
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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Luther's Use of Scripture in the Small Catechism

by James W. Voelz

To prepare and present a paper on Luther's use of Scripture in the Small Catechism is no small task. The principal problem is, of course, the welter of material. Of 540 lines in the German text of this work, 143 or 22% are simple citations of the Scriptures, and of the 397 remaining, at least 167 or an additional 31% are exegetical treatments of Scriptural passages. Inevitably, therefore, I have been forced to be selective, both for the limits of time, and for the maintenance of my sanity. Accordingly, I have chosen to consider Luther's use of Scripture in the Small Catechism in two ways, which will constitute the two major portions of this paper. In the first part, we will deal with the Small Catechism's use of Scripture generally, exploring the theological purpose behind a catechetical use of Holy Scripture, while in the second we will deal with selected passages, concentrating upon the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Because the material in the Small Catechism is quite terse and spare, as is appropriate for a basic instructional manual, I will have occasion to refer both to the Large Catechism, which was prepared in close connection with the Small Catechism,

and to Luther's writings at large, which illuminate his thinking on given matters. We begin with Part I, Luther's general use of Scripture in the Small Catechism.

Part I

It was said in the introduction that 22% of the Small Catechism is simple quotation of Scripture, while a further 31% is exegesis of that Scripture. In total, then, 310 of the 450 lines of the Small Catechism concern themselves directly with Scripture and its interpretation. What use is made of such a massive handling of God's Word? Luther tells us in the introduction to the various chief parts:

- I. The Ten Commandments, as the Head of the Family Should Teach them in a Simple Way to His Household
- II. The Creed, as the Head of the Family Should Teach It in the Simplest Way to His Household
- III. The Lord's Prayer, as the Head of the Family

Should Teach It in the Simplest Way to His Household, etc.

The key here is the simple word “should” — “should teach . . . to his household.” Not a weak, wishy-washy “should”; not, “it would be nice if he would”, but “ought to” should, as in “the head of the family ought to teach . . . to his household.” The German and the Latin are clearer here. The German is soll and the Latin debeat. “Sollen” means to be obliged to, to be bound to, to have to, must — indeed, to be in debt, which shows the general tenor of the word, while “debeo” carries a similar force, namely, to be under obligation to render, to be in duty bound, must, even to be necessary; again with an overtone of being in debt, as there is with “sollen”. The head of the household is under moral obligation to teach what is written in the Catechism.

When we deal with the contents of the Small Catechism, therefore — or, to put it in terms of our paper’s topic, when we deal with the Catechism’s use of Scripture as a whole — we are in the realm of LAW, the realm of Command. To be sure, the specific content of the Catechism is not all Law — far from it. Sections like the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar are the sweetest Gospel, in and of themselves. But the use to which all of the sections are put — not only the Ten Commandments or the Table of Duties, but also the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar — is a law purpose: they must be taught and they must be learned. As Luther says in his introduction:

Therefore I entreat (and adjure) you all for God’s sake, my dear sirs [and brethren who are pastors or preachers,] to devote yourselves heartily to your office, to have pity on the people who are entrusted to you, and to help us inculcate the Catechism upon the people (SC Pref 7)

But which uses of the Law, to use good Lutheran categories, are involved here? Luther tells us in his introduction:

But those who are unwilling to learn it — [all of the parts of the Catechism by rote memorization] . . . their parents and employers should refuse them food and drink, and (they would also do well if they were to) notify them that the prince will drive such rude people from the country, etc. (SC Pref 12)

For although we cannot and should not force any one to believe, yet we should insist and urge the people that they know what is right and wrong with those among whom they dwell and wish to make their

living. For whoever desires to reside in a town must know and observe the town laws, the protection of which he wishes to enjoy, no matter whether he is a believer or at heart and in private a rogue or a knave. (SC Pref 13)

This is nothing less than the first use of the Law. Luther envisions the contents of the Catechism, and, therefore, principally the Scripture passages and their exposition, to be a standard of life and thought for the political entity which has broken with the pope and embraced evangelical doctrine — the regulator, as it were, of outward behavior. And this, of course, is not dissimilar to the provisions of the Peace of Augsburg, concluded in 1555, after Luther’s death, with its rule of cuius regio, eius religio.

