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## LUTHER'S CATECHISM AS A MAP FOR LIFE'S JOURNEY

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At the dawn of the twenty-first century the church increasingly faces questions about what it means to be Christian within a culture that is characterized by a smorgasbord of non-Christian religious options. Half a century ago, Bible stories were a basic part of the wider American culture and could be found in movies, books, literature, and public conversation. That is no longer the case today. Children are not being formed at home in how to worship or to pray. Adults have little to no Christian memory even from childhood. As a result, those approaching the church or who are standing on the front porch of the church today are literally at square one in their knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Instead, they live in a universe of religious options and are becoming eclectic and syncretistic in their spiritual lives. They will adopt a little of this and a little of that. They live in a world of thirty second soundbites, brief commercial slogans, catch-words, and bumper sticker theology.<sup>1</sup>

In this context the climate may be ripe for recovering and rediscovering the catechism's value for the church. In the wider culture one hears the cry for schools to return to the basics (the three "Rs"). Why go back to "basics"? Basics are so foundational that they endure and last in a world where knowledge is ephemeral and fleeting. Basics provide some reference points or markers by which we can find our bearings. These reference points help us to sift what is important from what is not important when confronted

with a tidal wave of information. They help us deal with the world thoughtfully and critically. This is where the catechism enters and why the climate may in fact be ripe for recovering serious catechetical work with youth and adults. The catechism fastens our attention on what is most important so that we are not distracted by peripheral concerns.

From the beginning of the church's life, catechesis provided the counterpart and complement to baptism for the making of disciples, so that both sides of the Great Commission, "baptize and teach," might be carried out. At times catechetical instruction took place prior to baptism and at other times it took place afterwards. In either case, as baptism provided the point of entry into the church, catechesis disclosed to the catechumen the gifts of baptism. Like baptism then, catechesis functioned as the bridge across which people were led out of the world and incorporated into the life of the church. In brief, catechesis prepared people for the life that baptism inaugurated. In Lutheran terms, this meant that our entire life is a catechumenate in as much as our entire life is a living out of our baptism.

The purpose of catechesis can be better understood when we bear in mind that baptism brings people into the church by effecting a change in their status before God and their life in this world. In other words, one enters the church not by signing up as one might for a community organization, but by undergoing a transformation. By uniting us with the death and resurrection of Christ, baptism effects a transfer of Lordship that brings us under God's name and his care. At the same time it inaugurates a life of repentance in which we live out here and now that which has already been accomplished historically and eschatologically in baptism. This repentance occurs chronologically and spatially. Each day and in every corner of life, the catechumen's convictions undergo a change from old values to

new values, their conduct from old ways to new ways.

If baptism carries us into the church by bringing Christ's death and resurrection into our life that we might die and rise daily, catechesis incorporates us into the church by imparting the mind of Christ to us that we might put to death the old ways of thinking and bring to life new patterns of thought. Catechesis flows from baptism by assuming a role that destroys old questions and raises new questions. "What's in it for me?" becomes "How can I serve God and neighbor?" "What do I want to do with my life?" becomes "What does God want to do with my life?" Through catechesis we learn to look at life, and live, not from our perspective but from God's. Thus catechesis is less concerned with downloading information and more concerned with the formation of a Christian *habitus* of the mind and heart.

The New Testament is replete with examples that our new status brought by Christ must lead to new patterns of thought and with it to new forms of living. For example, Jesus exhorted Peter to turn his back on Satan and learn to "think the things of God" (Matthew 16:22). In the preceding verses this involved the confession of the gospel, namely, that Jesus is the Christ (v. 16). In the subsequent verses it meant living out the ramifications of this confession, namely, "pick up your cross and follow me" (v. 23). Elsewhere, Paul stresses the same thing when he exhorts, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Drawing on the imagery of baptism, in Colossians 3:2, Paul makes the connection directly: "Raised with Christ, set your minds on the things that are above, not on earth, for you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

Thinking the things of God and living from God's perspective ultimately means that we learn how God relates to

us. For Lutherans, learning to live life from God's perspective involves the cultivation of a habit of the mind and heart that it is lived from faith to faith. One can speak of the theme of the catechism—at least Luther's exposition of it—"The Art of Living by Faith." It is an art in that we do not learn it all at once. We continually learn to see God's goodness in the events of daily life and to live in the expectation of his continuing goodness tomorrow.

### NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE CATECHISMS

How then do Luther's *Small* and *Large Catechisms* fit into this broader context of catechesis? Today it must take on a more complex role than in the past. We face many questions today that are not answered by Luther's text, which was written nearly 500 years ago. One could solve this problem simply by supplementing the catechism so as to turn it gradually into a textbook for theology. But Lutherans have often realized that the catechism is more paradigmatic than encyclopedic. As such, it functions more like a map that guides us through life's vagaries than an encyclopedia of theological knowledge. The analogy of a map for the catechism is useful in order to picture the twofold role of the catechism. On the one hand, it introduces a person into new and uncharted territories of the Christian life by providing a general orientation to the landscape. On the other hand, the catechism does not replace Scripture as the whole point of reading a map is to use it as a guide on the journey itself.

### CATECHISM AS A MAP OF ORIENTATION TO THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

As a map, the catechism provides an orientation to the basic dimensions of the Christian life. A map orients a traveler by marking out the major landforms of an area, the coasts, mountain ranges, plains, and bodies of water. It

does this by providing a bird's eye view of the whole. In a similar way, the catechism orients the Christian by marking out major texts, themes, and events for the Christian life. Instead of giving a description of every detail, it shows us the major contours, features, and characteristics of the Christian life. These major landmarks or signposts enable us to find our way around in order to make sense of life's many challenges. They also mark out where the richest treasures of Scripture are to be found.

This means that the catechism can provide an ideal starting point for exploring the Christian life. With a map in hand, the Christian can set off on a journey to explore the Scriptures, the worship life of the Christian community, the thought of theologians, and a personal life of prayer. Within the framework of this catechism, each Christian will incorporate and relate new discoveries. This approach recognizes that, in a sense, the catechism is not really learned until "life strikes."<sup>2</sup> This leads Luther to reprimand those who regard it as a simple, silly teaching that can be absorbed and mastered in a single reading (*Large Catechism*, Longer Preface, 5). The catechism's teaching is such that we do not grow out of it, we grow into it. And growing takes time!

### ORIENTEERING WITH THE CATECHISM

The analogy of the catechism as a map has several additional benefits. First, as a map, the catechism "situates our journey of faith within the context of those who have gone before us."<sup>3</sup> While each new generation of believers must take the journey of faith for themselves, the catechism provides some easily identifiable signposts to help us set out on the right path. Second, as a map, the catechism provides a "shared image" or "common confession" around which to plan journeys as individuals and communities. "A commonly held understanding of what we believe, how we worship, how we are to act, and how we are to pray gives

unity to the diverse of journeys of faith."<sup>4</sup> Third, as a map, the catechism provides an important reference tool for later maps. We will enter into new regions not covered by the map or explore regions in greater detail. These details and new discoveries can then be incorporated into our knowledge of the catechism itself. Indeed, Luther suggests this very thing in the conclusion of his exposition of the Creed in the *Large Catechism*. "This is enough now concerning the Creed to lay a foundation for ordinary people without overburdening them. After they understand the substance of it, they may on their own initiative learn more, *relating to these teachings all that they learn in the Scriptures*, and thus continue to advance and grow in understanding" [italics added] (*Large Catechism II*, 70).<sup>5</sup>

#### COMPONENTS OF LUTHER'S CATECHISMS

The *Small Catechism*, in particular, charts out three major areas of the Christian life by means of the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer. These texts had been used by for nearly 1500 years as the basics for the Christian faith and life. They had withstood the test of time and proven themselves to be entirely practical and perennially relevant. With these and a few biblical texts related to the sacraments, Luther first mapped out a view of the Christian life that is rooted in, centered in, and lived from faith (Ten Commandments-Creed-Lord's Prayer). He then mapped out the sacramental life of the church that nourishes the Christian's life of faith, to which end he treated baptism, confession-absolution, and the Lord's Supper. Finally, he recognized the need to provide a framework for daily life within family and occupation wherein Christians exercise and live out their faith. To that end, he provided several daily prayers and included chart of Bible passages related to the various walks of life established by God.<sup>6</sup>

#### DECALOGUE-CREED-LORD'S PRAYER

The first section of the catechism begins with the message that is essential and determinative for the church's very life. Luther saw that message contained in the first three chief parts. Here Luther focuses on the classic components of catechesis, the "heritage of Christendom from ancient times," as he calls it (Short preface to *Large Catechism*, 6). It was Luther's judgment that "all Christianity was contained in the first three parts." To know them is to know the church's faith in its most condensed and basic form. The test of time has also shown that they remain perennially relevant and contemporary expressions of Christian existence. Together, these three texts provide the foundation on which the entire edifice of a Christian worldview rests.

