
Luther's Catechisms-450 Years

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

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Forerunners of the Catechism:

A View of Catechetical Instruction at the Dawn of the Reformation

by N. S. Tjernagel

Fifty years ago our fathers were engaged in observing the 400th anniversary of Luther's Catechism. There were public celebrations and numerous books, articles, and other printed tributes to Luther's incomparable gift to the church, the Large and the Small Catechisms. Among those who honored Luther and the Catechisms a half a century ago, the literary legacy of one man stands out. His preeminence places him in a role so large that the rest of the commentators in the anniversary celebrations seem quite lost in his shadow. We refer, of course, to Dr. J. M. Reu of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. His two books, Catechetics¹ and Dr. Martin Luther's Catechism² are a classic exposition standing in the tradition of the theological excellence of Walther's Law and Gospel,³ Schmauk's Confessional Principle,⁴ and Krauth's Conservative Reformation.

As Lutherans we are well schooled in the theology of the Lutheran Reformation. We are appreciative of Luther's creative synthesis of apostolic theology and his clear and cogent exposition of the central doctrines of Holy

Scripture. We may be less than fully cognizant of the revolution, both in educational practice and theological understanding, that took place when Luther asked the question "What Does This Mean?" The question recurs in the Catechism twenty-three times, and the same question, adapted to instruction in the Sacraments, occurs sixteen times. In early times the church had been content with the ideal that Christians, trained only in rote memorization, should know the Creed and the Lord's Prayer from memory. Questions were rarely asked as to what these verbal formulations meant.

The ancient church, to be sure, had the advantage of hearing the exposition of Scripture from the Apostles themselves, and later from the second generation of churchmen who followed them. Candidates for Baptism were normally instructed prior to their reception of the Sacrament. Formal training in the truths of Scripture thereafter were generally limited to the little that could be gleaned from simple homilies.

It is generally conceded that the nature and

character of the Medieval church was not fully realized until the reign of Pope Gregory the Great, whose pontificate extended from 590-604. Regarded as the last of the traditional Doctors of the Church, this man, probably the greatest administrator the church has ever had, was indeed the true father of the Medieval papacy. His support of monasticism and his activity as a missionary pope are well known. His Liber Regulae Pastoralis, 591, translated by King Alfred of England, provided directives for the pastoral office of bishops. It became the text book of the Medieval episcopate for the next thousand years. Though Gregory was a creditable theologian, as is attested by his homilies, letters, and other writings, he was prepared to accommodate himself to the credulity of his age in developing and fostering the doctrine of purgatory and the idea that the pope is the spiritual father of all Christians, and hence the supreme authority in the church. What may sadden us most of all was that he gave up on any prospect for the biblical indoctrination of the primitive and illiterate people of the church, and advocated a veneration of true relics and recommended a religious life based on the pious imitation of the lives of saints and martyrs.

What evolved from this is most important because we are confronted by the fact that the real bible of Gregory's people came to be the legends and histories of the saints. The teaching of the truths of Scripture and even the reading of Bible history was largely ignored. Gregory was content that the people live under the guidance of the example of the saints and that they found a satisfactory worship form in the veneration of saints and relics. Any failing in their lives, any imperfection in their godliness would ultimately be made good in purgatory.

The result of all this was that people in the Middle Ages were nurtured by a hagiographic and devotional literature, rather than by instruction in biblical fundamentals. Therefore, as we shall see, the church felt no real need to instruct its people on the basis of the Bible. It was content that the people based their hope of salvation on lives modelled after the examples of pious saints.

Further, we should remember, the whole character of the Medieval church, its worship and life, was based on the mystery of the Eucharist. The Mass was the sacrifice of Christ in behalf of the present participants. No need to understand the theology of the Mass. A sense of magic and the expectation of benefits to be received ex opere operato was the pervading attitude. To be sure, something was expected of the Christian individual. He must confess his sins before a priest at least once a year. The priest thus became mediator, the dispenser of absolution and the promise of eternal salvation. Confession con-

sisted in the enumeration of sins committed. This was followed by receipt of absolution. No understanding of the basis for the forgiveness of sins was necessary. There was no need to complicate religious life by a study of Scripture. It was enough that the Mass provided a sacrifice and that the priest assured the sinner of salvation. When that was done, the Medieval Christian considered himself home free.

