

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE CATECHISM

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Why We Have A Catechism-

NOV 16 '72

There is a reason for everything. We find that this is particularly true of Luther's Small and Large Catechisms. Under the Roman Catholic Church no one cared whether or not children were trained and educated in the Word of Life and salvation. They did not know what sin was outside of the fact that it was generally taught that not to obey the laws of the Catholic Church was a sin. Hence, many a one knew very little and all too many could not read even what was found in books.

"The Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer held their own throughout the Middle Ages down to the time of the Reformation, as the basis of popular education in the church. And Luther held them so highly that he declared these three parts contained in clear and thorough exposition the substance of the Scriptures, all essential homiletic material, and the essentials of Christian knowledge. An explanation of them is found not only in the treatise of 1520, but also in the Small Catechism issued in 1529, for which these three parts form the basis. June 1516, to Lent 1517, Luther preached on the Ten Commandments, and during Lent 1517 he explained the Lord's Prayer."

However, the conditions in the church as to ignorance of the Bible Truth among the laymen was appalling. This we see already from the "Luther's Preface to the Small Catechism". "Alas, Good Lord, of all the misery I saw! The people, especially in the villages, know nothing of Christian doctrine, and many pastors are sadly unfit and

incompetent to teach. Yet all are called Christians, have been baptized and enjoy the use of the Sacrament, although they know neither the Lord's Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments." And then he continues in his crude way, "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."

Then Luther continues to lay the blame where it belonged, namely on the preachers of that day: "O ye bishops, what will ye ever answer to Christ for having shamefully neglected the people and never for a moment discharged your office? You command the Sacrament in one form and insist on your human laws and yet at the same time you do not care in the least whether the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, or any other part of the Word of God. Woe, woe, unto you forever!"

"Therefore, I entreat you all for God's sake, who are pastors and preachers, to devote yourself heartily to your office, to have pity on the people who are entrusted to your office, and to help us inculcate the Catechism upon the people, especially to the young---".

Confer Triglotta-Saxon Visitation p. 67-88

Thus it was Luther's chief concern to give the proper education to both old and young concerning the doctrines of the Bible, so that they might be confirmed and fully prepared to examine themselves before coming to the Lord's Table and partaking of the Body and the Blood of the Lord Jesus. And that is something which Paul exhorts us all to do in I Cor. 11, 28.

Thus Luther set out on the tremendous task before him. He did not have time to revise the old prayer books of which one was called

"Hortulus Animae" or "The Little Garden of the Soul" or another "Paradisus Animae" or "The Soul's Paradise" of which he says, "Such books stand in need of a most thorough revision or perhaps they should be entirely destroyed. His thought was to get into the hands of the Christians something as simple as possible and as soon as possible.

That was not such an easy task even for the gifted Luther. It seems all so simple and easy that one should mention that Luther spent very much time in study and preparation for this task. In preparing the people for the better understanding of the Great Truths which all should know, he also prepared himself for the work by preaching upon the chief parts. As early as 1516 Luther preached on the commandments in the pulpit "of the Wittenberg pastor Simon Heinz". In 1517 he wrote a very brief exposition of the Ten Commandments. Then in 1519 followed another, the "A Short Form to Understand And Pray the Lord's Prayer". Both were well received and welcomed, but neither of these are in the form we have them today. These two short forms even reached Switzerland, and even as late as 1844 were translated into English. But still Luther was very busy with revisions. In 1520, together in a booklet containing the Lord's Prayer and the Commandments, Luther first came to explain the Creed, but dividing it according to the Trinity (Three), whereas Rome had always divided into twelve parts. The thoughts in his mind had definite steps: Sin, Grace, and Prayer "to obtain these gifts". (Cf. Graebner's Story of The Catechism" on the original Creed. p. 23-25). This short form of 1520 served as the handbook of religious instruction until the year 1529 when the full Small Catechism appeared in print. The Short Form

formed the first Evangelical Catechism in England as part of the Booklet of Prayers of 1522 (Marchall's Primer).

But Luther was far from satisfied with his efforts. "He went over the same ground again and again. Series upon series of sermons did he preach." Although in 1523 there was some work done on the Lord's Supper under the title of "Five Questions in Regard to the Holy Supper", it was not until 1525 that Baptism and Lord's Supper appeared in mention as chief parts of the Catechism in a booklet which was very likely published by Bugenhagen, but "the text closely follows the thoughts of Luther. But Luther still continued to preach on the Catechism thoughts. And Roerer, who took notes on these sermons, shows that the sermons in 1528 had much to do with the final preparations of the draft of the Small Catechism. Following the third cycle of sermons preached in December of 1528 the familiar phrases appear more and more, as seen from Roerer's Manuscripts. Thus in the winter of 1528 and 1529 he wrote both the Small and the Large Catechisms. It appeared first, not in book form, but in form of posters which were hung on the wall so that everyone able to read might have them before him constantly for study and memory work. By March 16, 1529 the Poster Edition of the Five Chief parts was completed. From one of Roerer's letters of May 16th it can be seen that the Catechism had appeared in book form by that date. The Large Catechism probably had appeared several weeks before April 23, 1529.

