Praise for Luther's Small Catechism: A Manual for Discipleship

For Pless, the Small Catechism is no dreary, lifeless, ancient artifact to be memorized at fourteen and then forgotten for the rest of your life. Instead, it holds the answer to renewal in the church today. The remedy for the church's current enervation is not to be found in sleek, high-resolution programs but instead in embracing the Gospel found in the Catechism as a guide for Christ-centered living. Eschewing both the legalism of the evangelical right and the libertinism of the mainline left, Pless portrays Luther's view of discipleship as resilient in the face of spiritual trial, drawn from Christ's very own holiness, which claims every inch of a sinner. Not to be pitted against grace, discipleship directs Christians to serve others even as Christ has served them.

Dr. Mark Mattes,
PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY,
GRAND VIEW UNIVERSITY

Pless draws on his own experience living out and living out of Luther's Small Catechism; on his years of instructing children, converts, and seminarians; and on the insights of a number of other scholars to help readers put Luther's Catechism to daily use as an excellent field manual for finding Christ's path of discipleship through the shifting sands and dense jungles of modern life. His questions for further reflection and study present a well-designed theologically and pastorally sensitive catechetical course in themselves, which will lead those who put this field manual to work in their lives into a deeper knowledge of Scripture and love of their Lord.

Robert Kolb, professor of systematic theology emeritus, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Pless's A Manual for Discipleship sheds light on the narrow, sometimes shadowy path between two types of glitzy triumphalism. It's the path of following Christ so closely that we suffer the very attacks that are directed at Him. But the author shows how, with the divine gifts described in Luther's Small Catechism, the Christian can withstand those attacks and persist to the end. What a wonderful guide in the true life of a disciple of Christ.

REV. DR. JACOB CORZINE,
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY,
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

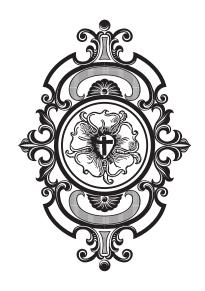
With *Luther's Small Catechism: A Manual for Discipleship*, John Pless once again blesses the church, her pastors, and her parents with a uniquely profound examination of the Catechism, unearthing its treasures by setting forth its eternal truths as a field manual for disciples. As he exemplifies in his teaching and living, so does Pless elucidate in his writing how the life of discipleship is one of continual catechesis, never growing out of but rather growing into a life that is given and guided by the Catechism.

Rev. Peter J. Brock, St. John Lutheran Church, Decatur, IN

In this book, John T. Pless does us a great service, unpacking the Catechism and its implications for the Christian life. Laypeople and pastors alike will find this to be a very helpful and edifying resource—rooted in the Gospel, clear, biblical, and deserving of several readings and sharing with neighbors.

Dr. Wade Johnston, assistant professor of theology, Wisconsin Lutheran College

Luther's Small Catechism



A Manual for Discipleship

John T. Pless



Founded in 1869 as the publishing arm of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Concordia Publishing House gives all glory to God for the blessing of 150 years of opportunities to provide resources that are faithful to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

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Preface

Where you see and hear the Lord's Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present.

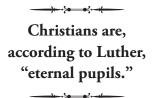
Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (AE 41:164)

iscipleship is not an extraterrestrial activity. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is not to escape the world and all that is involved with life on this earth. Looking forward to that city, whose builder and maker is God, as even now we live by faith in the One who has gone before us, we walk with feet firmly planted here in time and space. Martin Luther recognized that the God who created the heavens and the earth is no distant deity but is, literally, a down-to-earth God who formed Adam from the dust of the earth and took on flesh and blood in the womb of Mary to be our Brother and Redeemer.

The crown jewel of the multitude of Luther's writings is without a doubt the Small Catechism, where the Reformer provides disciples with a basic handbook of Christian faith and life. The Formula of Concord called it "the Bible of the laity." Ludwig Ihmels dubbed it a "life book" Other accolades would accrue for this compact book so rich in doctrine and at the same time focused on fundamental questions of life and death.

