altar. Other phrases used in the confessions include Heilige Abendmahl, Coena Sacra, the Holy Supper, Coena Domini, the Lord’s Supper, and Missa, The Mass.

The phrase “Holy Communion” takes the attention away from the altar and places it on the individual recipients who are gathered as a group. The late German Lutheran theologian Werner Elert has done more than perhaps anyone else in recent times to alert us to the dangers of understanding this sacrament as a communal meal among Christians instead of a participating in Christ’s body and blood.³⁴ The Protestant influence always wants to take Christ away from the bread and the altar and wants to put it subjectively into the hearts of people. The phrase “Holy Communion” now regretfully serves Protestant but no Lutheran purposes. In the previous section on Baptism, the translators removed the word “Baptism” twice, both in significant places. Now they have made a substitution for the name of the other sacrament and have even repeated it in the answer, though Luther did not repeat the phrase.

The phrase “Sacrament of the Altar” has an objectivity lacking in the phrase “Holy Communion”. “Holy Communion” is something we do. The “Sacrament of the Altar” is something which God does. He is the One sacrificed and from that altar now gives us His body and blood. This Sacrament is not our celebration, but God Himself is the Host and the Food.

In the first edition of the new translation the

word “true” before the words “body and blood” were omitted. The matter was brought up before a Missouri Synod convention and it was restored in later editions of the translation. There is little resemblance between the 1962 and the 1968 versions, but both are unacceptable from a Lutheran perspective.³⁵ The word “true” was a vital part of the Lutheran heritage and understanding of this sacrament, especially in confrontation with the Reformed, who at times were willing to speak of the elements being symbolical body and blood. The final reading “Holy Communion is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” would be acceptable within certain Reformed churches, as would be the concluding phrase “with bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us to eat and drink”. Luther’s unter, “under” is replaced with a “with”.³⁶ Though the change may at first glance seem insignificant, there is a history here that cannot be ignored.

In 1536 Luther and Bucer, a theologian who leaned heavily in the direction of the Reformed, committed themselves to the Wittenberg Concord. The document spoke of Christ’s body being “with the bread”,³⁷ which was later understood by the Reformed that Christ’s body was present spiritually along with the bread. The document was ambiguous on this crucial point of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper and was never considered as one of the significant confessions of authentic Lutheranism. With this history the word “with” should have never been substituted for the word “under”. The statement as it stands is acceptable according to Calvinistic understandings.

Any incipient Calvinism that was suspected in the first part becomes only more evident in the second part.³⁸ The original question of Luther “What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?” is changed to “What benefits do we receive from this sacrament?” Please note that the word “sacrament” which was eliminated from the question of part one is introduced here. Luther’s German and the older translation was not marked by such inconsistency.

One of the distinctive marks of the Lutheran position on the Lord’s Supper is the insistence that who eat and drink receive the Lord’s body and blood. This is called the manducatio malorum. Luther’s original question focuses the attention on the actual eating and drinking of the body and blood. Apart from this eating there is no benefit. In the new translation the benefits are sundered from the eating and drinking.

The question introducing the third section now hangs suspended in mid air.³⁹ “How can eating and drinking do all this?” has no previous referent, because the reference to eating and drinking has been removed from the question

introducing part two. Why ask about the saving efficacy of eating and drinking in the third question now that the question about the benefit of eating and drinking has been removed. The new translation removes from Luther's Catechism the very mortar which holds it together. The question of the third part is itself unacceptable. Luther's original question is "How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?" and not "How can eating and drinking do all this?"

The German leiblich Essen and more so the Latin corporalis manducatio, i.e., the bodily eating, are magnificently anti-Calvinistic. The Reformed have always been willing to assert a spiritual eating and drinking, but not a corporal or bodily eating.⁴⁰ The phrase as it stands in the new translation is clearly acceptable to the Reformed. The question introducing the concluding section is clearly a paraphrase. The older translation "Who then receives such Sacrament worthily?" more properly reflects the original than does the newer translation's "When is a person rightly prepared to receive this sacrament?"⁴¹ The original definitely suggests that some people, for whatever reason, are simply not worthy to receive the Sacrament. The newer translation removes this distinction and merely suggests that for some the time may not be appropos. The answer in the new translation does not respond to Luther's original question about who may receive the Sacrament. The question of time proposed in the new translation's use of the word "when" is simply ignored in the answer. In discussing fasting and outward bodily preparation and training the new translation only says that it "serve(s) a good purpose". The word "outward" is omitted. Therefore the option of whether a real spiritual benefit is derived from fasting is left open.

6.

THE OFFICE OF THE KEYS AND CONFESSION

One very welcome addition to the new translation is Luther's section on Confession which was replaced by Justus Jonas's section on "The Office of the Keys".⁴² The title to Luther's section on Confession is taken from the Latin De Confessione and not the German "How the simple people should be taught to confess their sins". Regardless of the desire to maintain authenticity, here is one place where Luther's original wording can be happily surrendered as being potentially insulting. Debatable is whether the Jonas section on "The Office of the Keys" should have been retained at all. What might be disturbing is that the section dealing with absolution and excommunication in Justus Jonas's section is, however,

eliminated. Absolution is handled, however, in Luther's section on Confession, but excommunication is not. That is a serious omission in the new catechism.

In Luther's Catechism the section on Confession was placed between Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar and not after the Sacrament of the Altar.⁴³ Confession and absolution were sometimes considered as a separate sacrament or as an extension of Baptism in the life of the Christian. It was also considered preparatory to the reception of the Lord's Supper. It should be returned to its proper place.

In the section on what sins are to be confessed there is a subtle switch from concern with one's station to one's relationships. The concrete is replaced with the active relationship. The original of Luther concentrated on the vocation in life as a God-given gift and responsibility. The new translation is more utilitarian and concentrates on whether something works.

III.

Summary Critique

The Small Catechism is both a confessional and pedagogical document and therefore presents innumerable problems in translating. It must present the Lutheran doctrine in a way that children, even those without exceptional intellectual gifts, can comprehend it. But in both these points, confessional and pedagogical, the new translation is disappointing. The theology is unacceptable at several crucial points.

1. The translators have a prejudice against understanding the phrase "word of God" as any reference to the Scriptures and frequently apply it to the hypostatic Word, i.e., the Son of God. This is a case of bad theology and deceptive translation.

2. The section on the Trinity, i.e., the Apostles' Creed, does not do justice to Nicene Christology and is extremely weak on the doctrine of the atonement.

3. The sections on Baptism and the Lord's Supper could easily be understood from a Reformed perspective. In fact, the unique Lutheran understanding is lost.