

Luther's Catechisms: 450 Years of Them

[An Essay Read Before The South Atlantic District Pastor - Teacher Conference, January 1979: The 450th Anniversary Year of Luther's Large and Small Catechism]

by Joh. P. Meyer

When I was a tad in graded school, we were members of a congregation made up for the most part of workers in factories that had not yet recovered from the great depression. Often enough, after the Sunday services, the offerings were counted, money taken out for a ton of coal to heat the school, and the remainder divided up to make payments on the salaries of the pastors and teachers, always in arrears. Little wonder there was no money left over for the luxury of the latest text-books for the Christian Day School.

As a result, we learned the English language by reading books containing stories of families going to the county fair to see the new wonder of the age, the "aeroplane;" or of a girl who persuaded her stubborn horse to move by whispering "please" in his ear. (I am not convinced that the later advent of Dick, Jane, and Sally, for my younger siblings provided too great an advantage.)

Geography we learned from books that still had Russia ruled by the Czar, years after the Ekaterinburg episode; and Germany ruled by a Kaiser who in our day was chopping wood in Holland. Arithmetic was relevant enough until we got to those "word problems" that were supposed to make Arithmetic relevant to our daily lives. They didn't. They did afford us our daily laughter.

Those were our modern textbooks. The oldest textbook from which we learned, was, in the end, the most relevant of all; one which I have kept and treasured to this day. Ours was a later edition, printed in German on one page and English on the other. The original edition was already at that time over 400 years old! I am speaking, of course, of Luther's Small Catechism, this year 450 years old. As with the case of Dick, Jane, and Sally, I am not convinced that the advent of improved methods of teaching children the basics of the Christian Faith has offered any advantage.¹

Just because Luther's Catechisms are 450 years old this year, the assignment for our conference thought it fitting to have read a paper (a Festschrift perhaps) on the Catechisms. Since the assignment was *sine nomine*, I have haphazardly entitled the present effort:

Luther's Catechisms—450 Years of Them

Our word Catechism (as well as its derivatives, catechesis, catechumen, *et al*) stems from the Greek word κηθησῶν, a late and rare word in secular Greek with a basic meaning "to sound from above" (no doubt the meaning we still grasped in my days as a confirmand). The word is generally used in the New Testament with the meaning: "to instruct" (cf. Romans 2:18, 1 Cor. 14:19) although it does seem to have the meaning "rumor" in Acts 21:21. Since other words for "teaching" were available, it seems that St. Paul used this word, rare in secular Greek, and foreign to the religious vocabulary of Judaism, as a technical term for Christian instruction. By the time of Tertullian, and perhaps before that, Marcion, the "Catechumens" appear as a distinct class in the church; those who are being instructed in preparation for Baptism. It is not out of character with the origin of the word that in our day Catechism is used almost exclusively for a book of religious instruction.² Luther used the word "*Katechismus*" (Catechism) not only for the two books that he published in 1529, but also generally for the body of Christian Doctrine in which the people were to be instructed, as well as for the oral instruction itself. It was in 1525, as far as I know, that Luther first used the word Catechism. (*Catechismus puerorum*—instruction of boys, or children). In 1526, in his "*Deutsche Messe*" (German Mass) Luther uses the word catechism to denote the various instructional materials made available during the course of the

¹ ...for example, the Concordia Catechism of a Decade ago, "When God Chose Man," "And Live under Him" and "This is the Christian Faith" which in three years of instruction present enough bulk to effectively obscure the clear simple Christian Faith.

² "...die sich auf Melancthon zurückführende Behauptung, das Wort weise auf einen Unterricht in Frage und Antwort, falsch ist." Rev. M. Katechetik—Wartburg Pub. House, Waverly, Iowa, 1915.

Reformation, and recommended that the “chief parts” be made a regular part of the service, and that weekday services with a catechetical sermon be held.

The use of catechetical materials, of course, predates Luther by generations and centuries. The very nature of the church as the body of Christians that will make disciples of all nations by both baptizing and teaching them would demand that the church not only have a formula for baptizing (washing with water in the Name of the Triune God) but that the church also have a concise and accepted summary of Christian Teaching that would be conveyed to those who had been instructed as infants, so that they might be instructed in, and confess that faith into which they had been baptized; and to those seeking baptism as adults, that they might know and confess the faith into which they were to be baptized. To detail the development of instruction from the early patterns of Jewish proselyte instruction to the development of the Apostles’ Creed as a confession of faith before baptism would be an intriguing study in itself, but beyond the scope of this paper. The development of the other ecumenical creeds, the Nicene and Athanasian, were more confessional than instructional, used to weed out heresy and confess the truth against heresy, rather than to instruct the heathen in the faith. (Hence the imbalance in them).

By 600 AD, we notice that a change has taken place in the catechetical instruction in the church. With fewer and fewer adults seeking baptism, and being instructed for baptism, and more and more infant baptism, the instruction given became more and more encased and encrusted in church ceremony, and finally, became instruction in the ceremonies themselves, rather than in the content they were intended to convey. Add to this the rise of the papacy, and a church that enjoyed power dependent on a people not well grounded in scripture, but rather held in the bonds of superstitions; a system in which salvation came, not from God., but rather from “the church,” and it is easy to see why the ensuing millennium is labeled the dark ages, and why, during that time, real instruction was almost non-existent, while what instruction did exist, failed to enlighten or to lead to Christ.

