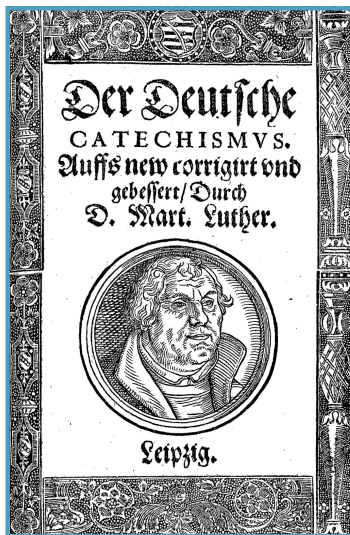


THE SMALL CATECHISM

A Simple Guide for the Book of Faith



Revised edition of Luther's Catechism
with cover picture of its author.

In 1529 Martin Luther, a pastor in the German town of Wittenberg and teacher at the university there, published explanations to the chief parts of the Christian faith. These explanations were first produced on individual sheets and sold for a few pennies each. By the middle of 1529 printers in Wittenberg and elsewhere had collected them into what they called an “enchiridion” or handbook. Luther added a preface, which told pastors how to use the book, and he also attached several other sections to the end of it. In this printing the handbook received a title by which we know it today, *The Small Catechism of Martin Luther*. The printers used the word “small” because in the same year Luther published a set of his sermons on the same topics. This book of sermons, then called *The German Catechism*, is now known as the *Large Catechism*.¹

In 1580, Lutheran theologians included the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther in *The Book of Concord* because, in their words, they were “the Laity’s Bible.”² As we read the Bible today, *Luther’s Small Catechism* still offers assistance.³ The *Small Catechism* provides adults and young people with

three useful tools to approach Scripture: experiencing what the Scripture as God’s Word does to us (Law and Gospel); encountering the Triune God’s work to make believers out of us; and receiving the God who comes to us in weakness (Christ crucified and risen).

☀ Lutheran Glasses: Diagnosis, Cure, Medicine

The genius of Martin Luther’s catechetical instruction involved changing the order in which a person encountered the three traditional chief parts of the catechism: The Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer.⁴ In 1522, in the preface to the Personal Prayer Book, a forerunner of the *Small Catechism*, Luther compared this order to recovery from illness. First, one receives the diagnosis (the Ten Commandments), then one is told the source for healing (God’s grace revealed in the Creed), and finally one calls the pharmacist to fill this gracious prescription (Lord’s Prayer).⁵ In the

Large Catechism, Luther reminded the reader of the same basic movement in the Christian life: our inability to fulfill the Ten Commandments, God's mercy revealed in the creed, and our cry for that very mercy in the Lord's Prayer.⁶

Even individual sections of the catechisms echo this same movement from law to gospel. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther wrote of the command to pray and the promise to be heard (a sentiment echoed in his explanation to "Amen" in the *Small Catechism*). In the *Small Catechism's* explanation of both Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the first question touches on institution of the sacraments (command), and the second question describes the benefits (promise). Moreover, the fourth question on Baptism connected this order (moving from law to gospel) to our daily drowning and rising in baptism itself. When in 1531 Luther added a section on private confession and absolution, he again used the Ten Commandments to reveal a person's sins and concluded with the comfort of the gospel in absolution (the forgiveness of sins).⁷

This basic catechetical principle of interpretation (from law to gospel) unlocks the center of the Scripture. The distinction between law and gospel was never intended to divide the Old Testament from the New Testament or simply to distinguish commands from promises. Instead, this distinction arises from the biblical conviction that God's word does something to its hearers. The law—in addition to providing good order in this world and its institutions and restraining evil—breaks down, strips bare, destroys, terrifies, and puts to death by unmasking our lust for control of God and salvation. The gospel, as God's answer to our human predicament, builds up, clothes in righteousness, creates, comforts, and brings new life by announcing God's unconditional promise. The law is thus any word that does the former set of things (even the word of the cross); the gospel is similarly any word that does the latter (even a word that "sounds" like a command but is heard by faith as pure, loving invitation).