#### ORDER OF CATECHISM

To Luther the order of the Catechism in its arrangement as we have it today was a simple thing. He regarded it as a divinely

ordered act of God that the Commandments, Creed and the Lord's Prayer were preserved throughout the centuries. And he kept them in that order, only adding and enlarging upon the other parts which were so necessary. He himself states the reasons for the arrangement:

What shall I do?

What shall I believe?

How shall I pray and be sure that God will hear me?

But a fourth question remained.

How will God nourish my spiritual life?

This question is answered in the other three chief parts of the Catechism.

Of course, at this time Luther also stood in a fight with the Anabaptists and other fanatics who got off to all sorts of heresies and claimed revelations outside of the Word. This induced him to add the last three parts in clear and concise statements of Scripture what the Bible itself stated. Thus Baptism, the Ministry of the Keys and Holy Communion found their way into the Catechism to guard the church, so newly grounded in the Word, from falling prey to these fanatics of whom there were not a few.

#### THE PURPOSE OF THE CATECHISM:

It becomes evident from the study of the Bible that Luther had hit the mark in his Catechism. We can see immediately that the fundamental doctrines of the Bible were clearly and briefly taught.

However, it would be accusing Luther falsely to state that he overthrew everything in the Catholic Church. No, Luther kept that

which was scripturally correct and true. He believed and taught that the old doctrines were still to be found in the Roman Catholic Church, but for the most part they were buried underneath the rubble of man-made doctrines which were contrary to Scripture. The Decalog, Creed and Lord's Prayer were by no means innovations made by Luther. The apostles and the church fathers of old had taught them. Augustine had used them. He was ever conscious of the fact that the Christian Church was ever the same, but the Roman Church had left the faith and besmirched it with their lies. He used the same old vessels, only now filling them with new clear wine which was nothing but the old wine of the Bible itself. He sloughed off the human flesh and blood and garbed the facts with Bible truth. Hence, amid it all Luther was a conservative and not a fanatic. Luther saw clearly because he did not permit his eyes to be filled with malice and hatred. He kept his eyes on the Word of Life. Thus one can speak of Conservatism and Progress with Theo. Graebner who places the thoughts in the following fine way:

"Luther did not create the three chief parts; they existed long before he wrote his Catechisms.

However, -

1. He preached, expounded, and popularized these elements of Christian instruction in a manner to which the church had not been accustomed these many centuries.
2. He supplied the important sections on Baptism, Confession and the Lord's Supper.
3. He knocked off the barnacles of Roman error and superstition.
4. He eliminated the Romanistic interpretations, which made of

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the Catechism only another crushing load upon the heart and conscience.

5. He recovered the evangelical interpretation of those ancient confessional phrases.

6. He brought about a general revival of catechetical method and thus laid the foundation not only for modern schools and popular education, but above all, for a sound indoctrination of youth in the saving doctrines of the apostles."

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One of the finest tributes paid Luther's Small Catechism is the absolute silence the world over of replacing this Catechism in Lutheran circles. No one has endeavored to improve upon it. No one, as far as is known, has gotten out pen and ink to out-do Luther. No one has thus far, in the circle of the sectarian churches, struck the intelligent, clear and concise terminology which Luther used. No one has struck the same evangelical, truly Gospel-note, which rings out even in the explanation to the First Commandment and ends with the worthy reception of the Lord's Supper. Each points to the cardinal truth of forgiveness through faith in Christ Jesus. It is truly a gem today as it was in the year 1529.

The language which Luther used is rhythmic and beautiful, full of alliterations which makes memory pleasant and easy. It is truly a jewel, a pearl of great price, which the Lutheran Church possesses. The thoughts strike a personal, subjective note which speaks in a tone of confession. Each word rings out as it were: "This is my faith. I believe this."

Distribution of the Catechism was far and wide. Almost incen-

santly Luther had warned and exhorted the people to give their children thorough instruction in the Catechism as a handbook of Christian doctrine, which had a fixed text which the children could memorize year after year, and become thoroughly indoctrinated. He urged the parents to accept their responsibility toward their children as teachers. Thus in the home, later on more and more in the schools which were established, and in church on Sunday afternoons and on weekdays, the Catechism was taught. The influence was tremendous. We are, no doubt, reaping the fruits of those labors to this day in the Lutheran Church. As time went on, many schools were opened. Thirty-seven years after the first publication of the Catechism Mathesius could say:

"There have now been printed of the Catechism-praise be to God!- more than a hundred thousand copies in this and other countries and are being used in all academies and public schools!."

