
Luther's Catechisms-450 Years

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

Concordia Theological Seminary

Fort Wayne, Indiana

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Fort Wayne, Indiana

The Large Catechism: A Pastoral Tool

by James L. Schaaf

In 1979 we observe the 450th anniversary of the publication of a most helpful book, and yet one that is little known by our pastors — the Large Catechism of Martin Luther. Almost everyone, clergy and laity alike, knows its companion volume, the Small Catechism, and for generations catechumens in the Lutheran Church have been *instructed from its pages and required to commit its contents to memory, and still are wherever catechetical instruction continues to follow the tried and true traditional pattern.* The Large Catechism, however, has been relegated to the dusty bookshelves of historical and confessional literature where it is seldom noticed and even more seldom taken down and read. In this 450th anniversary year we would do well to take a new look at Luther's Large Catechism and see it for what it was intended to be and still can be today — a pastoral tool.

That's what I'd like to talk about — The Large Catechism: A Pastoral Tool. It was produced out of pastoral concern, it is filled with pastoral contents, and it is to be used with pastoral care.

I.

Martin Luther's pastoral concern is evident in many of his writings, not only in the Large Catechism, of course. One does not have to be especially skilled at reading between the lines to see that Luther had a deep love for people and a desire to seek their spiritual welfare. His concern for ordinary parishoners is clear on virtually every page of the many works that came from his pen. *Although he never occupied a pastoral office, Luther the university professor was filled with a pastor's concern for those who were serving as pastors and for the souls in their charge.* The Large Catechism grew out of that pastoral concern.

Abortive attempts to produce something similar to what finally appeared as the Large and Small Catechisms had been made several times during the years preceding 1528. Melanchthon, Jonas, Agricola, and even Luther himself had had the intention to produce a book of instruction for the edification of people in those territories where the evangelical understanding of the faith was

triumphing over the old order. (BK, xxviii) None of these good intentions ever began to bear fruit, however, until Elector John ordered a visitation of the churches and schools in his domain. Teams of lawyers and theologians were commissioned to travel throughout Electoral Saxony, inspecting the churches and inquiring of the pastors how they were teaching the evangelical doctrine. Luther himself took part in some of these visitations. He reports in the preface to his Small Catechism about the sorry state of Christian training among many of the clergy and laity he saw:

The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty. (BC, 338)

Out of the experiences of these visitations grew the Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony, a document written by Melancthon with an introduction by Luther, and issued by the authorities as a sort of checklist of the things visitors should ensure were being observed in the churches. (WA 26, 195-240) Here the following instructions are given concerning the time and content of religious instruction:

On festival days there should be preaching at matins and vespers, on the gospel at matins. Since the servants and young people come to church in the afternoon we recommend that on Sunday afternoons there be constant repetition, through preaching and exposition, of the Ten Commandments, the articles of the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

The Ten Commandments are to be used so that the people be exhorted to fear God.

The Lord's Prayer is to be used so that the people know what to pray.

The articles of the Creed are to be proclaimed and the people taught

carefully these three most important articles comprehended in the Creed: creation, redemption, and sanctification . . .

If on Sundays we preach on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creed, one after the other, we should also diligently preach about marriage and the sacraments of baptism and the altar.

In such preaching we should spell out, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the articles of the Creed, for the sake of the children and other simple unschooled folk. (LW 40, 308)

But even before this official injunction to deliver sermons on the three traditional components of Christian instruction, it had been the practice in Wittenberg to preach series of sermons on these subjects, and Luther had frequently done so since 1516. (Otto Albrecht, Luthers Katechismen,¹) The immediate forerunner of the Large Catechism, however, is three series of sermons that he preached in the city Church in Wittenberg during 1528, in the absence of the regular pastor Johannes Bugenhagen. Three times, between May 18 and 30, between September 14 and 25, and again between November 30 and December 19, Luther preached on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper to the people of Wittenberg. (WA 30, I, 2-122)

From these sermons, almost verbatim, comes the text of the Large Catechism: The introduction chiefly from the first series; the Ten Commandments, from the second; and the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and sacraments, from the third. (WA 30, I, 480) One might thus say that the Large Catechism was not written in Luther's study or in the library, but was produced in the pulpit by a pastor concerned for his people.

