

The Small Catechism of
Dr. Martin Luther
**The Revision of
and an Exposition
Luther's Catechism**
for Children and Adults
Written in
"An Exposition for Our Times"
Contemporary English

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“This instructional and devotional aid by Professor David Kuske of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary at the request of the Board for Parish Education, is an exposition for our times”(p.77 *WLQ, vol.80, 1983*) This is a quotation from Pastor Paul Kolander’s review of Professor David Kuske’s revision of the exposition of the catechism. This revision was just one of a number of changes in our synod in the early 1970’s. There was an obvious and deliberate move to the use of contemporary language in our synod. The NIV was quickly catching on and the revision of the *Enchiridion* was a necessity for the better learning of our children and adults. The revision of Luther’s Catechism was inevitable. The catechism revised by Professor Kuske was truly an exposition for our times. The revision would contain the NIV, the revised *Enchiridion*, and many more passages and diagrams. The entire project was the work of many people who used the gifts that God gave to them to produce an instructional book that would meet the needs of our confessional Lutheran synod. This paper will follow the steps our synod took to revise Luther’s Catechism. We will look at the synod’s move from the KJV to the NIV, the time it took to produce a revision of the *Enchiridion*, the planning process of the Committee appointed to revise the catechism, and finally a study of the final product and the many improvements which we enjoy today.

OUR FIRST CATECHISMS

The first catechism used by our synod was the Dresden catechism. Since German was being spoken in most of our schools and churches, the synodical catechism was also written in German. But as the synod grew English began to move into our schools and churches. A teaching tool was needed in both the English and the German. In 1907 a ten-year project began which would produce

the catechism used for many years in our synod. Fredrich explains why the process of producing a new catechism took so long. *"At the outset a prestigious committee was entrusted with the work, consisting of Professor Ernst, Professor Schaller, President Soll, and Pastor Gausewitz. After six years and the addition of Teacher R. Albrecht to the committee, however, little had been accomplished, perhaps the committee was too prestigious"*(p.125). At the 1913 synodical convention it was decided that the work of revising the catechism be given to one man. Pastor Carl Gausewitz of Grace Lutheran Church(1906-1927)was chosen for the job. Pastor Gausewitz produced a catechism for our synod available in both German and English. Then in November of 1956 for \$1.00 you could purchase the revision of the Gausewitz catechism(only in English), an eight-year project which added 100 pages to the original 247. This ^{was} ~~would be~~ the catechism that most congregations in the WELS would use for many years.

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But already in the early 1970's there was once again a need for a new catechism. Professor David Kuske of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary believes there were basically two reasons why a revision was needed. First and most significant was the fact that children were having trouble with the wording of the Gausewitz catechism, including all of the passages in the King James Version. A second reason was that people were beginning to use other materials besides the Gausewitz catechism. Some pastors were using Iver Johnson's work, *"Growing Trees"* while other pastors and teachers were producing their own materials and worksheets for their students. There was nothing wrong with pastors and teachers using different materials, but the message was clear. A new catechism was needed that used the NIV, that contained a contemporary translation of the *Enchiridion*, and that had questions and answers the children could understand.

THE MOVE TO THE NIV

But our synod needed to make some changes of its own before a revised catechism could be produced. The first was our synod's move from the King James Version to the New International Version. This was a long, patient process that has led the way to the use of contemporary, but doctrinally sound language in our synod churches, schools, and homes. Pastor William Fischer, member of the Revision Committee for the catechism, recalls a seminar that was held in January of 1974 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The participants at this seminar were to evaluate the various contemporary translations of the Bible. The participants included all the members of the Commission on Christian Literature and the Seminary Faculty, faculty members from both Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College, members from the Board for Parish Education and the Commission on Worship, and many others. The consensus at the seminar was that the Seminary Faculty would study the New Testament of the NIV and report its findings to the CCL for consideration by the Districts in the summer of 1974. In general the faculty's reaction to the translation of the NIV was favorable. But the Seminary Faculty did find some problems with the translation and even suggested some changes which eventually found their way into the first edition ^{of the} *contemporary Bible* which was released on October 27, 1978.