Still, the church did retain the Concept that certain knowledge was desirable to being a Christian. From earliest times, the Lord’s Prayer was held as being essential, in addition to the Creed. It wasn’t until the 13th century, that the Ten Commandments were added to the list. These three chief parts were the main essentials behind the idea of Catechism up to Luther’s time. Thomas Aquinas had arranged them as Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and they generally retained that order. But, bigger is better, they say, so others added. Johann Herolt finally ended up with nine chief parts, The Ten Commandments, the Nine Strange Sins, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Six Works of Mercy, the Lord’s Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Creed, the Seven Sacraments, and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit.³

Various Synods, from Würzburg (1453) to Regensburg (1512) accepted four chief parts, The Lord’s Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. No doubt this arrangement was not unknown to Luther. These chief parts were used, however, more for the purpose of teaching the schoolboys Latin than to impart any Christian knowledge. The inclusion of the Ave Maria also points to the idolatry prevalent in those times, when Mary was called in devotional handbooks, the Mediatrix between God and man; the Restorer of the lost grace of all men, the Illuminatrix, who dispells the ignorance which exposes to eternal death, the Advocate before the throne of God, the Mighty Queer of heaven, the Holy Empress of the Angels.

No wonder Luther wrote (1522) “*Among the many harmful publications by which Christians were deluded and led into superstition, the worst were those handbooks of prayer like “Little Garden of the Soul” and “Paradise of the Soul,” the passionals and books of legends which belabor the Christian with enforced confessions and counting of sins, and all kinds of unchristian freaks of prayer to God and the saints. These books really deserve a complete reformation...rather,..annihilation.*”

It was really the church visitations of 1528 that opened Luther’s eyes to the *immediate* need for a Catechism, and got him to put the task of writing one to the front of his “do now” list. More on that later. To trace the roots of Luther’s Catechism, we must first go back to the years before the 95 thesis, before 1517.

³ “*Discipulus de eruditione Christi fidelium*” Johann Herolt.

In 1516, Luther was a professor at the University in Wittenberg, and also sometimes substitute for the local parish priest, Simon Heinz. In the summer of 1516, Luther began preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. When he had finished this series (February, 1517), he used the Lenten Season to preach on the Lord's Prayer. About the same time, in order to enable a proper preparation for confession and self-examination (as required by St. Paul), Luther wrote and published a brief exposition of the Ten Commandments.⁴ In 1518, another exposition of the Ten Commandments, entitled "A Brief Explanation" was published in German and in Latin, followed by "Expositio of the Lord's Prayer," in 1519, followed by "A Short Form to Understand and Pray the Lord's Prayer." At this time, Luther wrote to Spalatin that he was teaching children and illiterates the Commandments and the Lord's Prayer "every night" as well as preaching on them. By 1520 Luther compiled the fruits of these labors into a book intended for the common people to serve as Christian Preparation for Communion. It bore the title: "A Short Form of the Ten Commandments; a Short Form of the Creed; a Short Form of the Lord's Prayer."⁵

Meanwhile, Luther kept going over the same material again and again in his sermons. (Who doesn't?). By 1521, Wittenberg received a regular catechist for its youth in the person of Agricola, none other than the later antinomist.

In 1523, a new ingredient was added, when Luther published "Five Questions in Regard to the Holy Supper," also intended as an aid to preparation for the communicants. (At this time the custom began, of asking intending communicants their reasons for communing.) Here we see for the first time the Sacraments receiving independent treatment as chief parts of Christian Doctrine.

Luther realized more and more the need for a specific catechism for the instruction of "children and illiterates." Though his "Booklet of Prayer" was often used for that purpose, it had not been written with that in view. Because of his own busy schedule, Luther commissioned Justus Jonas and Agricola to prepare a "catechism *peurorum*," (Catechism for boys, or children, as noted above) in February, 1525. The results were not impressive.⁶

At this time, Luther did also examine the "*Kinder Fragen*" of the Böhmishe Brüder. Some have even suggested that Luther was acquainted with it, and would, perhaps have used it, were it not for certain unclarity in the section on the Lord's Supper. In 1523, he writes: "*Among other things, the statement is made that (the presence of) Christ in the sacrament is not a personal and natural one, and that He must not be adorned there, which disquiets us Germans⁷ very much.*"⁸ We may conclude that Luther was familiar with the *Kinder Fragen*, even that he had thought of making use of them, but not that he adapted them into the form of his Small Catechisms since he objected to their unclarity, nor that this little book suggested to him the need for a catechism, since he expressed the need for that, and, in a way, answered it, already with his preaching and writing in 1516, and from then on.

With unclarity in the *Kinder Fragen* of the Böhmishe Brüder, and no results forth coming from Jonas and Agricola, perhaps Melancthon would produce! None other than Philip Melancthon, Preceptor of Germany, did try his hand at writing a suitable catechism, more than once. His first attempt, in 1523-24, contained the Decalogue, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Alphabet, the Sayings of the Seven Sages, and numerous prayers (mostly of praise to God the creator.) When Jonas and Agricola did not complete their catechetical assignment, Spalatin suggested that Melancthon give it

⁴ Note that this was also the year of the 95 thesis. The real spark for the Reformation was ignited, not in the academic world of Luther the professor, but in the heart of Luther the pastor.

⁵ This "Short Form" remained the chief handbook of religious instruction in Reformation Lands until the appearance of the Catechisms in 1529. Already in 1522 it was translated into English as a part of the "Booklet of Prayers" and was also the basis for "Marshall's Primer." The first evangelical catechism in England.

⁶ It would be interesting to see how Agricola handled dividing the chief parts on teaching the 10 commandments, considering Luther's sarcastic: "*Gribel wirt Grikel beiben*," but I have been unable to locate the results of his catechetical work.

⁷ Luther uses the term "Germans" as we would use the term "Lutherans."