II.

And not only was this Large Catechism produced out of pastoral concern; it is also filled with pastoral contents. The familiar five chief parts, just as in the Small Catechism, are the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. However, these were not the traditional contents of pre-Reformation catechetical instruction. There had been numerous catechetical manuals produced before Luther set his hand to the task, and, although their contents had varied greatly, the most common practice was to include the Ten Commandments, the Ave Maria, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. (E. G. Schwiebert, Luther and his Times, 640)

The word "Catechism", incidently, was never used in the 16th century in its modern meaning of a book in which Christian teaching is explained, primarily in question and answer form. (WA 30, I, 448-49) Since the end of the Middle Ages Catechism meant, as Gustav Kawerau explains,

On the one hand . . . a definite body of material . . . the essentials of which were the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer; on the other, the word is used as describing the presentation of materials by means of oral instruction to those who are beginners in Christianity. (WA 30, I, 449; cf. Schwiebert, 641)

Luther, used this Greek word, *κατεχίσμος*, and translates it with the German word "Kinderlehre," that is, instruction for children. (WA 30, I, 128; BC, 362) By this he indicates that the reason he has produced this work is a pedagogical one. It is to be used in instructing immature Christians in the essentials of faith.

The medieval practice of catechetical instruction had been associated with the practice of penance. The penitent would be expected to recount his sins to the priest and display a knowledge of the rudiments of the faith; therefore, instruction in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer was essential.

Yet there is a significant difference between the contents of Luther's Catechism and those of the traditional penitential manuals which preceded it. Not only is Luther's work purged of non-evangelical elements, such as the Ave Maria, but to it is also added the treatment of the two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, subjects that in the Middle Ages were not generally considered necessary for the laity to know. All that a penitent might be expected to do would be to name the seven sacraments. (WA 30, I, 444-45) Some of the penitential manuals did indeed contain sections dealing with the sacraments, but these parts seem to have been so neglected in instructing the laity that Luther can say "in the past nothing was taught about them." (BC, 436)

Not so with Luther's Catechism. It might appear, judging from the number of pages devoted to expounding each section, that the subjects of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are far less important than something like the Ten Commandments, the exposition of which occupies half the book, or even the Lord's Prayer, which receives half again as much attention as either the Lord's Supper or Baptism. Such is hardly the case, however, the instruction in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer is rather designed to prepare believers to receive the sacrament of the altar and to present

their children for baptism. In his shorter preface to the Large Catechism, taken from his first catechetical sermon, Luther says:

This sermon has been undertaken for the instruction of children and uneducated people . . . Its contents represent the minimum of knowledge required of a Christian. Whoever does not possess it should not be reckoned among Christians nor admitted to a sacrament, just as a craftsman who does not know the rules and practices of his craft is rejected and considered incompetent.

. . . As for the common people, however, we should be satisfied if they learned the three parts which have been the heritage of Christendom from ancient times, though they were rarely taught and treated correctly, so that all who wish to be Christians in fact as well as in name, both young and old, may be well-trained in them and familiar with them.

. . . When these three parts are understood, we ought also to know what to say about the sacraments which Christ himself instituted, Baptism and the holy Body and Blood of Christ . . . (BC, 362-640)

And, when he has treated the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, Luther continues:

We have now finished with the three chief parts of our common Christian teaching. It remains for us to speak of our two sacraments, instituted by Christ. Every Christian ought to have at least some brief, elementary instruction in them because without these no one can be a Christian. . . . (BC, 436)

In introducing the final section, on the Lord's Supper, he says:

As we treated Holy Baptism . . . so we must deal with the second sacrament in the same way, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All these are established from the words by which Christ instituted it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should be familiar with them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come. (BC, 447)

That is the function of the pastoral contents of the Large Catechism. It is designed to assist

pastors in their duty of preparing people to come responsibly to the sacrament. Time fails to point out the many passages in it which express the deep concern of its author for the spiritual well being of ordinary Christians. There are passages of instruction, of admonition, of edification, of comfort, worthy to be read and read again. For example, Luther writes about Baptism:

In Baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings — victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of Baptism are so boundless that if timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true. Suppose there were a physician who had such skill that people would not die, or even though they died would afterward live forever. Just think how the world would snow and rain money upon him! Because of the pressing crowd of rich men no one else could get near him. Now, here in Baptism there is brought free to every man's door just such a priceless medicine which swallows up death and saves the lives of all men.