The contents of the Catechism are also intended to perform the second use of the Law. This is, of course, the mirror, the use which shows men their sin. Luther expresses this in a general way when he says:

But those who are unwilling to learn it should be told that they deny Christ and are no Christians, neither should they be admitted to the Sacrament, accepted as sponsors at baptism, nor exercise any part of Christian liberty, but should be turned back to the Pope and his officials, yea, to the devil himself. (SC Pref 11)

And again:

. . . the common people in the villages . . . 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. (SC Pref 3)

Specifically, he commands that preachers ought to stress those sections of the Catechism which are most abused by their people, that their sin might be shown for what it is.

And particularly, urge that commandment or part most which suffers the greatest neglect among your people. For instance, the Seventh Commandment, concerning stealing, must strenuously be urged among mechanics and merchants, and even farmers and servants, for among these people many kinds of dishonesty and thieving prevail. (SC Pref 18)

Note that while his example is a commandment, he says “urge that commandment or part”. Indeed, the doctrine of the Sacrament of the Altar, as it is contained in the sixth chief part, may be used in this way, as Luther advises his pastors

regarding those who despise the sacrament as something useless and unnecessary:

let them go and tell them that such belong to the devil as do not regard nor feel their great need and the gracious help of God.
— (SC Pref 24)

a reference, no doubt, to the question, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?"

Finally, then, the Scripture references and their exegesis also perform the third use of the Law in their catechetical context, that is to say, they instruct Christian men and women concerning the will of God for their faith and life. Luther speaks time and again of this usage in his introduction, urging that it be applied particularly to the simple, to the young, and to the unlearned.

The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare (publish) this Catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Good God! what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine! Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians, have been baptized and receive the (common) holy sacraments. Yet they (do not understand and) cannot (even) recite either the Lord's Prayer or the Creed, or the Ten Commandments; (SC Pref 1-3)

And again:

O ye bishops you do not care in the least . . . whether the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, the Ten Commandments, or any part of the Word of God Therefore, I entreat and adjure you all for God's sake, my dear sirs . . . to have pity on the people who are entrusted to you and to help us inculcate the Catechism upon the people and especially upon the young. (SC Pref 4, 5)

This is, in the end, the primary, overall use of Scripture and its interpretation in the Small Catechism. Indeed, it is the most natural use, given its setting. And this is not bad; for while the third use of the law is not its primary use in Lutheranism as it is in Calvinism,¹ instruction in doctrine and living was a fundamental necessity in Luther's time, even as it is today in ours, and such instruction is greatly facilitated by a catechetical presentation of God's Word.

We may say, therefore, that Luther employs Scripture and its interpretation abundantly in the

Small Catechism and that both sections of Law and sections of Gospel are equally included. Overall, the Scripture passages and their exegesis are used as Law. All three uses of the Law are in evidence. A knowledge of, and external conformity to, the texts and their treatments is required, which is first use. These texts and their interpretation are used to accuse those who do not act according to, and demonstrate a living belief in, them — second use. And they are used to instruct all men and women in the faith, especially the ignorant and young — third use. With the exception of the first use — given our changed political situation — the second and third uses can and must be applied also by us today.

Part II

We now turn to Part II, Luther's specific treatment of Scripture in selected sections of the Small Catechism. We begin with his first section, the Ten Commandments and their exposition.

A

The Ten Commandments were, in many ways, Luther's favorite portion of Holy Scripture. They occupy, as we have said, the first portion of his catechism. And he could, at times, wax grandiloquent about them. He says, e.g., in the Large Catechism:

Whoever knows the Ten Commandments perfectly must know all the Scripture, so that in all affairs and cases he can advise, help, comfort, judge, and decide both spiritual and temporal matters and is qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines, estates, spirits, laws, and whatever else is in this world. (LC Pref 17)

We will, therefore, consider in quite some detail, one question of no small hermeneutical significance, namely, why did Luther select the ten commands he did select to be the so-called Ten Commandments? As we shall see, the answer to this question reveals Luther's fundamental approach to the interpretation of the entire Old Testament.