⁸ Is this where Tom Hardt (St. Martin, Stockholm) gets his peculiar views on the adoration in the Lord's Supper? Luther's words here must be read in context. He may also have over-stated his case, desiring to preserve the teaching of the true presence of Jesus body and blood "as it was born of Mary and hung on the cross."

a try again. The result was “A brief Exposition of the Ten Commandments, The Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed” in 1527; and “Several Sayings,” Biblical material for catechetical instruction, in which Melanchthon often departed from Luther’s translation when quoting scripture, often making his own translation as he went along. Although these booklets went through several printings, they exercised little influence. People in general were not entirely satisfied with the results of Melanchthon’s efforts, just as Melanchthon was not entirely satisfied with Luther’s “Small Catechism.”⁹

Before the end of 1525, Luther must have realized that the only way he would get a suitable catechism would be to write one himself. He was already contemplating the task, when he wrote Nicolaus Hausmann, in September: “*I am postponing the catechism, as I would like to finish everything at one time in one work.*” In that same year, the “Booklet for Laymen and Children” appeared, possibly authored by Bugenhagen, yet containing or at least closely following the thoughts of Luther’s early catechetical works. This is the first book in which the Lord’s Supper and Holy Baptism appear as separate “Chief Parts.”

Luther’s procrastination in the catechism writing came to a crashing halt in 1528. The Reformation was now a decade old. In that time, Luther, aided by men of stature as Melanchthon, Bugenhagen, Jonas and others, had broken the hold of the Pope on the church. He had given the German people the New Testament in their own language, and was working on the Old Testament which would appear in another six years; many sermons, sermon-books and tracts had been published, as well as the first Lutheran Hymnal. Still, the Protestants (so-named at the Diet of Speyer 1529) were hard-pressed for capable clergy, a well trained ministry. In order to determine just what the needs were, and how great they were, systematic visitations of the churches were held.¹⁰ The first such visitations were made in Saxony, in 1528, by Melanchthon. That winter, Luther himself visited churches and schools particularly in Thuringia. The feelings of Luther, upon his return from this visitation, are well known to us, being recorded in the opening words of his Small Catechism. “*To publish the Catechism, or Christian Doctrine, in this short, plain, simple form, I was impelled and constrained by the deplorable conditions which I recently observed during a visitation of the churches. Alas, Good Lord, of all the misery I saw! The people, especially in the villages, know nothing at all of Christian doctrine; and many pastors are sadly unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet all are called Christians, and have been baptized, and enjoy the use of the Sacrament, although they know neither the Lord’s Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments.*”¹¹

Luther could procrastinate no longer. During the winter of 1528-29, he preached no less than three series of sermons on the five chief parts. In January, 1529, he writes to Martin Goerlitz, with Lutheran honesty: “*I am busy preparing the Catechism for the ignorant heathen.*” So important was getting out the catechism for the ignorant heathen (German Lutherans) that Luther followed the practice of his day, publishing each chief part on tablets (posters, broadsheets) as it was ready, before publication of the whole small catechism. And so eager were the ignorant heathen German Lutherans to become Christian, that a few days after publication, the tables that had sold for a few pennies were out of print, and could not be purchased for a gold guilder, according to Roerer, the Wittenberg proofreader, in a letter in January, 1529.

That Luther produced his catechism at the same time as he preached the catechism series, was no accident, but good stewardship of time. Many phrases and concepts so familiar in the Small Catechism are found in the third of those catechism sermon series. Consider these quotations: The first commandment: “*To have God is to fear Him and trust in Him.*” In the second commandment: “*Thou shalt not by His name swear, curse, use witchcraft, blaspheme, lie, deceive, teach falsely, but rather fear God, call upon Him in every need, love and honor Him.*”¹²

⁹ Stupperich “Melanchthon,” p. 75 (1960 – Walter de Gruyter & Co. Berlin)

¹⁰ Might this have been the origin of our system of school visitors, and visiting elders, now called circuit pastors? Probably!

¹¹ How deplorable were conditions? In a certain village, the congregation and the priest became Lutheran, during the course of the Reformation. Since they were now Lutheran, it was expected that the pastor would not only conduct the liturgy, but also preach and instruct. The pastor, being a brewer on the side, and a good one at that, preached a series of sermons on the history of brewing, and instructions in the art of brewing!

¹² We think it not necessary to compare further. Any wishing to pursue such a comparison may find the necessary material in the Weimar Edition of *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 30, section I, pp. 550-556 (cf. Also pp. 57-122)

There were three posters, containing the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, with their expectations. These may have been printed in time for the Christmas Season of 1528; they were in circulation early in 1529, and already out of print in January of that year. Two additional posters were later printed, Luther's Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.

This series, out of print already in January, 1529, appeared in a second edition, in March. One of Luther's frequent illnesses accounts for the delay. This second edition also contained posters on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Strange as it may seem, it now becomes impossible to determine the exact date of publication of Luther's Catechisms. A letter from Roerer, May 16th, 1529, mentions sending two copies of the Small Catechism (with some other books; the total bill: two groschen). The Large Catechism mentioned, as already on the market, by Roerer, already in April 23rd, 1529. It is likely that Luther worked on both catechisms, side by side, part by part, which is really the way he intended their use. *Deutsch Katechismus* (German Catechism) was the title of that book which we call the "Large Catechism." Luther never changed the title, but in preface to the "small Catechism" he referred to the *Deutsch Katechismus* as the Large Catechism, hence the name today. The term "Small Catechism" he used from the beginning for that book.

