

Our Instruction and Confirmation Practices – Is It Time for a Change?

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Why me? And why was I asked to present a paper on this particular subject? I'll probably never know the answer to either question. It isn't important either, except for you to know that I come with no credentials, no particular qualifications and no special experience on this subject. By letting you know this right off, none of you will have reason to be particularly disappointed with the meager fare here offered.

You should also know that this is the very first time I have ever been asked to present a paper on any subject at a conference of any kind. After this, I probably won't have to worry about being asked again either.

Also a word about the subject matter of this paper. I have often heard the complaint that conference papers are not practical enough, or stated from the other direction, that such presentations are too doctrinal. Well, this subject is tremendously practical. From my point of view - dare I say it - almost too practical. What could be said might fill volumes. I didn't know how to start, how to proceed, or know where to end.

I hope that this paper will not forever afterward discourage the assignment committee from giving out more practical papers. Please, let no one think that future essayists will so poorly handle fine, practical subjects.

The title of the essay is a question. How shall I answer it? Maybe with a "yes", or a "no" or maybe with a "maybe". At this early point I will say that I will answer it with a "maybe," because it all depends on what one is talking about.

Beside this, I am positive that already many different things are being done. For centuries already great variety has been the rule. I personally have done some things in regard to catechism and confirmation somewhat differently. But I am sure there are many others doing similar things and doing them better. Others most likely are doing even more and doing far better than I ever will.

(I plan on doing better too, but the Lord has not seen fit as yet to answer affirmatively my prayer for more than 24 hours in a day or for some other method of finding or making more time.)

Mt. 28:19-20 "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."

This passage and scores of others like it, both from the Old and the New Testaments urge us to teach all that our Savior-God has made known to us in and through His sacred Scriptures. I am sure that on this point at least all of us can agree, that confirmation practices are intertwined with Christian education.

The Book of Deuteronomy and the Psalms surely make much of one generation passing on to the next the powerful, wonderful, merciful, faithful deeds of the Lord God for our redemption and salvation.

At the time of Jesus' visible, earthly ministry, the parents among God's people took this responsibility and privilege very seriously. And the New Testament Scriptures encourage the same practice.

So, we today need to be active in teaching people, including also the young, God's plan of salvation. It is also certain that we ought to be doing that in the best and most effective way we can possibly do it, Is it time for change?

Change?! That is a frightening word even in our 20th century, western civilization and culture, and certainly is within a confessional Lutheran church body such as we are ever striving, by God's grace, to be.

There are some kinds of change which I must say should never be tolerated, The catechisms (Large and Small) were unanimously, almost automatically adopted by our Lutheran Church well before 1580 as part of its confessional heritage. As in the case of the other Lutheran Confessions, we subscribe to them not "in so far as" but "because" they are a correct exposition of God's Word and Teaching, Except for the three ecumenical creeds, the Small Catechism is the one confession the vast majority of our membership is familiar with. If there were no other reason, knowledge of the Small Catechism by our people just because it is a confessional document of our Lutheran Church is reason enough to keep it, to teach it and. to believe what it says. The catechisms ought not, therefore, be changed or ignored!

There is a second, though related, way in which there should be no basic change. Acts 8:30-31 might properly fit in here. "Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked. 'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."

The catechism - by that term I mean that which Luther wrote in his various editions and any fuller, expanded versions of them such as the revised Gausewitz, revised from the earlier Gausewitz, which was basically an English translation of a revised German edition known as the Dresdener Catechism - is Luther's and , as a confessional writing, also is the Lutheran Church's gift to us. They offer to us in the catechisms guides to understanding the Scriptures and tools for us to use in helping others, especially the young, to understand God's plan of salvation.

Any changes should not, therefore, come in discarding the catechisms as teaching aids and tools. The Small Catechism is an absolutely splendid and wonderfully brief summary of the Bible's teaching of God's way of salvation, Provided that the language is kept current, the Small Catechism is timeless simply because Martin Luther did plagiarize the Scripture so thoroughly and consistently in producing the booklet.

Now, what about the use of the catechisms? Is this where some change might be advocated? Should the catechism be used as a formal outline for formal religious instruction? If so, should there be some specific age to begin such instruction and to end it? Should the end come at the ceremony known as confirmation? Should confirmation instruction more or less coincide with preparation for the reception of the Lord's Supper? Is it possible that age 13 or 14 already reflects too long a delay, at least for some of those young people, in receiving holy communion? Should confirmation instruction and catechism instruction be one and the same? Could not catechism instruction gradually shift into more of a Bible Class-type presentation preparing them for the sort of Scripture study that will be offered to them upon confirmation? Or should our adult Bible Classes, Sunday mornings and during the week, take on, at least with some regularity, more of a back to the basics, catechetical approach? And how shall catechetical instruction involve the Bible itself? Should such instruction stress the proof passage, Bible History or a combination of the two? How shall they be put together? Side by side? Intertwined?