Moreover, hearing "law" does not simply call to mind guilt or shame, nor does the gospel remove such feelings. This guilt-ridden approach to the distinction distorts the catechism's point. God's Word that kills and makes alive does not send us inside ourselves to find or manufacture the appropriate religious feelings. Instead, the preacher or teacher of Scripture or even the reader of Scripture discovers two words in Scripture: one that tells the truth about the human condition (law) and the other that tells the truth about God (gospel). The truth about the human condition is not that we feel guilty but that we *are* guilty and are ashamed. Indeed, trying to manufacture the proper "spiritual" feelings is a part of our sinful condition that the law reveals. The Holy Spirit (not the preacher, teacher, or reader) then takes those very truths and does what only God can do—destroys the unbelieving Old Creature and creates the New Creature of faith by revealing the truth about God: that God is gracious and merciful.

Discovering this approach to reading Scripture in the *Small Catechism* means that we are suddenly spared from falling into two of the worst Bible-reading traps. First, we no longer need view the commandments as "doable." Quite the contrary! Instead of revealing what we can do to create or maintain our relation to God, the commandments remove all of our religious posturing or posing, so that we can beg God for mercy. Luther's explanations to the commandments state that we "*are to* fear and love God" with certain results, but it does not imply that we can. Indeed, as Luther once admonished his opponent, Erasmus of Rotterdam, regarding the latter's reading of Scripture, an "ought" never implies a "can."

Second, the promises of God are always unconditional: “God created me;” “Jesus . . . is my Lord;” “I . . . cannot believe . . . but the Holy Spirit calls.” This means that the subject of the Bible is never us and our works but God and God’s works. The question posed to us by Scripture is continuously: What is God doing to the people in the text and to us? Scriptural promises that are conditional (“If you do this, you will live”) simply function as law, either as a means to maintain order and restrain evil or as “killing letter;” to use St. Paul’s word for it (2 Cor 3:6), exposing our sin. The promises of Scripture are, as gospel, like a gift given without strings attached, and so they always include an unconditional “for you.” This is why the Bible functions best as law and gospel when proclaimed to us and not simply read alone. There must always be an interpreter and witness, that is, a preacher or teacher (or, in an emergency, an angel), who is under orders to announce: “To you is born this day.”⁹ Otherwise, we will never hear that it is truly for us. Of course, in the *Small Catechism*, Luther is that very teacher.



A woodcut depicting Pentecost scene:
The Holy Spirit descends upon the believers
in the form of a dove and as flames.
From *Deutsch Catechismus*
(German Catechism, 1531).

☼ The Trinitarian Heart of the Bible

The central texts in the *Small Catechism* are the explanations to the creed. Seen from the perspective of law and gospel, these creedal texts reveal what defines the Christian faith and makes it different from all other religions: God at work in creating, redeeming, and making holy.⁹ Christians encounter this triune God backwards, so to speak, so that first the Holy Spirit uses the Word (law and gospel) to put to death and make alive, creating and strengthening faith and forgiving sin. The Spirit does this so that we believe Jesus is our Lord. At the same time, having been led to Jesus Christ the Redeemer by the Holy Spirit, we suddenly encounter the mercy of God the Creator, since Jesus is, in Luther’s words in the *Large Catechism*, “the mirror of the Father’s heart.”¹⁰

This Trinity is the heart of the Bible’s message. In Scripture, God encounters us: the Holy Spirit uses God’s Word (law and gospel) to put the old creature to death and raise us up as true believers in Christ, who is the mirror of the Father’s heart. There are many other interesting things in Scripture, to be sure, but the readers’ interest in observing and learning such things will always be informed by two activities: first, hearing and experiencing the law and gospel in the text and, second, being led by the Spirit to faith in the Son who is one with the Father. Or, to collapse these two into one: the single point of Scripture is to make believers out of us, that is, people who no longer trust themselves (and judge others) but people who trust in God who alone judges and saves.