Why did Luther select the ten commandments which we have contained in the Small Catechism to be the Ten Commandments? This is by no means a foolish question. As is apparent from a reading of the Old Testament, especially Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, there is no specific list of ten commandments. There are a number of commandments, but in total they number more than ten — at least twelve, if not more. Why were ten selected? Basically because of three passages which mention ten commandments, Ex. 34:28, Deut. 4:13, and Deut. 10:4. Each is similar to the others, so a reading of one

will be sufficient:

Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sounds or words, but you saw no form — only a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. (Deut. 4:12, 13)

But which ten commands did Moses have in mind? As Bo Reicke has clearly shown, three traditions arose to answer this question.² The first combines, as the first commandment, the introduction, Ex. 20:2 (Deut. 5:6): "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," with the prohibition against false gods, Ex. 20:3 (Deut. 5:7): "You shall have no other gods before me," and the prohibition against graven images, Ex. 20:4-6 (Deut. 5:8-10):

You shall not make for yourself an idol, (a graven image) or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing loving kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

The prohibition against misuse of the divine name, Ex. 20:7 (Deut. 5:11), is then taken as the second commandment, the commandment concerning the Sabbath, Ex. 20:8-11 (Deut. 5:12-15) as the third, the command concerning parents, Ex. 20:12 (Deut. 5:16) as the fourth, the prohibition of murder, Ex. 20:13 (Deut. 5:17) the fifth, the prohibition of adultery, Ex. 20:14 (Deut. 5:18) the sixth, the prohibition of theft, Ex. 20:15 (Deut. 5:19), the seventh, and the prohibition of false witness, Ex. 20:16 (Deut. 5:20) the eighth. Finally, the prohibition against coveting the neighbor's house, Ex. 20:17a (Deut. 5:21b) is separated from the prohibition against coveting everything else that is the neighbor's, Ex. 20:17b (Deut. 5:21) to form the ninth and tenth commandments. (Note the different order of things coveted in Deuteronomy.) This was the solution of the Massorettes, and it is reflected in their pericopic punctuation.³ The church of the West, including Augustine⁴, Isidor of Seville⁵, and Peter Lombard⁶ followed this division, eventually dropping the introduction and the commands against graven images. (In all three traditions, other commandments in these sections of Exodus and Deuteronomy, for example those in the small discourse on keeping the Sabbath, were dropped, being seen, evidently, as appositional to the main

commandment on a given subject.)

The second tradition combines the introduction, Ex. 20:2 (Deut. 5:6) with the prohibition against false gods, Ex. 20:3 (Deut. 5:7) as the first commandment. The prohibition against graven images, Ex. 20:4-6 (Deut. 5: 5-10) is then seen as the second commandment, the prohibition against misuse of the divine name the third, and so forth, until the tenth commandment, which is the prohibition against coveting, Ex. 20:17 (Deut. 5:21) — a combination of commandments nine and ten of the first tradition, which we have just analyzed. This was the solution of Hellenistic Judaism, including Philo of Alexandria⁷ and Josephus⁸, and it was adopted by Eastern or Orthodox Christendom, including Irenaeus⁹, Origen¹⁰, and Gregory of Nazianzus¹¹.

Finally, the Jewish Rabbis followed their own system, essentially a combination of the solutions of the first and second traditions. The introduction was understood as the first commandment, separate from the rest. The commandments against false gods and against image-making were combined, as in the Massoretic and Western tradition, to form the second commandment, and the rest proceeded as normal (the injunction against misuse of the divine name became the third commandment, etc.), until the tenth commandment, which was taken, as in the tradition of Hellenistic Judaism and the East, as the total prohibition against coveting. This is the schema followed by the Talmud¹² and by the Midrashim¹³, through the middle ages (e.g., Ibn Ezra of Toledo, 12th C.)¹⁴, until the present day.¹⁵ It has not been particularly influential in Christendom, either in the East or in the West.

As is apparent from this brief overview, the real issue is the matter of images. What are we to do with the words:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. (Ex. 20:4)

Once this problem is dealt with, the matter of the ninth and tenth commandments automatically takes care of itself. Luther, as we know, followed the Western Christian tradition and omitted any reference to images. His colleagues in the Reformed camp, most notably Zwingli and Calvin, followed Hellenistic Judaism and the Eastern tradition (with the exception of Martin Bucer, who adopted the Rabbinic system¹⁶) and included the references to images. It is for this reason that the two major catechisms of these traditions, Luther's Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism, respectively, contain different versions of the commandments.