Why "*Deutsch Katechismus*?" Recall, at Luther's time, worship services were still conducted in Latin. When Luther instituted needed liturgical reform, he entitled his work "*Deutsche Messe*" (The German Mass, or Service). This means, quite simply, a service for the unlearned German people who would get nothing out of the Latin. The "Wittenberg Liturgy" provided: "*Before the early sermon on Sundays and on Festival days, the boys in the choir, on both sides, shall read the entire catechism in Latin, verse by verse, without ornamental tone. (Sine tono distincto, ie, recite, not chant).*" Just as the *Deutsche Messe* was to be a service for the common people, so the *Deutsch Messe* was to be a catechism for the common people, the unlearned.

Not only did Luther popularize his catechisms by writing in the language of the people, he also knew the value of visual aides or soon learned it, and in all but the first edition, added illustrations, taken mostly from the Bible, which had originally been intended for a collection of Catechism Sermons by Melancthon. He also knew the value of popularizing by singing, and wrote catechism hymns; for the Ten Commandments, "Dies sind die hei'gen zehn Gebot" in 1524 (T.L.H. #287); The Creed: "Wir glauben all' an einen Gott" in 1525 (T.L.H. #251,b) for Lord's Supper, He recast and added verses to "Gott sei gelobt und gebenedeiet" (T.L.H. #313). The metric version of the Lord's prayer, however, did not appear until 1538. (Vater unser im Himmelreich – T.L.H. #458) While you and your people may not consider these hymns popular today, they "sang the pope right out of the church" (literally, in Frankfort) in Luther's day!

All this gives us some direction as to why Luther wrote both his catechisms. While in the preface to the large catechism, Luther does lament the fact that the lazy preachers, who have now been released from the burden of the seven canonical hours, don't spend time in study and, suggests a little time, morning, noon, and night, spent in the catechism might benefit them and their people at least a little, in his short preface, he begins: "*This sermon (sic) is designed and undertaken that it might be an instruction for children and the simple-minded.*" That was Luther's goal, with both catechisms; not to reach or impress the learned; they could learn scripture for themselves; but to present the truths of scripture in simple teachable form for the unlearned. The prime place for such teaching to be done, of course, was the home. Above each chief part in the small Catechism, Luther wrote: "*as the head of the family should teach them in all simplicity to his household.*" (I have been pleasantly surprised to find one of our adult confirmands taking that seriously, and making sure his children were instructed and drilled at home in the catechism. His own remarks at meetings has shown that he, too, was not bereft of benefit.) This sometimes could not be carried out by father in his household (especially if, as often was the case, father couldn't read!), but was carried out by teacher and his class, pastor and his congregation. It was not really Luther's intentions that the Small Catechism be the children's textbook, and the larger Catechism the teacher's book, but rather that both books be studied side by side, the Small Catechism memorized, and then the meaning and import of what had been committed to memory be learned from the Large Catechism.¹³ For that reason, the Small Catechism is small, short, so that. it can be memorized, and

¹³ hence, the word *Enchiridion* (Handbook, Manual) appeared on the title page of many early editions of the small catechism, although not on the reprints of the first edition. (All original copies of the first edition have been lost).

retained. Not only its brevity lent itself to memorization, but also its wording. Consider the harmony and rhythm (not easily duplicated in translation) in such phrases as: “*lügen und trügen*” (lie and deceive); “*reichlich und täglich*” (richly and daily) “*verlornen und verdammten Menschen*” (lost and condemned creatures)...and many other artful phrases with their alliterations, so adapted for memorizing. (Luther’s explanation to the Second Article has often been called the most beautiful sentence in the German Language!)

Needless to say, Luther’s Catechisms were well received throughout Lutheran Lands, except for some reservations on the part of Melanchthon. Numerous editions and translations were soon made.¹⁴ By translation, we mean not only into foreign tongues, such as Polish¹⁵ English (Cranmer’s Catechism, 1548)^{16 17} Latin, Livonian, Estonian, Danist, Norwegian, and others, but also the various German dialects, Low German, Friesian, Niedersachsen, Bavarian, and others. Every effort was made by pastors and rulers alike to make Luther’s Catechisms available to the people in their own language, that they spoke and understood, no matter how corrupt.

To further trace the various editions and translations of the Catechisms, particularly the Small Catechism, would go beyond the scope of this paper, and your ability to sit and listen.¹⁸ The various “ages” that followed produced their own “improvements” and “explanations” of Luther’s work.. Some are quite orthodox, others rationalistic rubbish, and still others pietistic pratterings. The longest I have in my possession runs three volumes, a total of 1,733 pages and has the nerve to bear the title “*Praktische Katechismus*” (The author’s name happens to be Schütze!)

We will not trace all the editions of the catechisms, but one should be of interest to us, three years after our national bicentennial. In 1643, Pastor John Campanius came to America to minister to the spiritual needs of the Swedish Lutherans who had settled on the Delaware. He became the first protestant missionary to the Indians.¹⁹ His work actually started with the Indians wondering with great surprise that the whole colony would sit still and listen so long while just one man spoke.²⁰ Campanius set out to learn the language of the Delaware, and then translated Luther’s Small Catechism into their language. This book, printed in Sweden, at the personal expense of the King (Charles XI) and sent back to the colony, thus became the first book to be translated into Indian tongue.

Somewhere I read, though I cannot substantiate it, except from memory, that one of the first, if not the first, English Catechism printed in America, was printed on Ben Franklin’s press in Philadelphia. Not earth-shattering, but interesting. One wonders... did the infamous deist do the proof-reading himself? Not only editions and translations and explanations, but also imitations. Imitation is the best form of flattery, but flattery, at its best, often falls flat. The first of the three “flats” we will examine is the “Heidelberg Catechism.” Frederic III became ruler of the Palatinate in 1559. After the five day “Heidelberg Debate” of 1560, he decided that the Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper is what he wanted taught in his lands, and instructed Casper Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus to write a catechism inculcating this doctrine. The Heidelberg Catechism was the result.