Luther’s simple confession of his faith in God, as expressed in his paraphrase of the Apostles’ Creed in the *Small Catechism*, witnesses to this very action of God. In it we hear him testifying to his three-year-old son Hans and all of the simple folk in his congregation just what happened to him when God’s Word hit him. “I believe that God created me, . . .” the First Article begins, and then piles up a host of verbs where God, not Luther, is the subject: [God] “has given . . . still preserves . . . provides . . . protects . . . shields and preserves.” In case the readers do not get the point, Luther states the obvious

(to the believing New Creature): “And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all.”¹¹ Of course, Luther also admits in the *Small Catechism* that he ought to “thank and praise, serve and obey” this God. But an “ought” never implies a “can,” so that in the *Large Catechism* he admits that this article “should humble and terrify all of us,” given the way we sin with all of these gifts of creation.¹²

When the First Article still sounds in us as law, the Second and Third Articles come to our rescue. “I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord.” Realizing that Luther knew that his sixteenth-century hearers and readers understood the responsibility of their lords to ransom them if kidnapped by an evil rogue prince, he then piles up another set of verbs designed to reveal God’s work in Christ, who “redeemed . . . purchased and freed” with his very sufferings and death. The result, as his hearers would have expected, caused the ransomed believer to “belong to [this true Lord], live under him in his kingdom, and serve him.”

Finally, Luther witnessed to the Word in terms of the Holy Spirit, confessing that faith is not our work but God’s gift: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” Suddenly, all the verbs reside in God’s grace and mercy and not our works. Instead of claiming that we can choose Jesus, Luther confesses that God is in charge not only of our creation and redemption but also of our very believing. Again, Luther piles up the verbs to testify to God’s unbelievable mercy. The Holy Spirit “has called . . . enlightened . . . made me holy and kept me.” Then, just when individualists may want to retreat into their private biblical religion, the same set of verbs (with one addition: “gathers”) takes a curtain call for the church: “just as [the Holy Spirit] calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” Not content with this, the church becomes the location for one more verb where the Holy Spirit “*forgives* all sins—mine and those of all believers.” Then, this same Spirit will raise the dead and give eternal life.

This trinitarian reading of Scripture, where God is the subject of the sentence, simply turns our Bible reading on its head. We no longer need to open the Bible to find out what we must do. Instead, we come away amazed by what God has been, is, and will be doing. Indeed, the entire Scripture is all about God and faith.¹³ This same Trinity is revealed in Luther’s explanations to the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. The explanation to the words “Our Father,” first added to the *Small Catechism* in 1531, is a continuation of the creed itself and reveals God as reflected by Jesus, the “mirror of the Father’s heart”: God as a *loving* (not judging) parent. The petitions begin with a prayer for the Word (“Hallowed be your name”), which is the first medicine any believer needs to take. The Second Petition prays for faith brought by the Holy Spirit. The Third Petition prays for the very victory won by Christ the Redeemer, and the fourth prays for the blessings of the Creator. Thus, the Christian, when ordering medicine at the divine pharmacy, prays for the Trinity in reverse. The last three petitions pray again for the very things promised in the Third Article of the creed: forgiveness, strengthened faith in the face of attacks, and deliverance in this life and the next.

The Sacramental Scripture: God Revealed in Flesh

The *Small Catechism* helps us read the Bible in a third way. Early in his career, Luther developed what he called the “theology of the cross,” a term that does not designate a theory about why Christ died

but instead reveals the God who appears in the last place we would think to look. Building on what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Luther discovered this “theology” in God’s surprising blessing of Abraham and Sarah, in God’s choosing Moses and the Israelites, and even in God using Paul, a former persecutor of the church, to be an apostle. This “weak and foolish” God is most clearly revealed in Jesus Christ, who came not in power but in the last place we would reasonably look: in the manger and on the cross.