Now, why did Luther go in the direction that he did? Two major reasons may be adduced. The first is exegetical. Luther understood Ex. 20:4-6 (Deut. 5:8-10) as essentially an explanation and amplification of Ex. 20:3 (Deut. 5:7), the prohibition against other gods. He writes in his essay "Against the Heavenly Prophets":

I cite the first commandment (Exod. 20:3): "You shall have no other gods before me." Immediately, following this text, the meaning of having other gods is made plain the words: "You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness . . ." (Exod. 20:4). This is said of the same gods, etc. No one will be able to prove anything else. From subsequent words in the same chapter (Exod. 20:23), "You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold," it follows that "make" certainly refers to such gods.

For this saying, "You shall have no other gods," is the central thought, the standard, and the end in accordance with which all the words which follow are to be interpreted, connected, and judged. For this passage points out and expresses the meaning of this commandment, namely, that there are to be no other gods. Therefore the words "make," "images," "serve," etc., and whatever else follows, are to be understood in no other sense than that neither gods nor idolatry are to develop therefrom.¹⁷

He even goes on to say:

No conclusion can be drawn from the words, "You shall have no other gods," other than that which refers to idolatry. When however images or statues are made without idolatry, then such making of them is not forbidden, for the central saying, "You shall have no other gods," remains intact.¹⁸

Now this is diametrically opposed to the Reformed approach. The Reformed consistently understood Ex. 20:4-6 (Deut. 5:8-10), not as a further description of the false gods which were prohibited in the first commandment. Instead, they saw it as pertaining to the true God — specifically to how he is — or in this case, is not — to be pictured and portrayed, and how he is to be worshipped and adored. They understood it to prohibit, not worship of a false god, but false worship of the true God, or, at best, misguided or misdirected worship. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q.96. What does God require in the second commandment?

A. That we should not represent him or worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word.

Q.97. Should we, then, not make any images at all?

A. God cannot and should not be pictured in any way

Q.98. But may not pictures be tolerated in churches in place of books for unlearned people?

A. No, for we must not try to be wiser than God, who does not want his people to be taught by means of lifeless idols, but through the living preaching of his Word.¹⁹

Calvin is equally clear:

As in the preceding commandment the Lord has declared himself to be the one God, besides whom no other deities ought to be imagined or worshipped, so in this he more clearly reveals his nature, and the kind of worship with which he ought to be honoured, that we may not dare to form any carnal conceptions of him. The end, therefore, of this precept is, that he will not have his legitimate worship profaned with superstitious rites. Wherefore, in a word, he calls us off, and wholly abstracts us from carnal observances, which our foolish minds are accustomed to devise, when they conceive of God according to the grossness of their own apprehensions²⁰

Zwingli followed a similar line²¹, as did his close friend Leo Jud of Schlettstadt, Alsace, who interpreted Ex. 20:23, ("You shall not make other gods besides me, gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.") The passage quoted by Luther in defence of understanding images in the sense of false gods, to mean: "Don't make me into a gold or silver god." (To do so he had to render ἑαυτῷ, "with me", as "myself."²² It is interesting to note that he consistently converted the NT injunctions against idolatry to injunctions against images or portrait-making and worship, rendering I Cor. 5:11, e.g., as "I have written to you that you ought not to mix or have relationships with adulterous or covetous people, with robbers, or with those who worship a representation" and I Cor. 10:7 as "You ought not reverence portraits or images", in the first passage translating εἰδωλα as bild and in the second, the same word as bildnussen.²³

Who is correct on this matter? My own preference lies with Luther and with his understanding of the relationship between Exodus 20:3 and verses 4-6. It seems most natural, on a "neutral" reading of the text, to understand the injunction concerning images to amplify the

meaning of "other gods" in the previous verse. It is quite unnatural to understand the words "You shall not worship them or serve them" as referring to images of the true God, especially when worship of a false god has just been prohibited. Indeed, the wrath spoken of in the very next words, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God . . ." is best understood as directed against pretenders to the heavenly throne, not against foolish or ill-thought-out representations devised by true worshippers. To be sure, Deut. 4:15, 16 seems to pose a problem for this interpretation:

So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.