In an earlier book, Praying Luther's Small Catechism, I sought to examine the Catechism through the lens of prayer while making some suggestions as to how its parts might be transfigured into prayer. In this current book, I am suggesting that we might see the Catechism as a field manual for disciples. The image of a field manual is appropriate for soldiers and others whose work takes them into unknown terrain. A field manual imparts essential wisdom for those who would live and work away from the confines of the familiar. It provides directions to ensure survival. It orients those who use it to the conditions specific to the particular environment. A field manual is also appropriate for disciples who live in a world created by God, who have fallen into sin but are reconciled to the Father by the blood of His Son and even now are awaiting the consummation of all things in His return. It orients us to the territory of creation, guarding us from confusing the creature with the Creator.

Christians are, according to Luther, "eternal pupils." That is, we are disciples. Disciples are learners. Our curriculum is straightforward. We need to learn how to receive (faith) and how to give



(love). As we live in the field, the Catechism tutors us in both receiving and giving, in both faith and love. All that we have—body and soul—comes from the hand of a generous Creator. The Creator became a creature of our flesh and blood to redeem

us from sin, death, and the devil. The good news of this redemption was brought to us in the words of the Spirit.

The Spirit enables us to call God "our Father" with the boldness and certainty born of faith. Baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we have died with Christ and so live with Him as we await the resurrection of our bodies. In the meantime, we live in repentance and faith, confessing our sin and receiving the absolution from Christ Himself on the lips of His servant. In the Sacrament of the Altar, Christ Jesus comes to us with His

body and blood for the forgiveness of our sin, strengthening us in the life and salvation He acquired for us on Calvary. Strengthened by His testament, we now "thank and praise, serve and obey" our Father, coming to Him in daily prayer and living according to His Commandments in our earthly callings within the congregation, civic community, and household. This is the life of discipleship.

In the nineteenth century, Kahnis observed that "the Small Catechism became the people's book in a manner not achieved by any other book except the Bible." We continue to teach it in our congregations, homes, and schools with the prayer that ordinary Christians will continue to grow up and into the Catechism. What Helmut Thielicke says of young theological students may also be applied to ordinary Christians:

There is a hiatus between the arena of the young theologian's actual spiritual growth and what he already knows intellectually about this arena. So to speak, he has been fitted like a country boy, with breeches that are too big, into which he must still grow up in the same way that one who is to be confirmed must also still grow into the long trousers of the Catechism. Meanwhile, they hang loosely around his body, and this ludicrous sight is of course not beautiful.²

The Catechism is both simple and complex. It takes a lifetime to "fill it out" as disciples continue to mature.

It is my hope that this book will assist ordinary Christians to live as continual disciples, growing in the knowledge of His saving Word. Luther did not see his Catechism as an end in itself but as a handbook that would accompany the Christian, navigating a path through this world with eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. All disciples are in fact theologians, handling

¹ Cited by W. T. Dau, "How Can We Prove Our Gratitude for Luther's Small Catechism," *Lutheran School Journal* (Summer 1929): 10.

² Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 28–29.

God's Word as they hear it, receive it in faith, meditate on it, pray from it, and live under the cross that it inevitably brings. To that end, *Luther's Small Catechism: A Manual for Discipleship* is offered as a "catechetical systematics" fleshing out of Luther's teaching of God's Word for twenty-first-century Christians.

While working on this book, I was also serving on the committee to revise *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (CPH, 2017). At the end of each chapter, I have included study and discussion questions for you to make connections with particular aspects of the newly revised Catechism in the hope that this book might serve as something of a companion piece for those who use this edition of the Catechism in their home, congregation, and classroom, as well as for devotional reading.

I dedicate this book to the students who have studied the Catechism with me at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Lutheran Theological Seminary in Pretoria, South Africa. Their insights and questions have led me deeper into the truth confessed in the Catechism and its utility not only in teaching but also for preaching and pastoral care.

My thanks to Dr. Mark C. Mattes of Grandview University in Des Moines whose insights into the Lutheran character of discipleship were an impulse for the writing of this book.

John T. Pless April 24, 2019, Wednesday in the Week of the Resurrection of our Lord

Chapter 1

What Does the Catechism Have to Do with Discipleship?

The most effective tool in establishing and structuring the evangelical church in the long term was Luther's Small Catechism (*Der kleine Katechismus*), in effect a manual for Christian faith and life.