¹⁴ Oddly enough, the first edition of the enchiridion in book form was not Luther’s but a Low German translation of the chief parts from the tablets, or posters!

¹⁵ Especially now, with a Polish Pope, we might do well to remember that for at least a brief time, all of Poland was won for the Reformation. The Lutherans in Poland in the twentieth century, however, are mostly German Colonists from an earlier age, and since World War II, German Lutherans in areas of Germany that became a part of Poland, particularly upper Silicia.

¹⁶ We mention Cranmer’s Catechism, 1548, because it got Luther’s Catechism popularized in England. It should be noted, however, that already in 1529, both Catechisms of Luther in Latin were being circulated by students at Cambridge and Oxford, and are listed on the “Index of Prohibited Books.”

¹⁷ Luther’s influence on Cranmer’s Catechism can be seen with one example; the first commandment: “The Fyrst Commaundement: Thou shalt have none other goddes but me. And when this question shal be demaunded of you, how do you understand the first commaundement? then shal ye answer thus: ‘In this precept we be commaunded to feare and love God with al oure harte, and to put our whole trust and confidence in him.’”

¹⁸ By the year 1700, there were, in the collection of just one theologian, over 100 explanations to Luther’s Small Catechism! (Too bad the man was so unclear in his writing, that everybody has to keep on explaining what he wrote!)

¹⁹ This honor is usually accorded John Eliot, who did not begin working with the Indians until 1646. Campanius began in 1643.

²⁰ According to his grandson, Thomas Campanius, in his “History of New Sweden.”

This catechism begins with an introduction (How novel!) on the “Holy Scriptures,” then, 52 sections, titled (with great imagination) 1 Sunday, 2 Sunday, etc. The first question is: “What is the only comfort in life and death?” The Chief parts are I. Of Man’s Misery II. Of Man’s Redemption III. Of Thankfulness. The Reformed stand of the Catechism does show through, not only in the arrangement, but also in the doctrine. One example: 29 Sunday, Question 78: “*Do, then, the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Christ?*” “*No, but as the water, in Baptism, is not changed into the blood of Christ, nor becomes a washing away of sin itself, being only the divine token of assurance thereof, so also, in the Lord’s Supper, the sacred bread does not become the body of Christ itself, though agreeably to the nature and usage of sacraments, it is called the body of Christ.*” No wonder, even in Reformed areas in the E.K.I.D., Luther’s Catechism is still used almost exclusively in the instruction of the youth.²¹

Another “Imitation” is the Catechism found in the English “Book of Common Prayer.” It is entitled: “A Catechism, that is to say, an Instruction to be learned by every person before he can be brought to be confirmed by a Bishop.” My edition runs 10 pages, in questions and answers, the first being: “*What is your name?*”²² With this question, it gets right into Baptism, then the Creed (with an explanation shorter than the Creed itself), the Ten Commandments (Reformed Numbering), a short table of duties; the Lord’s Prayer, and explanation of “Sacrament” (of which there are two generally necessary to salvation) and a brief page on the Lord’s Supper.²³ If the Reformed and Anglican would try their hand at providing a substitute for Luther’s Small Catechism, why not the Papists? In our own land, the generally used Roman Catechism is the “Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism.” It is divided into Three Chief Parts, I. The Creed, II. The Commandments, III. The Sacraments and Prayer, arranged in 38 lessons. To give you a taste, here is a question on the Lord’s Prayer. (Lesson 38.) “*Why is the Our Father a prayer of perfect and unselfish love?*” “*The Our Father is a prayer of perfect and unselfish love because in saying it, we offer ourselves entirely to God and ask Him the best things, not only for ourselves, but also for our neighbors. There are seven petitions in the Our Father. We cannot really desire what these petitions express unless we love unselfishly, for they are arranged in the order of love. We must, for example, be more desirous that God’s will should be done (No. 3) than that we should escape our own troubles (No. 7).*” The seven petitions are then listed in decreasing value: 1. *God’s Glory*, 2. *Union with God*, 3. *Perfect Love*, 4. *Needs of the soul*, 5. *Forgiveness of sin*, 6. *Protection in temptation*, 7. *Freedom from all harm.*²⁴ In the Bible, Joseph is the silent man who never says anything. Unfortunately, his catechism says little more!

Why all this about the catechisms of others? To make us realize what a 450 years of blessings we have had in Luther’s Catechisms. To prevent us from taking this blessing lightly. For Lutherans, too, have not been beyond trying to improve upon Luther’s work. I suppose the most glaring example (and failure) is the “Quitman’s Catechism” published “with the consent and approbation” of the New York Ministerium in 1814. That bit of rationalism just about did in catechetical work of any kind in the eastern synods for a generation or two. Some have never recovered.

Having looked at a few examples of catechisms we consider inferior (not only for doctrinal reasons); having seen what others have to put up with, let us spend a bit of time looking at the material Luther included in his catechism, and its arrangement.

²¹ E.K.I.D. “*Evangelish Kirche in Deutschland*,” the State Church, a sort of pan-protestant union, made up mainly of Lutherans and Reformed. Another reason, of course, for the use of Luther’s Catechism, instead of the Heidelber, is that while faith is about 95% dead in protestant Germany, Luther is still a *National* hero. Olevianus and Ursinus are not.

²² I suppose that even some of the gems I have attempted to teach might have gotten that one right!