Since feelings were generally favorable toward the NIV, the synod at the 1975 Convention instructed the Commission on Christian Literature *"to begin immediately all studies necessary for the production of liturgical, catechetical, and educational material using the NIV translation"* (1975 *Proceedings*, p.62). And yet it was resolved that *"the synod refrain at this time from giving official endorsement to the NIV"* (1975 *Proceedings*, p.62). Then at the 1977 Convention the synod resolved to commend the New Testament of the NIV to the people. If the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

faculty would also find the Old Testament of the NIV acceptable, the Board for Parish Education could use the NIV in the preparation of instructional material. But this action would be reviewed at the 1979 convention (1977 *Proceedings*, p.73-74). Finally at the 1979 synod convention it was reported that, "In general, the faculty found the NIV to be a readable translation, appropriate for both devotional and liturgical use, faithful to the original, and doctrinally sound" (BoRaM '79, p.196). Therefore it was resolved that the synod commend both Old and New Testaments of the NIV to the people, to the Board for Parish Education for use in its instructional materials, and that the publishing agencies of the synod chose the NIV for their newly printed materials. And again it was resolved that "this action should not be construed as the adoption of the NIV as the Synod's official Bible" (1979 *Proceedings*, p.93).

THE REVISION OF THE *ENCHIRIDION*

The second change which made a revision of the catechism inevitable was the revision of the *Enchiridion*. This writer, along with Pastor Fischer, believes this was even more influential in the push for a revised catechism than the move to the NIV. Pastor Fischer believes that the revision of the exposition was inevitable because if the chief parts of the catechism are revised, the entire catechism is going to be changed and will be in need of a revision.

It all began at the 1971 convention where a resolution was passed that the Board for Parish Education appoint a committee to study the feasibility of revising the *Enchiridion* of our synodical catechism. The Revision Committee consisted of four men: Pastor Werner Franzmann, Literary Editor of Northwestern Publishing House and editor of the Northwestern Lutheran at the time, who former Professor John Jeske says was "known for his insistence on clear writing"; Pastor Arnold Meyer, son of Prof. John Meyer, who had been a teacher for about 25 years and contributed valuable

insights; Pastor Gordon Synder, a member of the Northwestern Publishing House Board, and Professor John Jeske, who was appointed chairman of the Committee. The Committee had three aims regarding the revision: *"1) Remain faithful to Luther's thoughts and words. 2) Provide a translation which speaks clearly to our youth. 3) To retain Luther's genius of expression, his rhythmic, poetic flow of language"*(BoRaM '73, p.34). Jeske says that one thing the Committee decided upon early was that they would share the first revision with the members of the synod so that they would be aware of the changes and would be able to make any comments. According to Jeske this served two purposes: *"It produced some worthwhile suggestions, and defused any suspicion that the synod was trying to foist a revised catechism on unsuspecting congregations."*

The Committee then submitted their tentative revisions to the synod for study. The Board for Parish Services suggested that copies of the revision be sent out to pastors and teachers in the synod for their comments and suggestions. But this wouldn't be acted upon because of the 1975 convention. ~~It was there that~~ the revisions of the Committee were appreciated but there were some concerns as to whether the revisions weakened the intent of Luther(1975 *Proceedings*, p.59). Professor Jeske recalls the incident at that 1975 convention which delayed the approval of the revision two more years. The Revision Committee had problems with some wording in the 1956 Gausewitz catechism that they believed was misleading. On page 13 of the catechism the question is asked, *"What is the ministry of the Keys?"*. On the bottom of the page it then asks the question, *"What do I believe according to these words?"*, in other words, "Who has the right to forgive and to not forgive sins?" The Revision Committee had a problem with the answer. Professor Jeske comments on the Committee's feelings. *"According to that answer, a **pastor** has the divine right not only to absolve penitent sinners, but also to exclude impenitent sinners from the congregation.*

Our Committee did not believe that statement reflects the practice of WELS congregations. Congregations of Christians excommunicate the impenitent sinner; WELS pastors don't take that upon themselves." The Committee also noted that Luther's Small Catechism doesn't have a section entitled "Ministry of the Keys", therefore the material found on page 13 wasn't really part of Luther's Small Catechism. The Committee decided that since it wasn't a part of the Lutheran confessions, they would revise the wording to reflect the practice of the WELS that the congregation excommunicates and not the pastor. This was part of the final revision which was to be approved in the 1975 convention. But when it came time to approve the revision a pastor rose up and warned the delegates saying there was false doctrine in the revision and that the delegates should not approve the revision. Even though the accusations were false, the delegates became confused and worried. The revision was sent back again for further study. The synod then resolved that no publications be sent out until the revision was available in acceptable form. Then in 1979 the revision of the *Enchiridion* was complete.