To appreciate and use Baptism aright, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort, "But I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body." (BC, 442)

The Christian life is not an easy one, and it is just because of this that the Lord's Supper has been given. Another pastoral word in the Large Catechism relates to this:

. . . While it is true that through Baptism we are first born anew, our human flesh and blood have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint, at times even stumble. The Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger. For the new life should be one that continually develops and progresses. Meanwhile it must suffer much opposition. The devil is a furious enemy; when he sees that we resist him and attack the old man, and when he cannot rout us by force, he sneaks and skulks about everywhere, trying all kinds of tricks, and does not stop until he has

finally worn us out so that we either renounce our faith or yield hand and foot and become indifferent or impatient. For such times, when our heart feels too sorely pressed, this comfort of the Lord's Supper is given to bring us new strength and refreshment. (BC, 449)

Words of comfort and encouragement meet us also when we look at Luther's explanation of the traditional three parts of the catechism. For example, can there be found a better explanation of Luther's concept of the distinction between Law and Gospel than in the conclusion to this section on the Creed:

Here in the Creed you have the entire essence of God, his will, and his work exquisitely depicted in very short but rich words. In them consists all our wisdom, which surpasses all the wisdom, understanding, and reason of men. Although the whole world has sought painstakingly to learn what God is and what he thinks and does, yet it has never succeeded in the least. But here you have everything in richest measure. In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Jesus Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.

. . . Now you see that the Creed is a very different teaching from the Ten Commandments. The latter teach us what we ought to do; the Creed tells what God does for us and gives to us. The Ten Commandments, moreover, are inscribed in the hearts of all men. No human wisdom can comprehend the Creed; Commandments do not by themselves make us Christians, for God's wrath and displeasure still remain on us because we cannot fulfill his demands. But the Creed brings pure grace and makes us upright and pleasing to God. Through this knowledge we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see that God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and his power, to

help us keep the Ten Commandments; the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts. (BC, 419-20)

Words like these are typical of the pastoral contents of this work which was produced out of Luther's pastoral concern. The same contents may still profitably be used by pastors today, 450 years after its writing, in dealing with the souls in their care.

III.

For the Large Catechism is intended to be used with pastoral care. I do not mean that pastors must exercise caution in how they use it, but rather that it is still a useful tool today in the practice of pastoral care. An essential part of what we often call Seelsorge is education in Christian truth. For this purpose pastors today may find Luther's Large Catechism just as useful as did their forerunners four and a half centuries ago.

Perhaps the need of present-day pastors for something like this Catechism is not as great as it was in 1529. The situation then among the clergy in Electoral Saxony was appalling. The visitors reported that many of the clergy, while calling themselves Lutheran, were ignorant about Luther's teaching and could not, in fact, even repeat the Ten Commandments or the Lord's Prayer, let alone demonstrate any knowledge of the Bible. (Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, 618) Only 94 out of 154 pastors were regarded as satisfactory in 1529, and it seems that their examination was not especially strict. (Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, 612) Certainly pastors must have welcomed the appearance of this work and we can well imagine that it found frequent use by those who felt unqualified to convey the new evangelical teaching to their congregations, perhaps even being read word for word in parishes as were Luther's postils or sermon collections which were also appearing at the time.

Compared with the situation in 1529, however, today's pastor is surfeited with literature on educational techniques, catechetical methods, helps for teaching, and all sorts of books designed for imparting instruction in the Christian faith. This wealth of modern materials, however, may lead us to overlook the riches of the past. Perhaps classifying the Large Catechism with the symbolical writings in the Book of Concord has contributed to its disuse as an educational tool. We must remember that it was not written to be a confession of faith. It originated as a sermon, and it may still find its best use as an exposition of the faith, useful in preaching and teaching and in a pastor's dealing with the needs of the souls in his charge.

