

Introduction to the Small Catechism¹

It's so easy to take the Small Catechism for granted. Most of us spent a year or two memorising it for confirmation class and now it sits up on the shelf like a trophy, never to be opened again. What a great sadness that is!

The Small Catechism and its companion Large Catechism are two of the greatest documents ever written in the history of the church. They are the heart and soul of the Lutheran tradition, embodying what everyone must know and confess to be a Christian. Together with the Scriptures and the hymnal, the catechisms are the core of the Lutheran "catechetical method" - how we hand on the faith to the next generation. They ask and answer the important questions: "What does this mean?" and "Where is this written?"

Armed with nothing more than the Small Catechism, you could teach another person the Christian faith. No wonder our Confessions call the Small and Large Catechism, "the layman's Bible," for they "contain everything which Holy Scripture discusses at greater length and which a Christian must know for his salvation."

Luther wrote the Small Catechism after visiting the congregations of Saxony with Philip Melancthon. They were appalled by the conditions they observed. The common people had virtually no knowledge of the Christian faith and their pastors were no better. Many people didn't even know the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed or the Ten Commandments. To look at them, you wouldn't even know they were Christians! And this, only eleven years after Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door! You can imagine Luther's disappointment.

For several years, Luther had urged others to write a simple catechism for the common people, but nothing happened. After the Saxon visitation, Luther decided to do it himself. He made a simple booklet out of the core texts of the Christian faith: The Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and provided simple explanations that were easy to memorise. These were even printed as wall charts - a huge innovation for the day. The Large Catechism is sermons on the Small Catechism, preached during 1529. Many of the common people couldn't read very well, so by memorizing these texts and discussing them with their households, they could teach the Christian faith to their children and servants.

The method is really quite ingenious. In his preface to the Small Catechism, Luther laid out a simple three-step learning process. First, learn the text by heart. Stay with the same text and recite it out loud. Second, discuss what the text means. Again, keep the explanations simple and constant. Also take your time, so you don't get overwhelmed. Third, take up the Large Catechism for a fuller and richer explanation. In this way, Christian knowledge is built up, layer by layer, over the years.

Luther never envisioned a "confirmation class" from which one "graduated," never to return to the catechism. Instead, he saw catechesis as lifetime learning, going over the basics again and again, as a little child goes back to his ABCs.

You might think of the catechism as a seed or a nut in which is contained the entire Christian faith in a short and concentrated summary. Just as a seed contains everything for the full plant to develop, so the catechism contains everything for faith in Christ to grow to full maturity.

At the centre of the catechism seed are the three basic texts of the Christian faith: The Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. These texts deal with repentance, faith, and prayer. The Ten Commandments provide a framework for the Law that diagnoses our sinful condition, maintains outward order, and disciplines the "old Adam" in the believer. The Apostles' Creed is the symbol into which we were baptised and is a faithful description of the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and their works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. The Creed teaches us who God is and what He has done as our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sanctifier.

The Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father, is the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples (Matthew 6:9ff). It is the most perfect prayer in the whole world because the Son of God Himself taught it. It has the Son's guarantee that His Father is pleased to hear it and will act on it according to His good and gracious will.

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The next layer of the seed is the sacraments: Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. These are the means by which God shows Himself to be gracious to sinners and how He offers, delivers, and applies to each of us what Jesus won on the cross for everyone. Through the Word combined with water, bread, and wine, the Holy Spirit delivers Christ for all to you and for you. "For you" are the faith words. They call for faith and they create faith.

The third layer of the catechism seed is Daily Prayer and the Table of Duties. This is our "vocation," or our calling as God's priestly people. We are to sanctify the day with the Word of God and prayer, and we are to serve our neighbour where God has placed us in home, church, and state.

You can see why the catechisms are the "gems of the Reformation." They make the Christian faith accessible to anyone, and they enable us to hand on the faith to our family, our friends, and those who come after us.

If you haven't looked at the catechism since your confirmation, go find it and explore it again, now that you don't "have" to do it. There's a lifetime of learning in those simple sentences.