"Whereas after 8 1/2 years of studying revisions and suggested changes, the third revision of the contemporary translation of the catechism is now completed; therefore, be it resolved that the BPE be directed to print in paperback form the contemporary translation of the Enchiridion and make it available to those congregations which choose to use it; and be it further resolved that our present Enchiridion be offered as long as sufficient demand for it continues"(1979 Proceedings, p.94).

The revision of the *Enchiridion* was a long and well-thought out process and for good reason.

Professor John Jeske explains:

"There are three books which most directly affect the spiritual life and growth of WELS Lutherans: the Bible, hymnal, and catechism. We work with a newly revised catechism, with a contemporary Bible translation, and with a revised hymnal. Of the three the catechism was the first one to be revised. Twenty years ago lots of pastors and teachers had recognized the need for updating the language of the

catechism, but there were also plenty of people who considered it next to sacrilege to lay hands on Luther's Small Catechism or the King James Bible. The committee, therefore, resolved to work very slowly and deliberately."

There was some animosity toward the *Enchiridion* revision. People wondered why we needed a revision when the old one was just fine. Still others asked the question, "*Dare we make changes in one of the Lutheran Confessions?*" (Jeske). But as Jeske continues to say, "*We are not changing the original German text of a confessional document. We are only suggesting there was a better way to put Luther's words into English.*" It is clear that the change to the NIV and the revision of the *Enchiridion* cleared the way for a revision of the synod's catechism.

THE BEGINNING OF THE REVISION

The revision process of Luther's Catechism began in 1977 when the synod approved the BPE's plans to appoint a committee to study the need for a revision of the exposition of the catechism. According to Professor Kuske, Pastor William Fischer was the person most adamant for a revision of the catechism. Fischer went to the BPE in September of 1977 and recommended that Professor Kuske be the writer of the catechism. At that time Professor Kuske was the Seminary representative for the Board for Parish Education and had already worked with Pastor Fischer on a number of other projects. Kuske remembers that Fischer and he had discussed a revision of the catechism for some time already. Kuske also believes it was his good relationship with Pastor Fischer that also led to his recommendation to write the revision. The others on the Committee included Rev. Richard Frohmader as chairman, Rev. Wayne Mueller, Teacher James Raabe, and Professor Erich Sievert. In that same year the Committee sent out a questionnaire to all the pastors and teachers in the synod to find out what should be done in the revision. Should the revision be the same format of the Gausewitz catechism or should they take a completely different approach?

Kuske says in the past the approach was that the catechism was supposed to serve two purposes: 1) For pastors teaching confirmation class. 2) For people throughout their life for the basics of Christian doctrine. The questionnaires were returned with various comments. Some suggested that the catechism be more helpful in the classroom. Others thought that it should contain more passages for adults. But from the questionnaires returned from some 700 pastors and teachers, almost 95% said that the catechism should be for both adults and children.

In May of 1978, after having a meeting to study the feasibility of revision of the exposition, the Committee reported the following to the districts: 1) The revision was necessary. 2) Those who want to use the present catechism may do so. 3) The content of the 1956 Gausewitz catechism would basically remain the same. The Committee also expressed several reasons why the revision was necessary.

“1) There is a need for simplification of the language and presentation, so that a child can understand it better.

2) The increasing use of a modern Bible translation in our synod necessitates the adaption of the exposition to such a translation.

3) The contemporary translation of the Enchiridion necessitates the adaption of the exposition to this translation.

4) There is a need for more Bible passages and further development especially in the last three chief parts.

5) The fact that it will take a number of years to produce a revision necessitates beginning the work at this time” (Report to the Ten Districts, 1978, p.81).