Ideally, as we have remarked, the Christian ought to have memorized the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and possibly even the Ten Commandments. No need to understand them or do anything about them. Therefore it will be seen that it must be difficult to establish any genuine forerunners of Luther's Catechism. That book was to have the objective of instruction, it was designed to help the catechumen understand what Scripture teaches. The devotional manuals and the worship forms of the Medieval world were mere exercises in piety. They did not constitute religious instruction.

Yet, it must be conceded that, given its theological presuppositions, the church, on the record at least, did make formal provision for the young. The problem was that these provisions were not effectively carried out. In Article XV, paragraph 41 of the Apology, "Of Human Traditions in the Church," Melancthon makes the comment that, "with the adversaries there is no catechization of children whatever, concerning which even the canon gives commands." Dr. Reu has shown the nature of those canonical provisions. We summarize his findings as follows:⁶

1. Parental responsibility for the training of children in religion was the presupposition of canon law.
2. Parts of the catechism were to be read regularly in the churches.⁷
3. Priests were to use the confessional as a means for determining whether parents were doing their duty in teaching their children.⁸
4. A catechetical literature was in existence.
5. There were some schools where religion was taught.

If the Medieval religious system, as it developed, did not provide effective means for the training of parish priests, it is not surprising that, as Melancthon complained, the canons of the church regarding its responsibility for the training of children was more honored in the breach than in its effective fulfillment.

After a careful study of religious knowledge in

Saxony before the Reformation Luther said, in 1531 that: "No one knew what was the Gospel, what Christ, Baptism, Confession, Sacrament; what were good works, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer; what was praying, what suffering, what comfort; what government, matrimony, parents, children, lords, servants, lady, maid; what was devil, angel, world, life, death, sin; what was righteousness, what forgiveness of sins, what God, bishop, clergy, church; what was Christian and what the Christian cross. In a word, we knew nothing of what a Christian ought to know."⁹ Luther was doubtlessly exaggerating, but Graebner observes that "Erasmus and the authors of Letters of Obscure Men drew an even more vivid picture of ignorance in that age." This appalling lack of religious knowledge notwithstanding, however, the church did exist. Children were baptized. Sponsors promised to teach the Christian faith to their God-children if parents died. Some bishops urged parish priests to attend to the Christian instruction of the young. Some priests tried to do so. Councils of the church had made this duty obligatory.

Reu quotes a sermon of Berthold of Ratisbon (d. 1272) who said: "When the child is seven years old his sponsor shall teach them the Creed and the Lord's Prayer: that is their duty. They are his spiritual parents. They shall say to the parents: 'Friends, you must teach my God-child the Lord's Prayer and the Creed; else he shall come to me and I will teach him. And if he learns the Ave Maria so much the better."¹⁰ There are recorded instances where neglect of this duty was referred to in enumerations of sins pleaded in the confessional.

Perhaps we may best observe the ideal of Medieval religious instruction by calling attention to typical examples of teaching materials in circulation since apostolic times. G. H. Gerberding, a study of catechetical instruction in the Middle Ages, has called attention to 23 extant catechetical sermons produced by Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), Tertullian (d. 220) wrote an explanation of the Lord's Prayer, and Rufinus (d. 410) an explanation of the Apostles' Creed.¹¹

The renowned Alcuin of York (735-804), a central figure in the Carolingian Renaissance, came to Europe to serve as religious and educational advisor to Charlemagne. He wrote an explanation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer and prepared a manual of instruction for adult candidates for Baptism.

Four early instructional manuals have an unusual interest because they appeared in the vernacular German. The first of these was produced in 720 by an anonymous monk of St. Gall. It included expositions of the Apostles'

Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Another of these manuals was written by a nameless author at the monastery at Weisenburg. Students have called it the Weisenburg Catechism even though the word Catechism is an anachronism when applied to that time. Reu describes its contents under the following divisions:

1. The Lord's Prayer in German with a brief exposition based on Tertullian and Cyprian, later appropriated by Luther.
2. An enumeration of the mortal sins based on Gal. 5, 19-21, in Latin and German.
3. The Apostolic Creed in Latin and German.
4. The Athanasian Creed in Latin and German.
5. The Gloria in Excelsis.¹²

The Freising explanation of the Lord's Prayer appeared in 802. Notker of St. Gall (950-1022) also produced a German manual. It included an Explanation of the Lord's Prayer and the two Creeds. A little later in the 11th century another monk of St. Gall wrote a manual of instruction explaining the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, with the addition of the Song of Zacharias and the Magnificat. A contemporary author, Bruno, Bishop of Wurzburg, wrote what may be the first instruction in the form of questions and answers. It treated the Creed and Lord's Prayer.