Can the 450th anniversary of the Catechism be the occasion for a revival of catechetical exposition? Would there be value in a series of sermons on the catechism, that is, on the essentials of the Christian faith? Would it be helpful as David Scaer suggests in the questions appended to his Getting into The Story of Concord, to read a section of the Large Catechism as the sermon some Sunday? (p. 99) Could a study group benefit from reading and discussing its contents over a period of several weeks? Would it have value for use in membership instruction classes? Might it be used as congregational devotional reading? Are there other possibilities for use of this pastoral tool that come to mind as we contemplate the observance of its 450th anniversary?

Most of you in this audience are pastors or are preparing to be pastors. How have you used the Large Catechism in your ministry? Or what possibilities do you see for putting it to use in your care of souls, perhaps especially in this anniversary year? Our discussion period will give us an opportunity to share ideas on this subject. Together we may be able to discover more beneficiary ways to use this work in our pastoral care.

Whatever else we may do with it, however, I suggest that the most benefit will come from the Large Catechism when it is used as it was intended, simply read and studied anew by each pastor. Those who undertake to thumb its pages for the first time, or for the hundredth, will find themselves edified by its contents, just as I was in preparing these remarks.

But don't take my word for the benefit to be gained from studying the Catechism. Rather take Luther's words:

Many (pastors) regard the Catechism as a simple, silly teaching which they can absorb and master at one reading. After reading it once they toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again . . .

As for myself, let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher — yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning, and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly . . .

Therefore, I once again implore all

Christians, especially pastors and preachers, not to try to be doctors prematurely and to imagine that they know everything. Vain imaginations, like new cloth, suffer shrinkage! Let all Christians exercise themselves in the Catechism daily, and constantly put it into practice, guarding themselves with the greatest care and diligence against the poisonous infection of such security or vanity. Let them continue to read and teach, to learn and meditate and ponder. Let them never stop until they have proved by experience that they have taught the devil to death and have become wiser than God himself and all his saints.

If they show such diligence, then I promise them — and their experience will bear me out — that they will gain much fruit and God will make excellent men of them. Then in due time they themselves will make the noble confession that the longer they work with the Catechism, the less they know of it and the more they have to learn. Only then, hungry and thirsty, will they truly relish what now they cannot bear to smell because they are so bloated and surfeited. To this end may God grant his grace! Amen. (BC, 359-61)

**The Large Catechism:
A Pastoral Tool**

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(Summary of a paper read at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, January 4, 1979)

Because Martin Luther's Large Catechism has often been dealt with as primarily a confessional writing of the Lutheran Church, its original intention may have been neglected. In this 450th anniversary year it is appropriate for us to see it for what it was intended to be and still can be — a pastoral tool.

I. The Large Catechism was produced out of pastoral concern. It was the need for helps by pastors in Electoral Saxony (uncovered in the Visitations) that led Luther to undertake the writing of the Large Catechism. Pastors were required to undertake instruction in the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer and many of them were ill-prepared to do so. The Large Catechism was a reworking of the catechetical sermons Luther preached in 1528 on these subjects, plus Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It was produced in the pulpit, one might say, by a pastor concerned for his people.

II. The Large Catechism is filled with pastoral contents. Pre-Reformation catechetical instruction was associated with the practice of penance and numerous manuals had been produced to assist confessors in their task. Luther's work differs from the earlier ones in that it includes sections on Baptism and the Lord's Supper, because he sees the goal of instruction as preparing Christians to come responsibly to the sacrament. The Large Catechism's contents speak pointedly to the spiritual needs of believers, containing passages of instruction, admonition, edification, and comfort, worthy of being read and re-read.

III. The Large Catechism is to be used with pastoral care. An essential part of pastoral care is education, and the Large Catechism may be just as useful for contemporary pastors in their educational ministry as it was to their forebears 450 years ago. Because of the wealth of modern instructional materials we may overlook the riches of the past. The Large Catechism, which originated as a sermon, may still find its best use as an exposition of the faith. But the greatest benefits will come from it when it is used as it was intended, simply read and studied anew by each pastor. Then, as Luther himself testifies, those who do "will gain much fruit and God will make excellent men of them. To this end may God grant his grace!"