For their study on the feasibility of a revision, Kuske says that the Committee basically went through the entire Gausewitz catechism and looked for things that they should keep and things they should drop. The Committee felt that there were a number of doctrinal sections which needed improvement like the Sixth Commandment, fellowship, and inspiration. Another suggestion was that there would not to be any questions in the catechism without any Biblical support(q.10, 13, 26,

etc.). The Gausewitz catechism had a number of questions without any passages to support the answers to the questions. The omission of such questions is what led to the sections like "*Entering Marriage*" (p.94). They also wanted to change the appearance of the Gausewitz catechism. The print of the Gausewitz catechism was very small which made reading laborious. They also wanted to change the way the questions and answers were presented. But there were also many things that they wanted to keep. Kuske says the Committee wanted to keep the general content of the Gausewitz catechism because of its solid presentation of law and gospel. This was an aspect of the Gausewitz catechism that the Committee was committed to keeping.

At the 1979 convention it was reported that Professor Kuske had consented to work on the exposition in the next two summers. It was also resolved that the NIV be used for the sake of uniformity and that the revision be completed as soon as possible (1979 *Proceedings*, p.94).

Kuske would begin^a his work on the revision of the catechism in the Summer of 1980 and then followed up with the handbook, completing it in the following summer of 1981. Professor Kuske was serving at the Seminary at the time and had been for about six years. He was able to work on the revision because the faculty gave him no assignment for Summer Quarter.

The Committee took a structured approach to the revision process. They asked Kuske if he would do the first portion of the catechism up to the First commandment. Throughout the revision he was then asked to send his work to the members of the Committee for their comments and suggestions. Professor Kuske mentioned that he was very direct with the committee and told them not to spare his feelings in their evaluation. Kuske believed that their honesty was absolutely necessary to produce a quality product for the synod. From his comments it is clear that the Committee didn't spare his feelings. Everyone returned their comments on Kuske's work and he

was asked to start over. Some of the criticisms were that there were not enough passages. Some members of the Committee wanted more passages so adults would be able to do more in depth study on their own. Others had a problem with the form in which the questions were asked and the form in which the answers were given. Professor Kuske did the revision over again up to the First Commandment, sent it out to the members of the Committee, and this time there was general approval. He continued to revise the rest of the catechism and sent in the portions he had completed for the Committee's input. Throughout the revision Professor Kuske stated that he received many helpful comments and suggestions, appreciated all of them, and included almost all of them in the revision.

THE REVISION

Even though the doctrinal content of the two catechisms is very similar, there are some obvious internal differences in form between the Gausewitz catechism and the revised catechism. The Gausewitz catechism contained 889 passages and 418 questions while the revised catechism had 1,693 passages and 376 questions. The inclusion of more passages was an objective of the Revision Committee. It was thought that if this catechism was to be for adults as well as children, it should have more passages. The Committee knew that the pastors and teachers wouldn't be able to use all of the passages but they wanted to produce the best book possible. The reason the revised catechism has fewer questions is because the Gausewitz catechism would develop similar thoughts with more than one question. The revised catechism would take three questions (for example) and turn it into one question with two sub-points. So instead of a number of questions with similar thoughts, they decided to place those thoughts under only one question. Kuske says that the idea was, *"To give more Scripture proof while at the same time try to help the person who is reading it*

with the sub-points."

Another change from the Gausewitz catechism was the way in which the questions, answers, and passages were presented in the catechism. The Gausewitz catechism had its questions first with the answers to those questions immediately following and then the passages. Professor Kuske thought that it would be more reasonable to ask the question, let Scripture answer the question with the various passages, and then have an answer which summarizes the thoughts of all the passages.

IMPROVEMENTS IN THE APPEARANCE

Even though the revision may not have ^{had} many changes regarding content, there ^{were} are many changes regarding the appearance of the catechism. The new catechism had to be expanded because it contained so much more information. If it had remained the size of the 1956 Gausewitz catechism, it would have been a thick book. But at the time books were being published in larger sizes and this seemed necessary for the new catechism. As a whole the revised catechism is much more attractive ^{than} compared to the Gausewitz catechism. The new catechism was done in much larger type which made it much easier to read. The passages have words in italics which distinguish the main thoughts of the questions in a particular section. The answers for all of the questions are in capital letters which draw our eyes to the main point of a section. The two-color printing was also something that was quite new for books in the synod. The blue color, very popular at the time, is to draw our attention to the questions and answers of the section. All of these are wonderful additions to help make learning easier for the student.