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#### THE CATECHISMS COURSE THROUGH OTHER LANDS

The Catechisms' course through Europe was fairly spectacular. It was first translated and printed in book form in the Low German. Later on into the various dialects of the German lands-such as Dutch, Friesian - later on into the language of Russians and Poles, Lithuanians and other Eastern countries. It was the first book ever published for the ancient Wends and Prussians.

But this precious little book could not remain within the confines of Germany. "The Small and Large Catechism shall forever be preserved for the churches of this country," was the regulation



adopted for Lower Austria. Still greater success was found in Upper Austria. Here it became a part of the Sunday afternoon services conducted much like the "Christenlehre" of a few years ago. Bohemia, Hungary, where it was the first book published by the Hungarian reformer Caspar Heltai, Roumania where it appeared in the native tongue in 1544, Little Poland, Greater Poland, where it appeared as early as 1530, Courland, Livonia and Esthonia in the Baltic province.

To the Scandinavians. As early as 1536 the Reformation was recognized. Four Danish editions of the Catechism between 1532 and 1536 were recognized. Norway received its own translation as early as 1541, Icelandic 1562, Swedish about 1568 as well as the Finnish.

As early as the first year of publication, the Catechism came to England. Through Cranmer's Catechism, which was a translation of Luther's, published 1548, Luther's Catechisms became the Catechism of England. This was about the time William Tyndale, Luther's pupil, translated the Bible into English. Due to the Reformed political influence which was brought to bear, the Lutheran faith did not become the dominant religion it was destined to be.

However, inspite of the drastic measures which had been taken against the Lollards who had prepared books on the Reformation, the Catholic Church was not successful in stopping the sale and the study of these books. It went so far that the tavern and ale house became places where discussions of the Oracles of God were held. "The king found it necessary, by a proclamation, to discourage these public debates." Of course, political entanglements had much to do with hindering the Lutheran Reformation in England and gave the Reformed

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group quite a boost. Yet, before that took place William Tyndale translated the Bible into English and that under the influence of Luther's translation. This gave England a priceless heritage. And before the Luth. influence decreased in England the highest dignitary of the Church of England, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had given to his people an English translation of Luther's Catechism. However, there Luther's name was buried under Cranmer's who rendered a more voluminous Catechism, where the actual text of the Catechism was also lost.

Cranmer had been sent to Germany on a mission for Henry VIII. At Nurenberg he was married. There he also became acquainted with Luther's "Kinderpredigten" which contained the Catechism and had been translated into Latin by Justus Jonas in 1539. Cranmer's Catechism is entirely a translation of this book. Thus for a time Luther's Catechism became the Catechism of the Anglican Church. Cranmer died March 21, 1556, an outcast of the church, because bloody Mary, a fanatic Catholic, had come to the throne of England as successor of Edward the VI. He, Cranmer, died at the stake with the words of Stephen on his lips.

The Dutch, Swedes and Germans brought the Catechisms of Luther to America. The first English Catechism was printed in 1749, probably on Ben Franklin's presses in Philadelphia, in whose office a German reprint appeared in the same year. The translator was Peter Brunnholtz, a Lutheran Pastor, assisted by Peter Koch, a Swedish Lutheran. There were other translations: Dr. J. C. Kunze 1794; Dr. P. F. Mayer 1816; Missouri Synod 1884; Braille Catechism published by the Missouri Synod in 1927.

To The Red Man the Catechism also comes. In fact it is the first

book ever published, being translated into the language of the American Indian. This was done by the Swedish Pastor John Companius who came to America to minister to the Swedish Lutherans, settled on the Delaware. He succeeded very well with this translation.

The efforts of Dr. Alfred Uplegger, Sr. dare surely not be overlooked by us. Not only did he give the Apaches a written language, but translated the Lutheran Catechism into their tongue. No doubt this Catechism has done much to lead these people to a much better understanding of Christian doctrine. Such translations prove also very necessary in some of our other farflung mission fields such as Rhodesia, Mexico, Puerto Rico and our new field in South America, where the Spanish language is used in their daily life. As far as I know, some work has already been done in giving the Spanish-speaking people a translation of this "Gem of the Reformation" in their own language.

It is our hope that the introduction to the Small Catechism and its history will be brought to the attention of our young. They must have an appreciation of that little book if they are to take the study of this Catechism seriously. All too often the Catechism is placed under the noses of our children without them knowing what a tremendous effort went into preparing this marvelous little book. Dr. Luther spent many hours upon it. Let none of us take it lightly. Here Christian doctrine and its study will not only guide the children's feet on the "way of truth", fundamental truths and doctrines, but it will also serve us pastors and teachers to be mindful of these sacred doctrines of Scriptures. The needs of the soul have not changed, even though 543 years have passed into history.

(This paper was presented to the Winnebago Pastoral Conference  
September, 1972)

by Gerhard A. Schaefer, pastor