In the centuries we have reviewed, from the post-apostolic period to the 12th century, the outstanding effort toward improvement of both religious and secular education was taking place under the rule of Charlemagne. But the collapse of the Carolingian Empire spelled the end of the Carolingian Renaissance. Religious education deteriorated as apocryphal and legendary material came to intrude more and more in religious instruction.

In what we have seen up to this point the Creed and the Lord's Prayer have been the chief concern of the Medieval church. The Decalog has been conspicuously missing from early Christian pedagogy. After the Crusades (11-13 century) there was a renewed interest in the training of children. Thomas Aquinas, (1225-74) the scholastic theologian, wrote the Expositio Symboli Apostolorum, an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, and Edmund of Canterbury (d. 1240), the primate of England and a former professor at the University of Oxford, produced the Speculum Ecclesiae, the "Mirror of the Church." Laurentius Gallus (d. 1279) wrote a similar manual in the German Language, "Ein Spiegel des Christen Glauben."

Parental responsibility for the Christian training

of children was re-emphasized with the determination that their religious education should begin at the age of seven. The minimal requirement remained the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, with the stipulation that the Ave Maria should be learned if possible. Parents were urged to bring their children to church. Repeated admonitions of church councils about the spiritual nurture of children were embedded in canon law. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 went so far as to demand that, in addition to other regulations, children were to commune of Easter Sunday. The duty of confessors to see to the state of religious knowledge among children was reaffirmed. There is no evidence, however, that suggests that instruction in the Christian faith was a prerequisite to the rite of confirmation.

Beginning in the 13th century, heretical movements became a growing challenge to the church. Among these were the Waldensians, founded by Peter Waldo of Lyons (d. 1217). He was a wealthy man who gave his considerable wealth to the poor and became a missionary preacher crying out against the worldliness of the established church. The Waldensian movement was immediately distinguished by its establishment of schools. They may have been the first to insist on including the Decalog in the penum of the religious studies of children. But even more important was their diligent cultivation of Bible knowledge. Their view was that every home must be a Christian school and that it ought to learn to know Holy Scripture. The Waldensians refused to receive anyone at the Communion table who could not give a comprehensive account of his faith. Most of them could do so by the time they were twelve to fourteen years old.

The 14th century brought with it the first signals of the coming Renaissance with all its impetus to learning. Rising above the horrors of the Great Schism (1309-77) in the church, John Gerson (1363-1429) became a vital transitional figure who later could be quoted approvingly by such diverse figures as Ignatius Loyola and Martin Luther. A conciliarist, wielding great influence at the Council of Constance (1414-18), Gerson's mysticism, his concern for a genuinely spiritual life, endeared him to the Brethren of the Common Life and placed him within the context of events that were to lead both to reform of the church and a revival of religious education.

Gerson was so far ahead of his time as to have anticipated Luther in his demand for the establishment of a school in every parish. He wrote numerous educational tracts, among them one on Bringing Children to Christ and another related to it, on The Art of Hearing Confession.¹³ One of his most influential manuals was Opusculum Tripartitum. It was 35 pages in length. One page dealt with God the Creator and the destination of man,

a second treated the fall of man, and a third the redemption and the Creed. From pages 4-15 there was a discussion of the Ten Commandments and from pages 23-35 instruction about confession and how to die. The book was intended for the use of poorly trained priests, for uneducated laymen and those who could not attend church, for children and youth, and for those who care for the sick in hospitals.¹⁴

Another little book, written primarily for children, was ABC Des Simples Gens, it included expositions of the Lord's Prayer, Ave Maria, the Creed, the Decalog, the three divine and the four cardinal virtues, the seven beatitudes, the seven bodily and spiritual operations of mercy, the seven Sacraments, the seven consecrations, the seven gifts of the blessed ones, and a few sentences about condemnation.¹⁵

John Wyclif (1329-84), often referred to as the Morning Star of the Reformation, who anticipated Luther's interest in vernacular versions of the Bible, shared Gerson's interest in the spiritual welfare of Christians. He wrote tracts of instruction. By the end of the 14th century the Decalog was consistently included in manuals of instruction. Other features were added, some of them in the character of the Medieval church, but only the Waldensians and Wyclif had incorporated biblical studies in the informal curriculum of spiritual nurture.