All of the above questions restrict discussion to the use of the catechism by pastors and teachers in more or less formal instructional settings. But should the book(s) be used also in worship services? What about as a personal and/or family devotional booklet? Again, all sorts of hows, wheres, whens etc. come to mind. In other words, should not "catechism instruction" continue long after confirmation and first communion?

The purpose of this paper is not to delve into the religious instruction used by the Church since the days of the apostles, nor is its purpose to study the development of the catechism, specifically Luther's. So, I won't do it. But maybe a very brief glance at the roots of Luther's catechisms will give us some ideas on how we in 1982, might make use of the book. I list four historical usages and roots of Luther's catechisms.

First, Worship, including Bible Classes,

I. The sermon, II. The service, III. The class.

Second, The Prayer Book for the home

I. The Trilogy; 10 commandments, The Creed, The Lord's Prayer

II. Plus the two sacraments (confession)

III. The two appendices -- Prayers and Table of Duties.

Third, Classroom

I. Memorization, II. The catechetical method.

Fourth, Announcing for Holy Communion.

Let's take a closer look first at #3. Surely this is the most often used purpose of the catechism by us today, First, let us at least note that as far as historical roots go, this use was not first. Its use in the worship service and the promotion of its use in the home were higher on that historical list.

Number 3 came about especially because of the Saxon Visitation (inspection) of 1528-29, in which Luther himself also participated. Deplorable conditions were discovered. In his introduction to the Small Catechism Luther says, "In setting forth this Catechism or Christian doctrine in such a simple, concise, and easy form, I have been compelled and driven by the wretched and lamentable state of affairs which I discovered lately when I acted as inspector. Merciful God, what misery I have seen, the common people knowing nothing at all of Christian doctrine, especially in the villages! And unfortunately many pastors are well nigh unskilled and incapable of teaching; and though all are called Christians and partake of the Holy Sacrament, they know neither the Lord's Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments, but live like the poor cattle and senseless swine, though, now that the Gospel is come, they have learnt well enough how they may abuse their liberty."

This visitation was the final impetus for the actual publication of the catechisms, The first to be published was the Small Catechism, though, at first, not in book form, but on placards (chart form), This form was the first to be put into print apparently with, once again, the church and home especially in mind, The first to begin to be written and to appear in book form was the Large Catechism. From the beginning its special purpose was to assist pastors, teachers amid parents (especially fathers) in expanding upon and making various applications of the very brief form of the Small Catechism, The Small Catechism appeared about a month after the Large Catechism also in booklet (enchorion) form, Both catechisms grew out of not one but three series of catechism sermons preached by Luther in 1528.

Many of the questions I raised earlier fit under this section. There is simply no way. I am going to delve into each subject suggested by those questions, Obviously, then, I will not offer

answers either. I would hope that in the discussion period some of these matters might be discussed at least to stimulate some wholesome thinking. What is really needed is a book by someone of our fellowship researching some of these matters. In fact, I could imagine two or three books. Probably there would not be much duplicated material either!

I would, in order to encourage a little of that discussion today, like to plunge into a couple general areas. Please, these ideas are not all advocated by the author nor practiced; But what of the indissolubly united trio of catechetical instruction, confirmation and the reception of the Lord's Supper? In our circles catechetical instruction culminates in the public ceremony known as confirmation, which also doubles as the church's public announcement to the membership that these are now ready to receive the sacrament, After the confirmation rite all catechetical instruction does generally cease, "Confirmation is NOT graduation," we scream shrilly. But does not our practice scream even more loudly that confirmation is a sort of graduation from this kind of biblical instruction? And to some can this not be interpreted as graduation from biblical instruction in general?

Another matter, but related! Are not some 10-or 11-year-olds ready for the sacrament? Could not many of them, if instructed and prepared for that goal, be ready? Are not a significant number of 10 year olds disciples of Christ fully capable of remembering Christ, of discerning the Lord's body in the sacrament and of examining themselves?

In Luther's day some of the children, if they were ready, did receive the sacrament at even earlier ages. In Bugenhagen's introduction to the Small Catechism in Danish, the age of 8 is specifically mentioned in this connection, I personally am convinced that the enchiridion ought to be thoroughly memorized along with an appropriately large store of Bible passages. Ideally, this part of the instruction should begin at a very early age, and surely could be accomplished at such an age. After that, the memorization ought to be polished, perfected and made a permanent part of their memory. Gradually a more and more expanded doctrinal instruction ought to accompany these memorized chief parts. Here is where an expanded Gausewitz type catechism is of special use. But gears ought to be shifting again by the time they reach 12 or 13 years of age(??) into a more Bible Study form of instruction, from which they will learn that what they had memorized and learned earlier, indeed, comes directly out of the Bible.