Luther arranges the three chief parts in such a way that the Ten Commandments appear first in the catechism, followed by the *Apostles' Creed* and Lord's Prayer respectively. This arrangement itself shows that they are part of a design that serves some larger end. Luther sought to provide an organic synthesis and sequential understanding of life that begins with the demands of daily life (Ten Commandments)<sup>7</sup> and concludes with our final deliverance from evil (Lord's Prayer). He also recognized that in every presentation of the faith we must be aware of what the central thing is. Thus when he wrote the catechisms he organized their contents around a common theme—in this case, the theme of faith. They thus possess an inner coherence that would be lost if the chief parts were rearranged (or, for that matter, if the order were maintained but taught in a way that isolates the chief parts from one another).

Again, the analogy of a map can assist us here. A map orients explorers and travelers to the totality of the region to be explored so that they understand the parts of that region in relationship to one another. In so doing, they can

arrive at the heart and the center of the region for only from that vantage point can one understand the region's essence, its essential nature, its very soul. There are two points here. First, a map takes us to the center. Second, from that center we can understand the whole.

In a similar way, the catechism first relates the chief parts to one another in such a way as to lead us to the heart and center of the church's message. As a paradigm, a map "offers organizing principles which simplify the complex."<sup>8</sup> In the process, it fastens our attention on the center in such a way that "it cannot be brushed aside with peripheral ideas and arbitrary objections and assertions."<sup>9</sup> The genius of Luther's catechism lies in the way he organizes the traditional material and integrates it around a central theme. "In turn, that theme—the path of faith—is given by the very nature of a catechism as a guide accompanying the Christian this side of eternity."<sup>10</sup>

Once we have arrived at the center we can then understand the nature of the whole and how each part fits into the whole. The catechism leads Christians by the hand from their daily life wherein they cannot live without faith to the eschatological way of faith in yearning for the final act of Christ's redemptive work. The Ten Commandments sketch the contours of creaturely life. They lift out our need for faith above all other needs. As creatures we are by definition dependent beings. That is we cannot live without faith. The only question is what or who will be the object of our faith. The Creed speaks of all of God's gifts that frame our entire life, beginning with our birth and culminating in our resurrection. It teaches us to see that no aspect of our existence remains untouched by God's gifts. It thereby bestows the gift of faith. The Lord's Prayer arms the Christian for the warfare with Satan that commences with the awakening of faith. It thereby becomes the battle cry of faith wherein Christians pray for the faith to cling to God's

gifts and simultaneously pray against the assaults of Satan that would throw us into unbelief.

### SACRAMENTAL LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The second section of Luther's catechism brings us into the life of the church by bringing us into contact with the sacramental life of the church: baptism, confession, and the Lord's Supper. This portion of the catechism contains the most important churchly actions or the treasure of the church's gifts of grace. Baptism gives the Christian life of faith its birth by transferring us out of Satan's kingdom in to Christ's. It is itself a miniature and complete picture of the Christian life, its birth, discipleship, death, and resurrection. Absolution ties baptism and the Lord's Supper together. In absolution we become what we are—baptized. It provides Lutherans with a Law-Gospel dialectic for interpreting God's work within their lives. As daily food, the Lord's Supper sustains our faith in the struggle of the church militant and bears witness to the eschatological banquet of the church. These central events gather, sustain, and unite the church in the life of faith. They center us on the church's gifts, which seal to us our possession of salvation sacramentally.

### THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN PIETY

Not only do people need to be instructed, they need to develop the habits and discipline within which the Christian life is lived. The third section contains the final components of Luther's catechism. While we do not want to overestimate external discipline for Christians in the matter of sanctification, neither should we underestimate its value. Luther recognized that our lives need an order and pattern in which the life of faith can grow. Such "formal discipline cultivates a habit of mind which will keep our lives turned to God throughout the day, through a lifetime."<sup>11</sup>

The cultivated discipline of prayer is the basis and presupposition of both freedom and power of prayer.

Luther recognized the value of cultivating an evangelical piety of daily prayer among the people. He himself had grown up in a monastic system that provided him with such a discipline of prayer that shaped his days. But when the old forms had been shattered by the gospel, the Reformation needed new forms and new orders through which the gospel could shine forth. Accordingly these last parts provide the structure and setting for a daily life of prayer in which the gospel can emerge and take hold. They provide a "how," "when," and "where" for prayer.

As a way of introducing a new practice of piety, Luther included morning and evening prayers, together with two meal prayers. Rather than using the monastic seven hours as the pattern, Luther connected the Christian's daily prayers with activities that everyone carries out on a daily basis. For example, we have to rise in the morning and go to bed in the evening. Similarly, we must eat several meals throughout the day. Luther seeks to tie daily prayer then to these daily activities. The morning and evening prayers are to have two effects upon us. Morning prayer sends us forth to work with joy. Evening prayer sends us to bed in peace. "This confidence was also part of Luther's own praying."<sup>12</sup> The meal prayers were also traditional ones. Highlighting a theology of prayer that is centered on the Word of God, Luther's meal prayers reflect on and respond to the words of various Psalms. In this way he stresses that prayer is always initiated by God's promises. First he speaks to us and then we speak to him.

Luther also includes a number of Bible passages in the "Table of Duties" or "Table of Responsibilities"<sup>13</sup> for various holy orders and estates. "Originally, the Table of duties was certainly technically intended to be one of the several catechetical placards."<sup>14</sup> It closed with the advice, "Let each

his lesson learn with care; And all the household well will fare." These were to be utilized as an addition to the Ten Commandments. They contain less general commands for human living than a description of God's scheme or form for human life.<sup>15</sup> Together, these texts provide as it were, a pattern of Lutheran piety.

Finally, Luther's *Small Catechism* included marriage and baptismal booklets which fostered acquaintance with those actions that the church, according to its agenda, performs at marriages and at the reception of members into her communion. The marriage booklet looks forward to the establishment of the household. Thus its service defines the household in relation to God's creation. The baptism booklet anticipates the reception of individual members of the household into the household of faith. These again draw attention to the need for helping and assisting people partake in the worship life of the congregation.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge of catechesis is tough. Its work can be hard and at times unrewarding. This is nothing new. In the preface to his commentary on Zechariah, Luther complained about how few preachers were competent to give good catechetical instruction. Those who could, however, he ranked above the most subtle theologians.

One ought, however, to regard those teachers as the best and the paragons of their profession who present the catechism well. . . . But such teachers are rare birds. For there is neither great glory nor outward show in their kind of teaching; but there is in it great good and also the best of sermons, because in this teaching there is comprehended, in brief, all Scripture (*Luther's Works* [American Edition] 20: 155-57).

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### Notes

1. See Charles P. Arand, "Meeting the Challenge for Tomorrow: Formation through Catechesis," *Formation in the Faith: Catechesis for Tomorrow*, Symposium Papers, No. 7 (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 1997), 49-83.
2. Robert Kolb, *Teaching God's Children God's Teaching* (Hutchinson, Minnesota: Crown Publishing, 1992), 15.
3. Jane E. Regan, "The Context of Catechesis," in *Exploring the Catechism* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 165.
4. *Exploring the Catechism*, 165.
5. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), 440.
6. See Chapter 5 of Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2000).
7. See Charles Arand, "Luther on the God Behind the First Commandment," *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 1994), 8:397-424.
8. James A. Nestingen, "Preaching the Catechism," *Word and World*, 10.1 (1990), 39.
9. Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 1:1.
10. Friedemann Hebart, *Luther's Large Catechism: Anniversary Translation and Introductory Essay* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1983), 24.
11. *Teaching God's Children*, 7:3.

12. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, II*. Translated by James L. Schaf. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 177.
13. *Teaching God's Children*, 8:3.
14. *Martin Luther*, 277.
15. *Teaching God's Children*, 8:2.