John Huss (1369-1415) died a martyr, condemned by the Council of Constance. Gerberding notes that Huss spent the last days before his death compiling a manual of instruction which included the Creed, the Decalog, and the Lord's Prayer. It was later enlarged by the Bohemian Brethren. That version was most important because it included, for the first time in this genre of literature, questions and answers on the doctrines of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. A table of duties citing Bible verses was added. The book was further revised by the addition of material from the Raudnitz Catechism, which later came into the program of studies of the Moravian Brethren.

Another martyr, Girolamo Savonarola of Florence (1452-98), produced a manual of instruction titled Instruction for Christian people. It explained the Decalog and the Creed.

Among numerous educational manuals Die Tafel des Christlichen Lebens, published in Low German late in the 15th century, is important. It was written specifically for children and included a discussion of the Paternoster, the Ave Maria, the Creed, the five exterior and interior senses, the four cardinal virtues and the four sins that cry to heaven, the four last things, the seven capital sins, the seven bodily and seven spiritual works of

mercy, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, the seven Sacraments, the seven beatitudes, the nine alien sins and the Ten Commandments.¹⁶

Other tracts which helped to revive domestic catechization and the instructional obligations of priests in the confessional were, Der Seele Trost (1472), Ein Spiegel des Christlichen Gelauben (1472), John Wolf's Beichbuechlein (1468), Stephen Lanzkranna's Die Himmelstrass (1478). An anonymous manual with a wide circulation was written in 1470. It was Fundamentum Aeternae Felicitas. Its 66 pages included a consideration of the twelve articles of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, sin, with mention of the seven capital sins, the Sacraments, the last things; death, judgment, hell and heaven. The final article was an instruction about grace.¹⁷ Koelde's manual of 1470 called Seelenwurtzgaertlein, stressed the grace of God. Luther found no fault with it or with the Geistliche Streit of Ulrich Draft, written in 1503. Its objective was to teach the dying to trust in Christ.¹⁸

A manual produced by Jacob Wimpfeling (1450-1528) brings us to an important feature in the development of religious education in the 15th century. Wimpfeling was a product of the educational system of the Brethren of the Common Life in Schlettstedt, Alsace. He became an important educator himself, founding and teaching in a Latin school in Strassburg. The Brethren, not a heretical sect like the Waldenses, were generally laymen committed to the Devotio Moderna which, late in the 14th century, had spread from Holland to Germany, France, and Italy. They were devoted to the deepening of their spiritual lives in a tradition that found its classical expression in Thomas a Kempis' Imitation of Christ. Stress was laid on an inner spirituality which took its guidance from such Medieval saints as Augustine, Bernard, Bonaventure, and from the more recent John Gerson. The Devotio Moderna was seen most conspicuously among the free association of the secular priests and lay people who represented the main body of the Brethren of the Common Life. Their founder was Geert de Groote, a teacher and educator, who abandoned a brilliant professional career to live a simple devotional life in the company of his associates. The Brethren generally remained in their secular vocations while they pursued their spiritual and contemplative lives. Their great importance was to lie in the fact that they formed a network of common schools of unsurpassed excellence in which Bible reading and study was effectively pursued. Many important personalities in the 15th and 16th centuries were members of this group: a good many more attended their schools. Among them was Adrian VI the hapless pope (1522-23), so frequently mentioned since the election of John Paul II, as the last non-Italian occupant of the Throne of St. Peter.

Luther himself was not formally associated with the Brethren of the Common Life but in his later years he spoke warmly of the instruction he had from some of their teachers while he was a fourteen-year-old student at Magdeburg. E.G. Schwiebert believes that it was at Magdeburg, rather than at Erfurt, that Luther made his discovery of the Bible.¹⁹ In any case, there can be no doubt that the Brethren, with their reverence for Holy Scripture and their practical use of the Bible in the educational process, were a major influence in the progress of religious instruction.