These words clearly do prohibit images of the true God, which is what the Reformed contend Ex. 20:4-6 and Deut. 5:8-10 enjoin. But these verses are easiest understood as containing injunctions which are similar to, though directed toward a different end than, those in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and they cannot be used to determine the meaning of other pericopes which have no similarly stated, or even contextually implied, rationale.

Luther's major reason for omitting reference to images in his rendering of the Ten Commandments, however, is not exegetical. It is much deeper, much more far-reaching than that. It reflects his basic approach to Scripture, his basic hermeneutical principles, if you will, and it is rooted most firmly in his Biblical theology. It has, in short, to do with his view of the Old Covenant. Luther believed that, for New Testament Christians, the entire body of Mosaic legislation has been abrogated. He writes:

. . . the law of Moses is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel . . . We would rather not preach again for the rest of our life than to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the law. We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, "Thus says Moses," etc. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink

and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service.

That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved from Exodus 20:1, where God himself speaks, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that . . . it is clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles. He has given the Jews a sign whereby they should lay hold of God, when they call upon him as the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Christians have a different sign, whereby they conceive of God as the One who gave His Son, etc.²⁴

Do such sentiments make Luther anti-nomian? Most assuredly they do not. The key for Luther was the natural law. This, he maintained, is valid for all men.

When these factious spirits come, however, and say, "Moses has commanded it," then simply drop Moses and reply, "I am not concerned about what Moses commands." "Yes," they say, "He has commanded that we should have one God, that we should trust and believe in him, that we should not swear by his name; that we should honor father and mother; not kill; steal, commit adultery; not bear falsewitness, and not covet (Exod. 20:3-17); should we not keep these commandments?" You reply: Nature also has these laws. Nature provides that we should call upon God. The Gentiles attest to this fact. For there never was a Gentile who did not call upon his idols, even though these were not the true God. The Gentiles have it written in their heart, and there is no distinction (Rom. 3:22). As St. Paul also shows in Romans 2:14-15, the Gentiles, who have no law, have the law written in their heart.

Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written on the hearts of all men.²⁵

As a result, Luther believed that some parts of the Law of Moses are still valid, even though the

legislation as such has been abrogated, namely, those laws and ordinances — but only those laws and ordinances — which reflect the natural law.

But the other commandments of Moses, which are not (implanted in all men) by nature, do not restrict the Gentiles. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles, such as the tithe and others equally fine which I wish we had too. Now this is the first thing that I ought to see in Moses, namely the commandments to which I am not bound except insofar as they are (implanted in everyone) by nature (and written in everyone's heart).²⁶

And again: “. . . where he [Moses] gives commandment, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law.”²⁷ Furthermore, Luther maintained that the validity of these ordinances does not rest upon their having been given by Moses, but rather that it rests solely — and precisely — upon their total agreement with the natural law: “Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave commandments, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature”²⁸ And again: “. . . we read Moses not because he applies to us, that we must obey him, but because he agrees with the natural law”²⁹ The correspondence between OT moral ordinances and the natural law does make Mosaic legislation valuable for pedagogical purposes, of course, because it is a clear expression of this natural law.

Now on the basis of this view of the Old Covenant, Luther was forced to reject the OT commandment concerning graven images as valid for believers in the NT era. Luther saw that, when all is said and done, this piece of legislation is part of the old covenant and that the old covenant has been done away with. To be sure, he agreed that some parts of this covenant do have enduring validity, as we have seen. But as we have also seen, he also realized that those parts are the ones which correspond to the natural law, which is enduringly valid, and that they themselves are valid only because they are, in fact, congruent with that natural law. Luther saw that the OT commandment against idol forms and likenesses has no such congruence. Therefore, he said that it is not binding upon us, and that it is of no further value to us. In his own words:

Where then the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, there the law remains and is not abrogated Therefore Moses' legislation about images . . . and what else goes beyond the natural law, since it is not supported by the natural law, is free, null and void, and is specifically given to the Jewish people

alone. It is as when an emperor or a king makes special laws and ordinances in his territory, as the Sachsenspiegel in Saxony, and yet common natural laws such as to honor parents, not to kill, not to commit adultery, to serve God, etc., prevail and remain in all lands. Therefore one is to let Moses be the Sachsenspiegel of the Jews and not to confuse us Gentiles with it, just as the Sachsenspiegel is not observed in France, though the natural law there is in agreement with it.³⁰

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Luther's handling of the question of images, as we have just examined it. Of special interest is his insight into the nature of the Mosaic Law, for it determined his approach to all of the commandments, and it was particularly important in his treatment of the third commandment, enabling him to reword it from “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy,” to “Thou shalt sanctify the holy day,” based on an appeal to natural law.³¹ This insight into the Law's nature and purpose was not one which came easily or quickly to the Christian church. As we know, many of the earliest Christians continued to be bound to the ways of the OT code, even after the Resurrection. They observed Mosaic Laws of purification, circumcision, sabbath observance, and dietary control. (We need think only of Peter's vision of the sheet with unclean animals in Acts 10, the controversy at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and Paul's statement of being a Jew to the Jews in 1 Cor. 9.³²) Indeed, St. Paul had to fight the Judaizers from the very first and say concerning them, Col. 2: 16, 17:

Therefore, let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — things which are a mere shadow of what is to come

In his insight, Luther was true to his apostle of freedom, St. Paul, and it is, therefore, not surprising that one of his favorite NT books with the epistle of Christian freedom, St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

B

As we turn from the Ten Commandments to the Lord's Prayer, we turn from what Luther considered to be the most important section of the Small Catechism to the section which is perhaps the most beloved to its readers. Herein are contained our Lord's words of comfort and hope, and they are expounded so beautifully to bring out the very depth of the Gospel message. For example the explanation to the fifth petition, “Forgive us our trespasses” reads:

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, nor on their account deny our prayer; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them; but that He would grant them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. So will we also heartily forgive, and readily do good to those who sin against us.³³

In his third chief part, Luther exhibits great insights in his handling of Scripture, much as he did with the Ten Commandments. Again, many could be adduced. But, again, one stands out in particular. It is the treatment of the Introduction, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Luther writes: "God would thereby (with this introduction) tenderly urge us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that we may ask Him confidently, with all assurance, as dear children, ask their dear father." (SC III, 2) With the first clause of this explanation, Luther captures the important NT truth that we need constantly to be reminded of the fact that, by faith, we are in a father-son relationship with God, not a master-slave relationship. This is not the natural state of affairs. Indeed, the Jews did not believe it — they virtually never addressed God as their father.³⁴ And it is easy to slip back into the bondage of slavery, by reverting once more to the service of the law. As Paul reminds the Galatians:

But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son. (Gal. 4:4-5, 7)

Luther saw that by beginning his prayer with the words "Our Father," our Lord reminds us of our true status as Christians and roots us more firmly in our faith.

Equally importantly, however, with the second clause of his explanation, Luther captures the NT insight into the nature of God's fatherhood, and, therefore, of our childhood. He shows that God is not harsh and severe, but kind, loving, and caring. These words say what the early church said when it used the Aramaic word "Abba," my father, as an address to God — a child's word, really,³⁵ a simple, trusting word — "Daddy" would be a good translation. With this type of father we are given the privilege of request, and we need not be afraid to exercise that privilege, even as our Lord himself explained it in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said:

Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be

opened to you If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him? (Matt. 7:7, 11)

As Luther properly saw it, the entire Christian life is summed up in this introduction.

Unlike the Ten Commandments, however, in which there is little to take exception to, Luther's treatment of the Lord's Prayer can be criticized in at least one respect, when the text is approached exegetically. His explanation to the second petition, "Thy kingdom come," reads:

What does this mean? The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer of itself; but we pray in this petition that it may come unto us also.