I must say that it bothers me a lot to hear kids answer repeatedly that their faith in the Savior and knowledge of the way of salvation comes from the catechism. (Though I know I can understand that answer correctly).

If we do not have the time to place the Bible as a whole into the hands of our young people; if we do not have the time to show them that they can read their Bibles and actually get the basic meaning from that text, should we not perhaps start earlier or go longer, or both, to accomplish it?

Is it good enough to teach both catechism and Bible history side by side? Could this method not actually be perpetuating the idea that catechism is one thing and biblical doctrine something else? Another question that might be looked into is whether the kind of text offered by any Gausewitz-type-catechism is sufficient for our young people, After they hear the lesson taught in class, is the catechism text adequate to reinforce that lesson? It never was for me back in those days. I do not believe such a text is today, either, And believe it or not, I've actually tried to do something about it! For ten years now - beginning in my vicar year - I have written, revised and revised again what I call "Summaries". These "Summaries", in simple language and usually short sentences, in a page or less, restate the lessons just taught. A worksheet corresponding to the Summary is then assigned each week. I know that there are published booklets of this nature

available, Use them, if you feel comfortable with them, If you do not, then take the time and make the effort to produce your own. By the way, this sort of thing was being done already in the 16th century. (Sermons for children etc.)

Then there is one other matter about which I'd like to give my two cents worth, (Many of you may feel it worth little more). I do not know if it fits better under #1 - The Worship Service, 3 - The Classroom or even #4 - Announcing for Holy Communion. That is the matter of the pre-confirmation, public examination. Such a thing did not always exist. There was a brief pre-Holy Communion examination - short, simple and to the point, - based on the Small Catechism text for all those who announced their intention to receive the sacrament, each time they announced. This practice was a substitution for the Roman method of private, oral confession.

There was another practice sort of historically related to our pre-confirmation, public examination, Regularly, on Sunday afternoon or during the evening on a mid-week day, there was a "catechism type church service". We might describe it as a sort of Bible class based on a portion of the catechism together with a less formal worship service structure. (less formal than p. 5 or 15, but more formal than our typical Bible class). In many cases these weekly services really were the catechism classes. About the only difference between those and our classes was that other members of the congregation could and did attend, though usually in numbers nowhere approaching Sunday mornings. They also benefited from the instruction in this way.

And third, pastors or teachers always devised some way or other, usually involving a considerable period of time of general observation and examination, for determining when youngsters were ready to receive holy communion and/or to make a public, personal, confirmation of their faith.

Gradually all three of these things combined and developed into a one-time-only, pre-confirmation, pre-first communion, public examination, worship service. But even at that, its most important purpose continued to be the annual review of the chief parts of Christian doctrine for the congregation. But accidentally some people, rather foolishly, began to think that a child's performance at this annual, one or so hour event actually determined his or her readiness for confirmation and first communion. Under that kind of pressure it's a wonder that the children can remember their names, let alone the doctrine of the Ministry of the Keys.

As a substitution for this practice, this is what is currently being done at the congregation I serve. Several weeks before confirmation, a major pre-confirmation thesis is assigned to the class, The young people are given at least two weeks to write their paper, following a detailed outline, (I have a copy or two of that outline here, if any of you would be interested in glancing at it), These papers are handed in and read by me. I reread each one, taking notes, jotting down questions etc, Then, I interview each student individually, face to face, in the school library on the basis of his or her paper.

I love the method better than I ever imagined, the many hours required for the two or three weeks of interviewing notwithstanding. In many cases it is the first time they have spoken with a pastor on a personal level. And, lo and behold, they all learn that it isn't awful. Between pastor and sheep a precious rapport is encouraged, the pastor gains an overview of their faith, attitude, interests, concerns and yes, even problems. In each of the last three years one or two students have used the opportunity to ask for help. I do not think they would have done so otherwise. Some of them have their questions too, questions which maybe they would not have asked in front of the rest of the class. And what beautiful, thorough, thoughtful papers they write. They take it seriously, They write; not under duress, nervousness or fear, but out of calm

reflection and conviction. They no longer dread confirmation because of the earlier "examination", but eagerly look forward to it.

By the way, their papers are kept in my file for possible later use, I have already used two of them to reach out to help troubled young persons later on in time.