Numerous catechisms and instructional booklets were circulating at the beginning of the 16th century. Some of them are of special interest because Luther made reference to them. Pearl of Passion and The Little Gospel were two children's books to which the Reformer took exception because of their admonition to intercession to saints. In a treatise, "The Law, Faith and Prayer," written in 1520, Luther referred to other harmful books. He said: "Among the many injurious teachings and books by which Christians are misled and deceived, and through which a vast amount of unbelief has arisen, I consider not the least those little prayer books, through which a great burden is foisted upon the simple minded in the form of confession and enumeration of sins and much unchristian foolishness in the form of prayers to God and his saints. Indulgences on red titles are the means of puffing these words of high-sounding names. One is called Hortulus Animae, or, "The Little Garden of the Soul;" another Paradisus Animae, or "The Soul's Paradise," and so forth. Such books stand in need of thorough revision, or perhaps they should be entirely destroyed. And this, I think is true likewise of the passional and legendary books in which we find many sections contributed by the devil."²⁰

The following is a partial listing of about thirty manuals that were available in the first third of the 16th century: Andreas Althammer, a catechism with questions and answers, "Instruction in the Christian Faith," 1528; Johannes Brenz, "Questions on the Christian Faith for Children," 1528; Johannes Bugenhagen, a manual for the instruction of children in 1524; Wolfgang Capito, "Catechism," 1524; John Colet, "The Catechyzon," 1510; Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Latin catechism with the Creed, the seven Sacraments, written for Colet's St. Paul's School in London, 1512-13; Hans Gerhart, "Catechism," 1525; Dustus Jonas, a series of simple sermons for children concerning forgiveness of sins and salvation, 1524; Johannes Lachmann, "Instruction for Children, How They are to Learn and Keep the Faith," 1528; Philip Melancthon, a manual of instruction including the Lord's Prayer, Ave Maria, the 66th Psalm, The Ten Commandments, 1524; Urbanus Rhegius, An exposition of the

Creed in twelve parts with questions asked by the pupil and answered by the teacher, 1523; Nicholas Ruzs, a catechism with an evangelical content that was condemned by the Roman Church; Ulrich Surgant, Manuale Curatorum, a widely circulated manual published in Basle in 1502 which gave the form in which the parts of the catechism were to be read in the churches; Konrad Sam, "Catechism," 1526.

We should also take note of placards, large conspicuous banners or sheets of paper displaying the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, which were tacked up on the walls of schools, hospitals, and churches.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the history of religious education in the Middle Ages or to measure its impact on the church. Our review of the literature of religious instruction before the publication of Luther's Catechism has told us more about the defects of Medieval theology than about the practical application of religious knowledge to the lives of the people. In a sense we may say that Luther's catechisms had no forerunners at all, indeed could have none, because the defective theology of the Medieval church made its instruments of instruction invalid and unacceptable. Luther had turned theology around and new text books were needed. If the Reformation was a restoration of apostolic theology, a revivification of the Christian faith on a revolutionary scale, then no less a revolution was required in the educational application of the old truths to a new generation of Christians.

Luther's Bible translations had given the Bible back to the people and his biblical studies had enabled them to grasp Scripture's fundamental message. But it was not enough for him to be a great theologian. He had to combine his expository talents with a comprehensive program of educational development and spiritual nurture. His Catechism thus needed to be as unique as the theology that informed and supported it.

Bible translations were not a novelty in Luther's time. More than twenty translations were available when he began his work on the German Bible. But his Bible was to stand alone as the master pattern for the shaping of all future vernacular Bibles. By the same token we have seen that dozens of catechisms were circulating in 1529. Nevertheless Luther's work broke so much new ground, his catechism was so thoroughly based on Scripture, and at the same time so clearly delineated that it too became the mode, in its excellence, for future instruction in religion.

Luther understood Scripture better than any of his contemporaries. Therefore he was qualified,

above all others, for the task of summarizing it. Moreover, his particular talents qualified him supremely for the task of basing instruction on his summaries and his understanding. He considered the Bible to constitute a body of knowledge which all sinners need to apprehend. He was not content, like Gregory the Great, to take a condescending attitude toward the unlettered by assuming that they were incapable of grasping and believing the fundamental truths of Scripture. He made it his business to see to it that they did come to know and believe those vital truths.