How is this done? When our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His Holy Word and lead a godly life, here in time and hereafter in eternity.³⁶

This exposition reflects the commonly held opinion that the Kingdom of God is to be defined as "the reign and rule of God in the hearts of believers." It may be called a subjective view, and the problem with it is that it is neither sufficient nor exhaustive as an explanation of this phrase. In the NT, the word Kingdom, in the phrase Kingdom of God, refers to God's active and dynamic reign and rule, as Luther rightly saw. But its primary referent is precisely, God's reign and rule in the person and in the work of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Now, while there is a subjective element to this kingdom or reign, namely, our Lord's wooing and winning the hearts of those who heard Him, and of course, his wooing and winning the hearts of those today who do hear him through the preaching of the word of his select ambassadors, the apostles, most frequently — standardly — this Kingdom is seen objectively, as God engaged in conflict against the forces of evil. Preeminent are our Lord's battles against Satan, especially his enduring of the temptation of the arch-deceiver, and his healing of madmen, epileptics, and other afflicted people by casting out demons from his enslaved creation; his defeat of Satan, as he stormed the gates of hell in his triumphal death and burial; and finally his breaking of the bonds of corruption which enthralled his poor creation, holding it a prisoner, estranged from its maker, as he rose triumphant on Easter morning, bringing new life to the world. These were objective acts. They occurred apart from subjective human response. Indeed, they are the very foundation for, and ground of, the call of the child of God.

Why is this important? It is important because

of the relationship between Christ's first, lowly, coming, and his second coming in glory. When he first walked our earth, Christ established — re-established, really — God's reign and rule over his whole creation. To use Oscar Cullman's famous WWII imagery, he broke the back of the evil forces and decimated their power, as the allies did to Nazi Germany at the invasion of Normandy. But his kingdom — his reign — has not completely been implemented. Not all creatures are yet under his gracious rule. Pockets of resistance remain, as it were. The Rhein still has to be crossed. When will this happen? It is happening even now as God's word is preached and his sacraments administered, as missionaries go out and churches expand. But it will not fully happen until the end of time, when the last vestiges of resistance have been crushed, when the last rebels have been conquered; in short, when Satan is finally put away to vex creation no more. Then God's reign will be complete. Christ will be all in all. All things will be put under his feet. This, too, is part of — in fact, the consummation of — the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The thrust of this petition, therefore, is a many-faceted one. Yes, we can say with Luther that the coming of the Kingdom of God is the coming of the Holy Spirit into our hearts and lives. This is one way in which God's reign is implemented. But we can also say that it concerns something outside of ourselves, and that in a two-fold sense. First, it concerns missions, and the spreading of God's Word, as our synodical catechism indicates when it says: "What do we ask in this petition? . . . b. that he would extend his kingdom of grace on earth (missions)." ³⁷ Secondly, however, and more importantly, it also concerns the parousia, Christ's second coming, when God's Kingdom, now fulfilled, will be fully consummated, again, as our synodical catechism does also indicate. ³⁸ Indeed, given the early church's sense of the imminence of the parousia, and its prayer, recorded in Rev. 22:20 and I Cor. 16:23, marana-tha, "Come, Lord Jesus," this interpretation of the Petition should be given a place of high prominence. In the words of Martin Franzmann:

The piety of the pure in heart prays that God may act, may so act in might and mercy that He become King, be manifested as King, and rule forever as King. It prays that God may so act in redemption and judgment that He will clear His name . . . of all that beclouds it, and burst forth full in His glory. ³⁹

C

We conclude with a brief word on the Sacrament of the Altar. It is included with some hesitancy, because, again, it must be somewhat critical of Luther's interpretation. But the problem, as it appears, is not a serious one, and

should cause us no great difficulty.

My concern is with Luther's understanding of the source of the benefits of the sacrament of the altar. After citing the words of institution, Luther says:

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? That is shown us by these words "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things? It is not the eating and drinking indeed that does them, but the words here written "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"; which words, besides the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins. ⁴⁰

Now, from an exegetical standpoint, this seems strange. The words seem to be made all-important, any, sole-sufficient: "in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given us through these words." And again, "It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them [gives the sacrament's benefits], but the words here written, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." The body and blood are necessary — Luther calls them a "chief thing" in his explanation — but what is their function beneficially? Are they there simply because Christ commanded them? It is interesting to note that my reading of Luther here is not unique in this regard, for Edmund Schlink also raises the same question, asking: "[In the Small Catechism] is there a basic theological concern involved in this separation of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper from forgiveness? In other words, does the benefit, forgiveness, belong to the essence of the Lord's Supper or does it not." ⁴¹