Heinz Schilling³

a resurgence of usage in recent years. It has become part of the name of one denomination, Disciples of Christ, and in some church-growth literature it has become fashionable to distinguish between members and disciples. In a recent article on "Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective," Mark Mattes suggests that in American Christianity discipleship is broadly understood in two ways. On the one hand, there is the approach of American Evangelicalism, where the tactics of neo-revivalism are employed to provide nominal church members with disciplines that will lead to an experience of God and make for a more effective personal spiritual life. On the other side of the aisle are the mainline churches associated with the Social Gospel movement, where discipleship is

³ Heinz Schilling, Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval, trans. Rona Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 375.

⁴ See Mark C. Mattes, "Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective," in *The Mercy of God in the Cross of Christ: Essays on Mercy in Honor of Glenn Merritt*, ed. Ross E. Johnson and John T. Pless (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2016), 501–18.

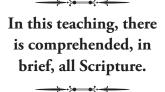
defined as moral deliberation that leads to the embrace of a liberal agenda for global justice, peace, and ecological awareness. The approach of American Evangelicalism would fix the church, while the Social Gospel approach would fix the world. Mattes asserts that Lutherans have a completely different take on discipleship, and it has to do with repentance and faith, death and resurrection. Discipleship is about death to the old Adam and the resurrection of a new man, who lives before God by faith and before the world in love that serves the neighbor.

Discipleship is catechetical. It is coherent with the shape and content of Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Friedrich Mildenberger aptly notes, "A catechism is not primarily a book. ... Rather, catechism is training in a certain body of knowledge."5 Prior to the Reformation, the term "catechism" was used in a variety of ways inclusive of the core Christian texts of the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Commandments and the ways in which these texts were taught. We can observe this usage also in Luther. For example, in his Preface to The German Mass (1526), Luther writes, "The German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. Catechism means the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith. This is why the candidates who had been admitted for such instruction and learned the Creed before their Baptism used to be called *catechumenos*. This instruction or catechization I cannot put better or more plainly than has been done from the beginning of Christendom and retained till now, i.e., in these three parts: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father. These three plainly and briefly contain exactly everything that a Christian needs to know" (AE 53:64-65). Then Luther goes on to suggest how these texts should be taught in the homes in order to train as Christians the children and servants (AE 53:65).

⁵ Friedrich Mildenberger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Erwin Lueker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 140

In his lectures the next year (1527) on the Book of Zechariah, Luther complains that so few preachers properly understand the Lord's Prayer, Creed, and Commandments and are able to teach them to the ordinary folk. Then he goes on to say, "One ought, however, to regard those teachers as the best and the paragons of their profession who present the catechism well—that is, who teach properly the Our Father, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed. 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. There is no Gospel, either, from which a man could not teach these things if he only were willing and took an interest in



teaching the poor common man. One must, of course, constantly prompt the people in these brief things—that is, in the Our Father, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed—and then insist on them and urge them upon the people in all Gospels and sermons" (AE 20:157).

Catechisms sermons were a regular feature of church life in Wittenberg in the 1520s. These sermons reflect the aim of the first of Luther's "Invocavit Sermons," preached after Luther returned from the Wartburg to do damage control on Karlstadt's ill-fated attempt to accelerate reform. In a stunning sentence, Luther sets the reality of death before the congregants: "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but every one must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me" (AE 51:70). Then Luther makes the point as to the necessity of catechetical instruction if disciples are to face death in faith: "Therefore everyone must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian" (AE 51:70). These chief

things that concern a Christian are the stuff of the Catechism. While not Catechism sermons in the narrow sense of that genre, the Invocavit sermons are surely catechetical in that they teach Christians how to live in faith and love, exercising patience in suffering and being well-versed in the Scriptures in order to endure the devil's attacks.

Luther's third series of sermons on the Catechism preached from November 30 to December 18, 1528, prefigures the content of the Large Catechism, even as it demonstrates the seriousness with which Luther took the tasks of teaching disciples of Jesus Christ. In the first of these sermons, Luther reminds his hearers that those who want to be Christian should know the catechism: "And one who does not know them should not be counted among the number of Christians" (AE 51:137). Those who do not know the Catechism are not to be admitted to Holy Communion. In this sermon, Luther also accents the responsibility of parents in partnering with pastors to catechize the young. "Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess. Therefore remember that you in your homes are to help us carry on the ministry as we do in the church" (AE 51:137). Luther suggests that the words of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer can be learned "easily enough by praying in the morning when you rise, in the evening when you go to bed, and before and after meals" (AE 51:137). Learned by heart, these core texts can then be fleshed out with additional biblical passages and the content made explicit in preaching as we see Luther doing in the Catechism sermons.