In the Small Catechism there are hints of this theology all over the place. In the Second Article, Christ rescues us from our kidnappers—sin, death, and the devil—not with what we might expect (silver and gold) but with “his holy, precious blood and . . . innocent suffering and death.” This unexpected action of God is already foreshadowed in the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, where God creates and preserves us, “out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!” Mercy without merit is surely a foolish thing for God to do, and it makes the self-giving of the Lord Jesus even more remarkable—as if God just cannot stop giving. The Third Article con-

tinues this “foolishness” with the surprising confession of the believer’s unbelief: “I believe that . . . I cannot believe.” Here echoes one of Luther’s favorite verses, the line of the father in Mark 9:24, “I believe; help my unbelief!”



The crucifixion of Jesus depicted in *Deutsch Catechismus* (German Catechism), 1531.

Scripture—functioning as the Word of God—proclaims (for all with ears to hear) a God of self-emptying mercy for foolish, weak followers. This is the basic theme of the Bible: a merciful Shepherd God who gathers sheep that love to wander. However, our “Old Creature” looks to Scripture for rules it is sure it can follow and for a God who will do its bidding. So, too, it creates “theologies of glory,” centered in God’s power and honor and in the human being’s ability to measure up to God’s rules.

The other place where the Small Catechism gives a glimpse of this foolish, weak God comes in the questions on Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, where Luther asks the question that finally takes the sacraments far more seriously (and at God’s Word) than his opponents: “How can water [or eating and drinking] do such great things?” Luther answers that it is not the water but the Word with the water; it is not the eating and drinking but the Word of promise (“for you”) with the bread and wine that does the trick.¹⁴

No wonder that in the Gospels true believers are those who take this carpenter from Nazareth at his word: the centurion with a sick servant and the Syro-Phoenecian woman (who accepts Jesus’ judgment that she is a dog and then begs for crumbs). No wonder so few people these days read the Bible this way! Instead, there is only a seeking for power, for wealth, or for a blessing on one’s own “self-chosen spirituality” (see Col 2:23). Who wants a god who comes in the dust? The other centurion in Mark’s gospel stands under the Crucified (Mark 15:39) and does not worry about being left behind or having a purpose or thinking positively. Instead, he recognizes “God’s Son” in the last place anyone (ourselves included) would reasonably look: on the Roman gallows, breathing his last, crying out to God for help. This is truly good news for those who are left behind, who have no purpose, and who are themselves losers, but it remains a puzzling mystery—foolish and weak—to everyone else.

Turning the Bible Loose on Us

In the *Small Catechism*, Luther provided a guide for reading Scripture. It witnesses to the fact that the Scripture, as God's Word, does something to us: it puts to death the Old Creature with its schemes and guilt and shame and brings to life the New Creature of faith. As we hear and read Scripture, we will witness to and experience this same dying and rising. This same Word brings us directly into the heart of the Bible, that is, into the presence of the Trinity, who is forever creating, redeeming, and making holy or—taking the Trinity in its proper, reverse order—through the Spirit making us believers in the Lord Jesus who is the mirror of the Father's heart. At the same time, the Word comes to us not in strength but in weakness and foolishness and so overturns our thirst for power and wisdom in the brokenness of the Word made flesh. Armed with these three central scriptural claims of the *Small Catechism*—distinguishing law and gospel, encountering the self-giving Trinity for us, receiving God in the last place we would reasonably look—the Bible will suddenly sound like the thing it truly is: Book of Faith.

¹ From LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM with Evangelical Lutheran Worship texts. Copyright © 2008 Augsburg Fortress, Publishers. Original copyright © 1994, 2000 Augsburg Fortress, Publishers. Introduction and translation by Timothy J. Wengert.

² See the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, trans. Robert Kolb, "Binding Summary," par. 5 in: *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 487 [henceforth cited as: BC 2000].

³ The idea for this connection was first suggested to the author by a student, Allison Wilcox, in a seminar paper on using the *Small Catechism* to introduce eighth-graders to the Bible.

⁴ See Timothy J. Wengert, "Forming the Faith Today through Luther's Catechisms," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 11 (1997): 379-95.