Two things may be said about this problem. First, it is certainly improper Biblically to separate the benefits from the essence of the sacrament of the altar. Considering the NT generally, it does violence to the doctrine of the body of Christ, especially as we find it in the Pauline Epistles. It cannot be insignificant that we, who are the body of Christ, in this sacrament feed on the body of Christ, as we sit at table one with another. In the words of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "Through this food we are united with Christ" (AP XXII, 10), and of the Formula of Concord, ". . . this most venerable sacrament [is] . . . a firm bond of union of Christians with

Christ their head and with one another. . . ." (ThD VII, 44).

Specifically, Paul's arguments in 1 Cor. 10 against the idolators are inexplicable if the sacrament's body and blood carry no merit in and of themselves. Some Corinthians were partaking of the sacrament and eating sacrifices offered at local idols' temples, and of these Paul says:

Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (1 Cor. 10:18, 21)

To partake of the sacrifice identifies the worshipper with the sacrifice. It communicates to him its benefits. But it also implies fellowship and puts him in the sphere of influence of the god to whom the sacrifice is given. It puts him in the god's power, places him under his aegis, as it were. And the same thing happens at our Lord's table, when the sacrifice of Christ is — not sacrificed anew — but given to us, so that we, too, may be endued with its divine power. We might also cite John 6 at this point, which, while not necessarily sacramental, is surely not non-sacramental, and totally inapplicable to the Holy Eucharist:

Jesus therefore said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. For my flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him." (John 6:53, 55, 56)

Secondly, we can also say that Luther personally did not separate the benefits of the Lord's Supper from our Lord's true body and blood. He says, e.g., in the Large Catechism: "The body of Christ can never be an unfruitful, vain thing, that effects or profits nothing." (V, 30) And again, "He bids me eat and drink, that it may be my own and may benefit me, as a sure pledge and token, yea, the very same treasure that is appointed for me against my sins, death and every calamity." (V, 22). Indeed, far from denigrating the value of the reception of the body and blood, Luther valued it more highly than you or I probably dare to think. He sees it, even, as valuable for our physical bodies, for he says:

Now, because this poor bag of worms, our body, also has the hope of the resurrection from the dead and of eternal life, this body must also become spiritual and digest and consume all that is carnal in it. And that is what this spiritual food

accomplishes: if a man eats it bodily, it will digest his flesh and transform him, so that he too becomes spiritual, that is, eternally alive and blessed, as St. Paul says (1 Cor. 15), "It is raised a spiritual body." To use a crude illustration, the effect of this food is as if a wolf had devoured a sheep which proved to be so powerful a meal that it transformed the wolf into a sheep. Similarly, when we eat the flesh of Christ in a bodily and spiritual manner this food is so powerful that it transforms us into it and turns carnal, sinful, natural men into spiritual, holy, living men. This we are already, but still concealed in faith and hope.⁴²

What a tremendous eschatological statement that is!

How, then, should we understand Luther's explanation of the benefits of the Sacrament of the altar? They must, it is clear, be seen against the background of his time. Luther's problem was not that his people, coming out of a Roman Catholic tradition, had a low regard for the body and blood of Christ. On the contrary, the problem was quite the opposite: a magical understanding of its significance and benefits. Too many of them had an *ex opere operato* view of the effectiveness of this sacrament. Therefore, Luther, properly, concentrated upon the word of God which is so closely connected with Christ's body and blood. He saw that partaking of our Lord in the sacrament is valuable because, and only because, we have the promise in God's Word that it is, in fact, valuable (cf. LC, V, 22, 28-30), and that a mere reception of these divine elements does not assure forgiveness automatically to everyone, regardless of his faith (cf. LC, V, 33-35). He puts it well in one statement in the Large Catechism when he says: "Yet however great is the treasure in itself, it must be comprehended in the Word and administered to us, else we should never be able to know or seek it". (V, 30). Far from splitting the elements and the word, Luther kept them together in the tightest union. In the words of Edmund Schlink again, ". . . the intimate relationship between essence and benefit has its basis in Christ's words of institution by the power of which we have both Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins."⁴³