The recognition of the need for a Catechism and competent catechists, that is, preachers who could prepare the head of the family to teach the faith to his household, became even more urgent with the Saxon Visitation. Along with other Wittenberg colleagues, Luther participated as a "visitor" in the Saxon Visitation of 1528. By his own admission, the bleak conditions in church

life compelled him to prepare what we now know as the Small Catechism:

The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version. Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs, and despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom.

(SC Preface 1-3; K-W, 347-48)

Luther recognized that both pastors and people needed a form of basic instruction in discipleship, for disciples are those who continue in Christ's Word (see John 8:31) and so live not in fleshly bondage to any idolatry but in the freedom He gives.

Luther holds pastors accountable for teaching. In the Preface to the Small Catechism, he challenges pastors and preachers, begging them for God's sake to take up their office, have mercy on their people, and "help us bring the catechism to the people, especially to the young" (SC Preface 6; K-W, 348). Preachers are themselves not only to teach the Catechism but to also grow in their knowledge of it. Like all disciples, pastors are to be "eternal students" who grow ever deeper in the words that they are called to proclaim. In his 1530 Preface to the Large Catechism, Luther confesses.

But this I say for myself: I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly. These fussy, fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to be doctors above all doctors, to know it all and to need nothing more. Well this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and their people's souls, yes, even God and his Word. They do not need to fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need, however, is to become children and again begin to learn the ABCs, which they think they have long since outgrown.

(LC Preface 7-8; K-W, 380-81)6

Recognizing that the Spirit works only through the external words of God to make and sustain disciples of Jesus Christ, Luther is incessant in his insistence that pastors use the Catechism to teach the faith.

Perhaps Luther is so strong in this insistence because he recognizes how multidimensional the Catechism actually is, and this increases its *usefulness* for the life of discipleship. The Small Catechism is multifaceted. Eric Gritsch has called it a "whetstone"

⁶ Also note Albrecht Peters: "The Reformation has placed the catechism again on the lamp stand. . . . After all, all the writings of the Church fathers do not afford such clarity as could be concentrated in the Small Catechism. This is why the reformer, together with those charges learning their ABC's, patiently and continually wants to suckle these central words of God and remain daily 'the catechism's student,'" in Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Ten Commandments, trans. Holger K. Sonntag (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 35.

⁷ Eric Gritsch, "Luther's Catechisms of 1529: Whetstones of the Church," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 60 (1980): 3–14.

for the Church as it sharpens basic distinctions necessary for Christian proclamation and life. Kirsi Stjerna identifies it as a "compass," for it navigates the Christian's reading of Scripture. Charles Arand says that the Small Catechism is a "theological Swiss Army knife," for it can be used for several tasks. The Small Catechism is a handbook in doctrine, summarizing the Scriptures' teaching of human sin and God's mercy in Christ. It serves as a prayer book. Ludwig Ihmels opined that "the Catechism is not only a school book, and not only a confessional book but it is a life book." ¹⁰

The Catechism (i.e., the Decalogue, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Words of Institution for Baptism and the Lord's Supper) is seen by Luther as a digest and summary of the entire Bible. Already in the "Booklet for the Laity and Children" prepared in Wittenberg in 1525, the Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Words of Institution for Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar are identified as the "Lay Bible." Later on, in 1577, the Epitome of the Formula of Concord calls Luther's Small and Large Catechisms "a Bible of the Laity, in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation" (FC Ep 5; K-W, 487).

Luther did not see the Small Catechism as a replacement for the Holy Scriptures but as the means to get to their heart and center, Jesus Christ, God's Son in human flesh crucified for the sins of the world and raised from the dead for our justification. The Small Catechism navigates readers of the Bible, guiding them in a reading that is able to distinguish God's threats from His

⁸ Kirsi I. Stjerna, "The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, 1529," in *Word and Faith*, vol. 2 of *The Annotated Luther*, ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 285.

⁹ Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 57.

¹⁰ Cited by J. Michel Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of Its Origin, Its Distribution, and Its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg Press, 1929), 366.