Therefore, when he held an open Bible before the people and asked, as in the questions of the Catechism, "What Does This Mean?" he was combining exposition with instruction. The theologian had become a teacher. The apostolic witness rang true in that instruction. The spirit of Jesus, the Master Teacher, had returned to the church.

The actual writing of Luther's Catechism may well have been precipitated by a decree of John, Elector of Saxony, dated Trinity Sunday, 1527, for a tour of inspection to be made of the churches of his lands. Luther was appointed for this task, to be assisted by Justus Jonas and Johannes Bugenhagen. Luther entered upon these duties the same year and continued the year following. In 1529 Luther wrote to Spalatin of the results of his tour of inspection. "The church everywhere presents a very sad picture. The peasants know nothing and learn nothing; they never pray and they simply abuse their liberty by wholly neglecting confession and the Lord's Supper. They act as if they had no religious obligations. They have cast off the papal religion and disgraced ours."²¹

Luther's findings are also vividly described in the preface to the Small Catechism. After a greeting to "All Faithful and Godly Pastors and Preachers," he says: "The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has urged me to prepare this catechism, or Christian doctrine in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy. Good God! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and alas! many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach. Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians, have been Baptized, receive the Holy Sacraments. They cannot recite either the Lord's Prayer, the Creed or the Ten Commandments; they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts."²² Medieval catechetical procedures had obviously been ineffective.

The progress of the thought and writing which preceded the final completion of the Small Catechism is detailed in Dr. Reu's books and

articles, as well as in other useful histories. We shall restrict ourselves here to just a few comments on the influence of Medieval instructional literature on Luther. Indeed, we may say that, as Luther went through the process of clarifying biblical doctrine in his own mind he was steadily engaged in the summarization and organization that was to reach final form in the Catechism. As early as 1517 when his tentative probings of Scripture led to the publication of the 95 Theses, he showed how unerringly he could go to the very heart of a difficult and complex matter. Recall the 62nd of the 95 Theses. Here he says that "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Luther's pedagogical concerns were part and parcel of his pastoral concern from the very beginning of his career as a reformer. In 1516 he preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. This was followed by a series on the Lord's Prayer in 1517. Luther first showed his hand in a determination to improve on the available catechetical booklets in 1520 when he published a revision of previous sermonizing in "A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed and Lord's Prayer."²³ The first thing that we observe in this exposition is that, though he accepted the primers or manuals of the Middle Ages, he had changed the order of their content. The Ten Commandments, which had not been included at all in early times, and later had only occupied the third place, Luther placed the first in order. The preface to this work shows the rationale of the pedagogical principles operative in his philosophy of Christian education. He said that the law must be taught first so that "the commandments teach a man to know his illness . . . and thus [he] knows himself a sinner and a wicked man." The teaching of the Gospel then follows, and "the Creed shows him and teaches him where he may find the remedy, the grace which helps him become a good man and [helps him] to keep the commandments; it shows him God, and the mercy He has revealed and offered in Christ. In the third place the Lord's Prayer teaches him how to ask for this grace, get it, and take it to himself, to wit, by habitual, humble, comforting prayer; then grace is given, and by fulfilment of God's command he is saved."

This preface to Luther's catechetical exercise of 1520 is followed by three pages of general comment on the Decalog, six and a half pages of discussion of transgressions against the commandments, and three pages on the keeping of the commandments. The Creed is treated on several pages under the three headings of the Triune God rather than the twelve subdivisions of the Medieval church. The Lord's Prayer is treated under the familiar headings of the seven petitions. Most of this material anticipates the succinct exposition of the Catechism of 1529, but there is

ample evidence of Luther's theological maturation in the intervening years.

One paragraph in the 1520 work has no place in that of 1529. In that passage of time Germany had suffered the scourge of the Peasants' Revolt. In view of the anarchy brought on by Thomas Muenzer and his followers, it is not surprising that the following paragraph from the 1520 work has no counterpart in 1529: "I believe that in the congregation or church all things are common, that everyone's possessions belong to the others and no one has anything of his own."