²³ Interesting! In the *Book of Common Prayer* the “Tables and Rules for the Moveable and Immoveable Feasts” takes two pages more than the Catechism for the instruction of children. As we were taught (in Germany) when a church becomes strong liturgically, it becomes weak doctrinally; when strong doctrinally, it becomes weak liturgically. While we don’t have to remain “Basement Baptists” all our lives, I don’t feel too badly that I still can’t figure out how to figure out when the “Amber Days” are. I wouldn’t know what to do about it, if I did know.

²⁴ A few other random statements from the Baltimore Catechism: “*In the flesh, Mary was His Mother, but in the spirit she was His bride.*” Listed among chief benefits obtained by use of the sacraments: 4) “*Health of body and material blessings.*” The chief kinds of sacraments are listed as 1) *blessings given by priests and bishops*, 2) *Exorcism against evil spirits*, 3) *blessed objects of devotion*. (In connection with No. 2, we should perhaps not forget that Walther’s *Kirchenagenda* also contains a form for exorcism in connection with Holy Baptism. Get a copy of the Baltimore Catechism... You will really thank God for Luther’s night after night!)

It will be remembered that an arrangement of Chief Parts was already in use toward the end of the Middle Ages. While some numbered various and odd things as chief parts, the usual number was three, The Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in that order. Some added the Ave Maria. Luther held the retention of the first three to be almost sacred, but he changed the order, Ten Commandments first, then Creed, then the Lord's Prayer. He explains why: "...the commandments teach a man how to know his disease and to perceive that he is a sinner and a wicked man. Thereupon the Creed holds before his eyes and teaches him where to find the medicine, the grace, which will help him become pious that he may keep the commandments, and shows him God and His mercy as revealed and offered in Christ. Finally the Lord's Prayer teaches him how to ask for, get and obtain it, namely by proper, humble and trusting prayer."

But the fourth question remained: How will God nourish my faith and sustain my spiritual life? That question was answered by adding the fourth and fifth parts, the Sacrament of Holy baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, and later, the section on Confession. (In the large Catechism, Baptism and the Lord's Supper appeared as appendices.)

Now, let us go a little more into detail in the arrangement within the five (or, if someone insist, six) chief parts.

In the ten commandments, we will find a difference in numbering between the Roman and Lutheran Churches, and the Eastern Orthodox Churches and Reformed Sects. To simplify, we shall refer only to the Lutheran and Reformed.

The Reformed include, first of all, a preface: "*I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*" While this surely can be understood in a spiritual sense, Luther omitted it, since it was addressed primarily to the people of Israel of the Old Testament. Let us not forget, the Law, for us Christians, is revealed in various places in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments are an Old Testament summary of the Law, that applies to us only in that it agrees to the New Testament utterances of the law. What does not must be understood as intended for Old Testament Israel only, ...as Civil and Ceremonial Law. So, in the fourth commandment, Luther Christianized the phrase: "*that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord, thy God, giveth thee*" to "*that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth!*" Where did Luther get it? Why, from the New Testament, from St. Paul, Eph. 6:3.

In Reformed catechisms, the second commandment includes Exodus 20:4 - 6. Verse 4 Luther omitted, since the prohibition against making idols is an example for Israel, who would face special temptation to idol worship in Canaan. Certainly the worship of graven images is still forbidden, but I think in our day, for most of us, our menagerie of idols probably does not include graven images. The rest, verses 5 and 6, are what we know as the conclusion to the commandments; Luther rightly perceived that what God says about the first commandment, He says about all the commandments, for a perfect keeping of the first Commandment will include: keeping all the commandments.

In a similar way, Luther omitted the special laws for the Sabbath Day that God gave for Israel, but abrogated in the New Testament. (Matthew 13:8; Col. 2:16-17, Gal. 4:10-11) Instead, Luther used the word "Holiday," or "Festival," ("*Du sollst den Feiertag heiligen*")²⁵

Now, what about the numbering of the 10 commandments? Since the Bible does not number them, there is no doctrine involved in how one might divide them. Jesus summed them up as two. The division that we are accustomed to was made by Augustine, about 400AD. In the prohibition against making a graven image, it verse 4 of Exodus 20, which the Reformed count as a second and separate commandment from the first, "graven image" is singular; in verse 5, "You shall not bow down to them" is plural, referring back, not to "graven image" in verse 4, but to "other gods" (Plural) in verse 3. What the reformed have made into two separate commandments, in the original Hebrew are one unit, one prohibition against other gods, of which graven images would be one glaring example Israel would encounter. The tropes, those little markings the Jews used to indicate the relation of the sentences in Hebrew, indicate that verse 2-6 are all one sentence, while verse 17, containing the 9th and 10th commandments, are broken into two sentences. Suffice it to say that while the

²⁵ Did our Synod have some qualms about that, that in our English translation we have returned to "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy?"

numbering of the commandments may not be of great importance, the numbering of Augustine, which Luther used, has good linguistic basis, and eliminates some of the peculiarly Reformed distortions of the Law, which at one time made stained glass windows in a church a graven image, a sin against their second commandment.

To these ten commandments, then, Luther added explanations; brief, terse, yet complete. The beautiful thing about them is their evangelical spirit. Each beginning with “we should fear and love God” tells us what we, as born-again²⁶ children of God should now do; how we should live, out of fear and love of so dear a heavenly Father who has shown such love to us. Yet, we Children of God on this earth are always *simul iustus ac peccatur*; and despite the evangelical spirit they breathe, Luther’s explanations are Law, making us painfully aware of our sinfulness and our own particular and peculiar sins; reminding us daily that we have not yet “arrived.”