¹¹ For the text of "A Booklet for Laity and Children," see *Sources and Context of The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1–12.

promises so that faith is anchored in Christ alone. As Mary Jane Haemig puts it, "Learning the catechism was never an end in itself but rather a beginning of a more broad and profound exploration of the Bible and the Christian faith." We can observe this pattern in Luther's Preface to the Small Catechism as he directs users to learn the words, move from the words to the meaning, and then take up a larger Catechism.

In his Preface to the Large Catechism, Luther speaks of a single part of the Catechism, the Ten Commandments, as a "brief digest and summary of the entire Holy Scriptures" (LC Preface 18; K-W,

"Those who know the Ten

Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures.

382). The Reformer says that "those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both

spiritual and temporal matters" (LC Preface 17; K-W, 382). This is not a reduction of Holy Scripture but a way of reading the Bible from these core texts. Already in his *Personal Prayer Book* of 1522, Luther anticipated the ordering of the first three parts of the Small Catechism:

Three things a person must know in order to be saved. First, he must know what to do and what to leave undone. Second, when he realizes that he cannot measure up to what he should do or leave undone, he needs to know where to go to find the strength he requires. Third, he must know how to seek and obtain that strength. It is just like a sick person who first has to determine the nature of his sickness, then find out what to do or to leave undone. After that he has to know where to get the medicine which will help him do or leave undone what is right for a healthy person.

¹² Mary Jane Haemig, "An Image of Luther for Today: The Catechetical Luther," Word & World 36 (Spring 2016): 124.

Then he has to desire to search for this medicine and to obtain it or have it brought to him.

(AE 43:13)

This would lead Luther to shift the structure of the sequence of the three core texts in catechetical instruction. Until the middle of the fifteenth century, the sequence of Creed-Our Father-Decalogue dominates. Around 1450, the Our Father takes the first position in catechetical handbooks. Johannes Surgant (1450–1503) gives rationale for the medieval sequence of Our Father-Creed-Ten Commandments in his *Manuale curatorum*:

Since prayer that is not prayed in true faith is without power (for without faith no one pleases God), recite the Creed. Since faith without works is totally without any power and dead and comes to be alive only through obedience to the Ten Commandments, therefore obey the Ten Commandments and learn them.¹³

The popular catechism by Dietrich Kolde (ca. 1435–1515), *A Fruitful Mirror, or Small Handbook for Christians*, organized the parts of the catechism with penance in view. In *A Fruitful Mirror*, the Creed comes first as all Christians could confess it. The Creed was followed by the Commandments and other catalogs of sin as a preparation for confession to the priest. Finally, there is the Lord's Prayer as the prayer to be prayed in order to attain grace.¹⁴

Luther begins with the Ten Commandments as the summary of God's Law, which structures human life and shows sin. The Commandments are followed by the Creed as an exposition of the trinitarian Gospel. Then comes the Lord's Prayer as the cry of faith in the midst of affliction, imploring God on the basis of

¹³ Gottfried Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism in the Context of Late Medieval Catechetical Literature," Concordia Journal 25 (October 1999): 370.

¹⁴ Timothy J. Wengert, "The Small Catechism, 1529," in *Pastoral Writings*, vol. 4 of *The Annotated Luther*, ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 202.

His command and promise to deliver and save. James Nestingen observes:

Luther follows an experiential order. He begins with the commandments because this is where life begins, under the *nomos*, in the context of the demands and conditions that bear down from birth to death. As Luther understands and interprets them, the Ten Commandments codify and summarize the essential requirements of life in relation to both God and the neighbor. The gospel declares that Christ has broken into the world of the law to take it upon himself in his death and resurrection to make sinners his own, thereby freeing them from the powers of sin, death, and the devil. The Lord's Prayer follows the Creed, expositing the shape of life as it is lived out in the tension between the claims of the law and the gospel, teaching sinners to call out to Christ Jesus for his assistance. In this way each of the three parts of the catechism posts a defining part of the life of faith-demand, gift, and consolation in the struggles of life.15

To this catechetical core, Luther will add material on Baptism and the Lord's Supper and eventually on Confession and Absolution to teach not only what the Sacraments are but how they are to be used as faith lays hold of the treasures God gives in them.



Disciples are those people who are called to faith by the Gospel and now, living by the promises of Christ, take up the cross and follow Him.



Disciples are those people who are called to faith by the Gospel and now, living by the promises of Christ, take up the cross and follow Him. Luther does not envision the Christian life—that is, the life

¹⁵ James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 76.