NEW ADDITIONS TO THE CATECHISM

There are many additions to the revised catechism which have greatly improved the catechism. The Glossary and Index of Topics are not new to the catechism but they have been

improved and updated to fit the language of the new catechism. Both were done by two Seminary students who were in their senior year. Pastor Fischer asked Professor Kuske if there were any students willing to take on this project. Professor Kuske talked privately with two of his students, Joel Fredrich and Tom Nass to work on the glossary and index. Both agreed to do it and Kuske says that they enjoyed the project because they were able to work with the new catechism and they received a reduced amount of homework in his education class.

The diagrams of the revision were the combined effort of two men. The first was Professor Kuske. Kuske was the creator of the concepts of the diagrams. Kuske had made diagrams for the Ten Commandments which he used for many years in his confirmation classes. Then while he was revising the first part of the catechism he would hand in these diagrams after every commandment to the committee for their comments. The Committee thought the diagrams were a great improvement to the catechism so they asked Kuske to continue doing diagrams for the rest of the catechism. But even though the diagrams were doctrinally sound, their appearance was still rough. It was then that Pastor Fischer said that he had someone who would be able to take the diagrams and do a professional job with them. The man was Duane Weaver, a designer at NPH, who would put Kuske's concepts into professional form. At the time of the revision, Pastor Fischer spent a lot of time at NPH working with the staff on preparing his Sunday School materials. It was there that Fischer came into contact with Weaver and mentioned the Luther's Catechism project to him. Weaver agreed to work on the project and some time later would ^{met} meet with Kuske for the first time at the home of Pastor Fischer. Weaver and Kuske would work together for three days going through all of the diagrams of the catechism, so that it was clear to both men what the diagrams would say and look like in finished form. Therefore when Weaver would put them in professional form the

diagrams were both attractive and doctrinally sound. But Kuske believes that the diagrams are already out of style because they are strictly words and arrows. He believes that children today need more pictures to grab their attention. He says that the diagrams in the catechism are good but they could be better. Pictures of people, symbols, and other visual aids would be more helpful for children to learn and for pastors and teachers teaching the basics of the Christian faith.

The pictures which appear before each of the six chief parts of the catechism also improved the look of the catechism(p.41, 131, 231, 251, 269, 289). These were also done by Mr. Weaver

THE EXPLANATIONS

The Explanation sections in the revised catechism came from certain questions in the Gausewitz catechism. The Committee thought that the revised catechism should not have any questions answered without Biblical support. There were many questions in the Gausewitz catechism that would answer a question without any Bible passage to support it. Those passages were pulled out and put into narrative sections(“*Life of Luther,*” “*Entering Marriage,*” p.94, “*The Creeds,*” p.135, etc.) These were written by Kuske at the request of the Revision Committee. The Committee believed that any topics that are not specifically addressed in Scripture should be in narrative form as opposed to the question and answer format.

DOCTRINAL SECTION IMPROVEMENTS

There was no specific problem with the doctrine of the Gausewitz catechism. In fact most of it is used in the revised catechism. But the Committee believed that there were many areas of Scripture that needed better treatment in the new catechism. The following are the improved sections: The Natural Knowledge of God, Verbal Inspiration, The Sixth Commandment, Conscience, and Sins of Omission and Commission. The revision also added a Creation-Evolution

diagram(p.145) to help educate our children being taught the theory of evolution in the public school. The section on fellowship and prayer were also improved to combat the ecumenical attitude of our society. There are also intentional improvements in the Commandment section. After each of the commandments there are passages that explain the law as mirror, Christ's work for us and the law as a guide in the life of a Christian. This inclusion makes it possible for the pastor or teacher to include the gospel message in each of the lessons on the commandments. The Nicene Creed is also included in the revision which was not present in the Gausewitz catechism.

The order of the last four chief parts of the catechism has also been changed. The Sacraments immediately follow the Creeds because the Committee believed it was a natural transition to move from the work of the Holy Spirit into Baptism and Holy Communion. The Committee also moved the Lord's Prayer to the end of the catechism because they felt it was a good summary of all of the teachings in the catechism.