Although it might probably surprise us today, the real innovation in Luther’s small Catechism was in his division and treatment of the Apostles’ Creed! Until Luther’s time, the Creed was divided into twelve unrelated articles, (one by each of the Apostles at their last meeting, or reunion, according to Medieval tradition). What a beautiful, yet obvious innovation, that Luther divided the Creed into three Articles, treating the three persons of the Triune God in their relation to us; one on creation and preservation, another on our redemption, the third on our Sanctification. Luther’s explanations to these Articles are, as already noted, German literary style at its peak, and, more important, summaries of the Christian faith so simple, yet so complete, that if a person knew nothing but Luther’s explanation of the second article, he would not need face death with despair.

The Lord’s Prayer really presents little different, in its text, except for the use of the doxology, found in Matthew, but not in Luke. Because the Roman Church does not use it, even so great a luminary as the Roman Catholic poet Alexander Pope assumed that Luther had composed and added it. (Perhaps it was added, according to text criticism, but not by Luther.) Lutherans, too, by the way, omit the doxology, as, for example, in the morning and evening suffrages. The ending of the Doxology divides the Lutherans from the Reformed; the Lutherans saying: “forever and ever,” the Reformed, saying only “Forever.” The difference, as far as I can determine, is not doctrinal, but a difference in translating “*in Ewigkeit*” (eiD touj aiw@nouv).

In the first edition of the catechism, the Sacrament of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper comprised the fourth and fifth chief parts. While sections on the sacraments had appeared in catechisms of the late middle ages, they usually contented themselves with enumerating the Seven Sacraments; Luther’s was in his age, an innovation in its treatment of the Sacraments.

The second Wittenberg edition of Luther’s small Catechism, 1529, included a “Short Form How th Unlearned Shall Confess to the Priest.” This Luther placed between Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, thereby bringing the numbering of it as the fifth chief part. The three questions on the Ministry of the Keys were probably not formulated by Luther at all. They are first found in the Nürnberg Text booklet of 1531. Both Catechisms, in the Book of Concord, do not contain the Ministry of the Keys; the Small Catechism does contain Confession, the last part quite different and longer than the text of the Gausewitz Catechism. The Scandinavian Churches have always included only Five Chief Parts in the Catechism, appending “of Confession” to Baptism, before the Sacrament of the Altar. Thus the Catechism in “The Lutheran Hymnary” and the one Swedish Catechism I was able to examine. The Catechism for Die Evangelish-Lutherish Kirchen Niedersachsens includes both the Keys and Confessions, but not as chief parts, thus retaining Five Chief Parts. (An example of how the German LandesKirchen have handled it.) One reason for dwelling on this is that one of the objections raised to the proposed new translation of the Catechism for our Synod is that it has made changes in the Ministry of the Keys, which, some have argued, amounts to changing a confessional writing, which, I guess, in conservative Lutheran circles is a “no no!” But, as those know, who not only defend their confessions, but also read and study them, such a change would not change a confessional writing; more, *if, ... IF... (I am obviously not ready to concede this point!)* **IF** the new Ministry of the Keys would better teach our people the nature of the ministry in the church, then that would be in keeping with Luther’s original goal and intention in writing the catechism, namely, to provide a “Teaching Tool” to instruct “the ignorant heathen” in the way of salvation.

²⁶ in Holy Baptism, not by some emotional experience only!

Other additions to the Catechism include the Table of Duties, scripture texts applying “sanctification” to various callings and stations in life. These were revolutionary in Luther’s day! They taught something dangerous! ...namely that every calling of a Christian is a Christian calling, and that all Christian Callings are equal before God; whereas up to Luther’s time, it was held that the work of priests and monks *et al* were superior to the lives of the common working layman.

Another addition is the section containing the daily prayers. The morning and evening prayer, Luther had already produced, in tablet (poster) form in 1529, so these are of early origin; but are not numbered as a separate chief part.

The last addition is the “Christian Questions and Their Answers.” These did not appear in any catechism during Luther’s lifetime. They appeared first in 1551, and, for the first time in a Wittenberg edition, in 1560. The authorship of these remains uncertain. (Some attribute them to Lange of Erfurt. I tend to agree with the few who think they were an earlier work of Bugenhagen.) It matters not who wrote them; they are surely an appreciated addition to the catechism for any who regularly use them as preparation for receiving the Lord’s Supper.

These last paragraphs may have indicated, that if not the winds of change, then at least an occasional gentle zephyr may be blowing over, and caressing the thinking of a few in our Synod. I am sure no one is thinking of anything so drastic as changing the catechism. (That would be a hurricane!) There are, however, a few that have reached the conclusion that just as the time came for us to go from a German Catechism to an English Catechism (and not all congregations and persons reached that time at the same time!), so it may soon be time to go from an English Catechism to an American Catechism (again, not all will reach that time at the same time!). Change in life style as well as change in language indicate the need for this. If you listen to the mistakes your children make, while reciting, it will be obvious that you are having them learn something which, while it may be your native tongue, is, or at least verges on being, a foreign language to them.²⁷

One could, no doubt, go on at some length with the mistakes made in reciting, and the reasons why they are made. Suffice it to say, that, while our present translation has become sacred to some, it is only a translation, and, one, at that, which fails more and more as the years go by, to do what Luther intended his catechisms to do in the first place,...to provide a small book of simple instruction that could be easily learned and memorized even by the unlearned. (We should take care lest our love for certain translations border on sins against the first commandment!)

The most glaring misconception that has come to my ears is the one that I hear the most often, namely, that the new translations, by changing the “Thee” forms to “You” forms, take away from the “Majesty of God.” We don’t of course deny the majesty of God. But it is pretty good Reformed Theology to approach catechetical instruction from “the majesty of God.” (cf. the first question in the shorter Westminster Catechism.) The Lutheran approach has always been from the justifying love of God.