Luther's next catechetical venture was the Betbuechlein of 1522 which repeated much of the content of the 1520 edition and added the following items reminiscent of Medieval books. 1. A discussion of the Ave Maria in opposition to Maryolatry; 2. Devotions based on the Psalms; 3. A commentary on the Epistle to Titus; 4. Prayers based on the seven petitions; 5. An explanation of true faith; 6. An instruction concerning prayer; 7. An instruction concerning confession; 8. An instruction on the Sacrament; 9. An instruction on death. This document, covering 75 pages in the Weimar Edition of Luther's Works,²⁴ made little catechetical improvement on the manual of 1520. It had a long way to go to reach the concise definition of the Catechism of 1529. The material on the Lord's Supper, five questions to be asked of communicants, in the very popular and widely disseminated Betbuechlein, was a later addition derived from a sermon of 1523. The Sacraments had still not found their place as a vital ingredient in a proper summary of the Christian faith.

Still another stage in the building of the definitive Catechism of 1529 was Luther's treatise of 1524, "To the Councillors of all Cities in the German Empire on the Establishment and Maintenance of Christian Schools."²⁴ In this statement Luther's debt to Gerson, the Bohemians, and the Brethren of the Common Life was clear. Effective catechetical instruction was needed beyond that which could be given in Christian homes.

In the meantime Luther was busy, very busy with his academic duties and his many important projects as leader of the Lutheran movement. He therefore gave his secretary, Justus Jonas, and his young protege, Agricola, the formidable assignment of drawing up a proper Catechismus Puerorum. Nothing came of it, but in 1525 some unknown author [was it Bugenhagen?] did produce a Buchlein fuer Kinder und Laien. Some of Luther's material was in it, but its chief distinction lies in the fact that it had drawn from the Catechism of the Bohemian Brethren and, for the first time in the history of the literature of catechetical material in Germany, there were

comprehensive sections on Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Confession. In this publication the content of the Catechism of 1529 was established.

The publication of the Deutsche Messe in 1526 gave further evidence of the need for a definitive catechism. A spate of manuals, noted in a previous section of this paper, appeared.

Eventually Luther and Melancthon, collaborating on the visitations demanded by the Elector of Saxony, pressed the need for a universally acceptable catechism further and suggested that the condition for first Communion be an understanding of the five parts of the Catechism, the Decalog, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Luther's Catechism finally evolved from the work that had been done by many authors and by the refinement of Luther's own thought growing out of three sets of catechetical sermons which he delivered from May to December 1527. After an initial exposure as printed placards in January 1529, the Small and the Large Catechism were published later in the year.

In conclusion, it behooves us to return to reflection on the objectives of this essay. It was to examine the antecedents of Luther's Catechism. I believe that, having looked at the forerunners of the Catechism, we must conclude that, though Luther was a product of his own age and that though he drew from material available from the past, particularly the literature of the pre-Reformers, the Catechism was a unique literary creation. It seems not too much to say that in the Catechism we have much more than a refinement of previous manuals of instruction. What we have in the Catechism is the entire scope of the Reformation in brilliant microcosm. Luther's creative synthesis of apostolic theology thus has its counterpart in the structuring of the essence of biblical theology within a miniature Bible.

Just as Luther's theological construct, the doctrine of justification, was uniquely creative and perceptive, so his organization of biblical themes in the Catechism was unique in the depth and breadth of the focus in which he placed the elemental features of the will and grace of God revealed in Holy Scripture.

It was Luther's Catechism that first stated and elaborated the concept of the means of grace and brought the Word and the Sacraments into their appropriate relationship. In one great sweep the Catechism removed the fantasies of a Medieval hagiography, substituting the facts of Scripture for the fables of Medieval superstition. When Luther asked the question "What Does This mean?" of the Ten Commandments he was not content to establish a canon of worldly

righteousness that a 16th century Pharisee might measure his life by. Rather, Luther explained the Ten Commandments in terms of the fruits of faith which illuminate and enrich the lives of justified sinners. He thus gave the law a long lost dimension. He reminded a Christian catechumenate that love is the fulfilling of the law and he gave renewed scope and meaning to the joy of Christian life.

Where, in all post-apostolic literature, is there a cut and polished gem comparable, in its comprehensive perfection, to Luther's explanation of the Second, Article? It is true that Scripture contains much that is beyond human knowledge. Luther's insights enable us to see clearly the things we need to know in order to apprehend the will and love of God. Through the Catechism Luther ordered that knowledge in such a way as to give us an organization for the study of Christian doctrine and a firm foundation for our present and future contemplation of the Word and promise of God. "This is most certainly true!"