The disadvantages? Nothing but advantages, except for one. This method does not provide that annual chance, even for the few who did attend, to review the entire catechism, is there a way to solve this disadvantage? I've been thinking about it a lot lately, and I surely believe there are solutions, several of them, all perhaps better than the original, annual, pre-confirmation, public examination.

That leads over easily to another use of the catechism(s). Historically, and certainly in Martin Luther's thinking, the term "catechism" did not necessarily refer to a formal question-answer method of instruction. That may come as a surprise to many. When Luther used the term, he as often as not referred to preaching or lecturing with the 10 commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments or Confession as the basis. While the Greeks and Romans liked the question-answer method, anal perhaps used the term catechism (catechize) in that sense, the word just means to teach orally. Surely the question-answer method will always remain a basic method of instruction on any subject, but certainly is not the only one.

Surely one or more of the chief parts, with a little imagination, could be taught once a year, in a really fresh and interesting way to our adults in Bible class. Here is where someone (or several) with the gift of imagination and creativity needs to put his gifts to work, not only for your own classroom or congregation, but also to help the rest of us who are not gifted in that way. How about six nice, little booklets or one book with six chapters?

But before we move on to the last general subject it should be pointed out that your classroom and the Sunday worship service offer many other opportunities for repeatedly teaching those basic doctrines contained in the catechism. In his German Service Luther used a paraphrased form of the Lord's Prayer; it turns out, very similar to what later appeared in the Small Catechism. Are there not ways of weaving parts of the catechism itself into the confession part of the service, in our Order of Holy Baptism, into the Creed's recitation and into the Holy Communion half of the service? It would offer healthy variety to our services without causing disruption or confusion, Similar things could be done in the classroom with the Lord's Prayer, Creed and so forth.

Another use of the catechisms to be mentioned today also has very strong and deep roots historically, that is the devotional use of the book. Luther lamented the sorry lack of religious instruction in the home. Sound familiar? Shall we today just moan and groan about it? Luther wrote a prayer book, predating his catechisms by several years, But guess around what it was fundamentally structured? That's right, the 10 commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer! Later editions, still predating the catechisms, added the Sacraments and Confession. There are definite similarities between these earlier prayer-devotional booklets and the catechisms. Nor is it any accident that the Small Catechism included two appendices 1) Daily Prayers and 2) Table of Duties. Luther wanted the doctrine to be translated into daily devotions and into daily Christian living; i.e., a life of worship and a worshipful life.

Expanded catechisms, produced already in the 16th century, often included selections of Psalms and hymns to aid in those daily devotions. Earlier I questioned whether the text style of such expanded catechisms are sufficient as learning aids to the young, I do not want to give any wrong impression. While I feel a simple narrative form would be a great addition for 10-14 year olds, the present form ought also to be kept for several reasons. First, Gausewitz offers an

abundant pool of resource to the pastor and teacher for preparing lessons, (I hope not too many simply have the students read the chief parts, read the questions and answers and then read the Bible passages). Such a book safeguards us from overemphasizing our personal pet subjects (or the church body's or the historical situation's) and from overlooking certain other teachings, And young people do not stay 13 forever! If we can persuade them to open their catechisms again a little later in life, they, too, will discover a rich store of biblical material. So rich, in fact, that an almost endless series of daily devotions could be devised for personal and family use.

We ought to be using the catechism for such devotional purposes both for ourselves and for our families. We also need to encourage parents to be doing the same. Though such families are rare, I have participated in a family that did that and have observed a couple other families that did. Blessed are those families!

In this regard, the reason many do not use the catechism devotionally is that they have never thought of using it that way. Second, often parents simply do not know how to go about developing devotions for themselves and their families out of the catechism. Our expanded catechisms actually make it easy. I've decided that for several weeks during our congregation's next fall-winter-spring mid-week Bible class, we will take the time to learn how to do this. Here again, we could use a book or a series of booklets offering such devotions to our people. What a blessing to them! And how much more practical could anyone wish to be? Either we need to make the effort to show them how, or someone needs to produce.

Such devotions are needed. While our Meditations are adequate for more mature readers, they do not work very well for younger children.

It seems, for better or for worse, that the personal announcing of intent to attend the Sacrament is a rapidly dying custom among us. But where the practice is still observed, surely there is yet another opportunity for "teaching catechism."

When am I going to end? As I said at the beginning, this assignment seems to me to have been almost too practical. The more I read, the more I thought, the more came into mind. Hopefully others can take on some of the questions I've raised to supply answers. Maybe all of you have been stirred, just a tiny but, to new enthusiasm for the use of the catechism in the pulpit, during worship services, in the classroom, in Bible classes, and at home. Perhaps someone here will write one of the five or six books I've advocated being written. But when am I going to end? Right now.