⁵ *Luther's Works* [American edition], ed. Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 43:13-14.

⁶ *The Large Catechism* [henceforth cited as LC], trans. James Schaaf, Ten Commandments, par. 315-318, The Creed, par. 1-4, the Lord's Prayer, par. 2-3, in BC 2000: 428-29, 431, 440-41.

⁷ See the *Small Catechism* [henceforth cited as SC], trans. Timothy J. Wengert, Baptism par. 1-8, 12, 20, 28-29 and the Lord's Supper, par. 1-2, 5-6, in BC 2000: 359-63.

⁸ Not only Luke 2 but the story of the Ethiopian official in Acts 8 and Paul's comments in Romans 10:17 show how widespread in Scripture the office of preacher, teacher, or evangelist is for interpreting Scripture. The individualized piety of our culture actually destroys the gospel and replaces it with a distorted post-modern solipsism: what I feel is right for me; God as I understand it.

⁹ See Luther's headings for the three articles in SC, Creed, 1, 3 and 5, in BC 2000: 354-55.

¹⁰ LC, Creed, 63-69, here 65, in BC 2000: 439-40.

¹¹ SC, Creed, 2, in BC 2000: 354-55.

¹² LC, Creed, 22, in BC 2000: 433.

¹³ See Luther's comments on the first commandment in LC, Ten Commandments, 324-25, in BC 2000: 429-30.

¹⁴ See also Luther's comments in the LC, Lord's Supper, 12-14, in: BC 2000: 468.

LUTHER'S SEAL and Daily Blessings

Martin Luther asked for a symbol to be designed as a visual summary of his theology. He explained the meaning of this symbol in a letter to his friend Lazarus Spengler, who worked as a town clerk in Nürnberg, Germany, and was an early supporter of the Reformation. Faith in Christ the Crucified One, Luther wrote, saves us and brings us joy, comfort, and peace—now in the present day and fully in the life to come.

In the Morning and Evening Blessings, Luther encourages us to begin and end each day joyfully with prayers and thanksgiving for all that Christ has done for us.

The Luther Rose

Letter to Lazarus Spengler, Coburg, July 8, 1530¹

Grace and peace in Christ!



Honorable, kind, dear Sir and Friend! Since you ask whether my seal has come out correctly, I shall answer most amiably and tell you of those thoughts which [now] come to my mind about my seal as a symbol of my theology.

There is first to be a cross, black [and placed] in a heart, which should be of its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. For if one believes from the heart he will be justified. Even though it is a black cross, [which] mortifies and [which] also should hurt us, yet it leaves the heart in its [natural] color [and] does not ruin nature; that is, [the cross] does not kill but keeps [man] alive. For the just man lives by faith, but by faith in the Crucified One. Such a heart is to be in the midst of a white rose, to symbolize that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace; in a word it places the believer into a white joyful rose; for [this faith] does not give peace and joy as the world gives and, therefore, the rose is to be white and not red, for white is the color of the spirits and of all the angels. Such a rose is to be in a sky-blue field, [symbolizing] that such joy in the Spirit and in faith is a beginning of the future heavenly joy; it is already a part [of faith], and is grasped through hope, even though not yet manifest. And around this field is a golden ring, [symbolizing] that in heaven such blessedness

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lasts forever and has no end, and in addition is precious beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable and precious metal.

May Christ, our dear Lord, be with your spirit until the life to come. Amen.

The Morning Blessing²

In the morning, as soon as you get out of bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say:

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over me. Amen.

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you wish, you may recite this little prayer as well:

I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I ask that you would also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

After singing a hymn, or whatever else may serve your devotion, you are to go to your work joyfully.

The Evening Blessing³

In the evening, when you go to bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say:

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over me. Amen.

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you wish, you may recite this little prayer as well:

I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today. I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously to protect me tonight. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Then you are to go to sleep quickly and cheerfully.

¹ LW 49:356-359.

² SC 36-37.

³ SC 38.