THE FIELD TEST

After the Committee approved the revision of the entire catechism, Pastor Fischer suggested that they do a field test of the catechism. He then chose 50-60 congregations in the synod, large and small, missions and self-supporting, those with schools and those without, to use copies of Professor Kuske's original draft for a full year. From this field test the Committee would receive approximately 500 suggestions of which Kuske says they used about 450. Overall the comments were suggested changes in the wording and the addition of certain questions. Kuske says that all of the comments and suggestions were helpful and appreciated and played a key role in producing a quality catechism.

THE HANDBOOK

The Handbook for the catechism was something Professor Kuske would complete in the following summer of 1981. It was done in response to the Committee's suggestion. As Kuske would revise sections of the catechism, he would explain to the Committee why he did certain sections different from the Gausewitz catechism. The Committee thought that these comments would be helpful for pastors and teachers to understand why certain passages were included and why certain questions are in a particular section. The Committee also decided not to include hymn verses like the Gausewitz catechism. Instead the Committee decided to put those hymn verses into the handbook along with other hymn verses chosen by Professor Kuske. And while Kuske was doing the revision, he was reading through Luther's Large catechism and decided to add portions of it. The discussion questions were something that Professor Kuske produced as he went along with the revision. After he would write a question and an answer, he would also write a discussion/application question. In general, Kuske believes the handbook was aimed at young pastors in their first years in the ministry.

USE OF THE REVISED CATECHISM

The revised catechism was accepted and put into use almost instantaneously. Kuske believes that the need for a catechism in the NIV was so great that it was received favorably by most everyone in the synod. There were some congregations who implemented the revision gradually so that children learning the KJV all their life would not have to switch immediately to the NIV in the revised catechism. But just as some individuals were opposed to the NIV, the revisions of the *Enchiridion*, and to the new hymnal, there were some opposed to the revised catechism. It seems the main reason was that some people wanted to stay with the KJV of the Gausewitz catechism.

Even in the first five years of the revision's use there have been many improvements suggested which are waiting to be used for the next revision. Professor Kuske believes that we are not too far away from another revision. He believes there should be a revision every fifteen to twenty years which would mean a revision in about five years. But since there isn't such a big push for a contemporary Bible translation, it may be ten years before another revision is begun.

Professor Kuske admits that he is not the one to ask for his personal opinion about the finished product. But he admits that he enjoyed doing the revision and he really enjoys seeing it being used. He believes the revision was generally a success because the demand was so great. People were hungry for a new catechism which used the NIV. Kuske also believes that it is a good product because of the Committee's hard work and the contributions of many people. Kuske demanded that they not spare his feelings and they didn't. The comments of the Committee, the field test suggestions, and a lot of work, especially by Professor Kuske are what produced a good product for the people. Professor Kuske's work of revising and the Committee's comments and suggestions proved to be a good combination.

When asked if he would do anything differently today, without hesitation Kuske mentioned the diagrams. Kuske believes that the diagrams are good but could be better. The diagrams could have more pictures and symbols which would be helpful in teaching and learning. There were some people who thought that the revision was too long and contained too much material. But Kuske believes these people are trying to teach the whole catechism with its 1,693 passages and 376 questions. But when it comes to the catechism as whole, Professor Kuske wouldn't change a thing.

We should feel proud to be associated with the Wisconsin Synod when we look at everything that was done to revise Luther's Catechism. Some may say that the synod was dragging its heels

when it was choosing a contemporary translation of the Bible to recommend to its people. Some may say that the synod wasted eight years revising the *Enchiridion*. This writer will say that the synod was not going to be hasty in choosing the NIV because this would be the translation of the Bible that the Wisconsin Synod would be using in its churches, schools, and homes for many years to come. It took more than eight years to revise the *Enchiridion* because the Wisconsin Synod wanted to be sure that the revision was true to the original. It was patience, wisdom, and God's blessing on the faithful work of many people which led to these changes. These changes led to the revision of our synod's catechism which is truly an exposition for our times.

Sources:

Interview with Professor David Kuske of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on April 14, 1996

Interview with former Professor of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, John Jeske on April 18, 1996.

Interview with Pastor William Fischer on April 18, 1996.

Interview with Mr. Duane Weaver of Northwestern Publishing House on April 26, 1996.

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