A little knowledge of German (Saxon) and the Saxon influence on the *anglo-saxon* that we call English would clear up a misconception here. The Saxon invasions of the British Isles did have an effect on the “Language.” In Saxon (German), there are three forms of “you”: the singular: “du,” the plural “Ihr” and the majestic “Sie”...a very polite form, used by people not on intimate terms.

The English, at the time of the King James translation, did still possess a “Majestic Form” of the second person, but it was not “thee,” but “*you*.” “Thee” corresponds to the German “*du*,” “You” to the German “*Sie*.”

²⁷ Let me share with you a few of my gems:

The 4th commandment: “Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with *them*...”

The 10th commandment... Question asked, after reciting: “that we do not alienate, beg, or take away from our neighbor his wife, servants, or cattle, but urge them to stay and do their duty?”... “Pastor, how do we urge our neighbor’s cattle to stay and do their duty?”

The Second Article: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from *maternity*...”

Here is the Lord’s Prayer, as shared with me by one of our lower grade teachers a few years ago, containing the accumulated mistakes and misconceptions of her pupils. “Our Father’s which art in heaven, How’d you know my name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, Give us this day our day old bread, and forgive us our Christmasses (not a bad petition at that!) and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the eagles.”

(Consider the language of the Quakers, who refused to use the Majestic form for anyone but God, and so always addressed one another as “Thee” and “Thou.”) “Thee,” in its original sense, was the correct way in which to address God, as a loving Father in Heaven, with whom we, His children, are on most intimate terms!

But now, the English language did a flip! Just as “V” and “U” changed places in the alphabet, “Thee” and “You” changed places in the language in the past several hundred years. The English, being a somewhat reserved and formal people soon referred to everyone with the very proper majestic “You” until “You” became the common pronoun, second person singular and plural, and “thee” went out of the language, except for students of older English literature, and the stained-glass language of the church. In English today the fact is that we have no “majestic” form at all in actual usage. The argument, therefore, for retaining the use of “Thee” to preserve the “majesty of God” is linguistically unsound.

But, I think it is more than linguistically unsound. I would have to question either the theology, or the teaching competency of anyone who wishes to teach my children, in Luther’s “Address to the Lord’s Prayer,” that “*God would by these words tenderly invite us to believe that He is our True Father and that we are His true children, so that we may with all boldness and confidence ask Him as his dear children ask their dear Father*” and thinks that he is going to accomplish teaching my children to really talk to God, their heavenly Father, with the same loving intimacy with which they talk to “dear old dad” by teaching them to address His “Majesty” with word forms that just are not part of their vocabulary! That just is not the way in which dear 20th century American children address their dear 20th century American fathers,... not even those of somewhat more German (or Prussian) “roots.”

It might be noted, and that, not in passing, that in the German Language, in which we do have a true “Majestic” form of the second person pronouns, Luther never once used it in his small catechism! “*Vater unser, der du bist im Himmel, geheiligt werde dein Name.*” So, to insist on retaining the “Thee” forms in the Catechism, to maintain the “Majesty of God,” must be, if not judged, then at least evaluated as both ignorance of the English language and of our proper relation with God, not to mention ignorance of the Catechism as Luther wrote it (and as it is one of our Lutheran Confessions!). True, God has majesty, a majesty that is neither maintained nor diminished by my use of “thee” or “you.” He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But I am His Child; I am the crown prince, graciously adopted by Him for Jesus sake; I address God as my Father...the way in which my (also adopted)son addresses me as his father...on the most intimate terms. God wouldn’t have it any other way.

The Catechisms of Luther are confessional writings of our Lutheran Church. We do not advocate changing a bit of the doctrine in them. But, they did not become Confessional writings of our Lutheran Church until 1580. Written in 1529, 51 years earlier, they were intended by their author to be teaching tools. If, in their present form and language, they teach the wrong concepts, then, they are no longer teaching tools, and, in the long run, they also cease to be confessional writings. A confessional writing must confess; *plainly* state, the truths that the church teaches on the basis of God’s word.

In all this, let it not be thought, or even inferred, that the essayist is in any way belittling Luther’s Catechisms. I began by saying that the over 400 year old Catechism was the one text book from my youth that I have kept and treasured. I still mean that. At Luther’s death, Melanchthon said: “*Luther is too great, too wonderful, for me to depict in words.*” I could paraphrase: “Luther’s Catechisms are too great, too wonderful for me to depict in words.” My criticisms of language and forms are not criticisms of the Catechism, but rather of those who might destroy the usefulness of the Catechisms by insisting that certain wordings be retained, even if it means that the clear, simple, comforting, precious message be lost!

If Luther’s Catechisms are too wonderful for me to depict in words, why these 25 pages of words? As mentioned, this is the 450th anniversary year of the two catechisms. We, the Lutheran Church, have had these treasures for 450 years: There are times when something has to be said by somebody, lest saying nothing be interpreted as lack of appreciation, or worse, a willful attempt to ignore. On such an occasion, even the simplest may speak, and the rudest acknowledgement is preferable to the silence which expresses ingratitude or contempt.

This essay is far from being the Lutheran Church's answer to the blessing of Luther's Catechism, 450 years of them. Time and talent, especially talent, were to bring it anywhere near what such an anniversary would demand. Still, it can serve a salutary purpose if by it some more able writer be spurred to do the needed work in a worthy manner.²⁸

²⁸ We happily understand we have such a more able writer in our own midst in the person of Pastor H. Warnke, whom the proper Synodical Board has already commissioned to produce a more worthy series of articles, a true *FestSchrift*, for this 450th anniversary of Luther's Catechisms!