

# MARTIN LUTHER'S SMALL AND LARGE CATECHISMS



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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE CATECHISMS

God Himself is not ashamed to teach these things daily. He knows nothing better to teach. . . . Can we finish learning in one hour what God Himself cannot finish teaching?

—Martin Luther (LC Preface 16)

### Echoing the Truth: What Does *Catechesis* Mean?

The term *catechism* comes from the Greek word *katecho*, which literally means to “sound back and forth.” (The word *echo* also comes from this Greek word.) Thus the “catechetical” method of teaching is rooted in classical Greek and Roman educational methods and was used throughout the Middle Ages down to Luther’s time: The teacher asks a question; the student responds with a fixed and set answer, and so it goes, echoing back and forth. Repetition and recitation

of the material is used to instill in the student the words, phrases, and concepts being taught. An explanation is also added, according to the student's level of understanding. In this way, the Christian Church taught, or *catechized*, the faith. The students learning the faith are known as *catechumens*, and they receive careful and thorough *catechesis* (instruction) in the Christian faith.

### The Catechism in the Middle Ages

In Luther's day there were any number of catechisms and catechetical materials. They were often extremely extensive and required the young people to memorize not only the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creed, but also a list of seven spiritual gifts, seven cardinal virtues, the seven Sacraments, seven words of mercy, the eight beatitudes of God, and on and on and on. Luther cleared away the medieval clutter and retained the core texts of the catechisms: The Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. He then added explanations to Baptism, Absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Instead of prayers to Mary and the saints, Luther provided prayers for the beginning and end of the day, and also prayers before and after meals. Luther's goal with his Small Catechism was to provide something that was much shorter, easier to

teach and to learn, memorable, and to the point. The Large Catechism was designed by Luther to provide more information and further material both for teachers and learners. Luther's hope was that students who had mastered the Small Catechism would move on to the Large Catechism.

### The Origin of the Catechisms

Martin Luther was first and foremost a Bible professor at the University of Wittenberg, but he was also a parish preacher who served at both the city and castle churches in Wittenberg. In 1516 Luther preached a thorough sermon series on the Ten Commandments. In 1517 he preached a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer and wrote a short explanation of the Ten Commandments to help the members of the parish confess their sins. In 1518 Luther published his exposition of the Ten Commandments. In the next two years he published other short tracts based on his catechetical sermons. In 1520 he gathered these resources together and had them published under the title *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer*.

Luther wanted this book to serve the laypeople. While Luther built on catechetical customs, his work stood out as a clear departure from much of medieval catechesis. There were three

key reasons for this: First, Luther removed a lot of the additional materials that had accumulated throughout the Middle Ages and focused primarily on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, urging that if these three things were learned well, the most important truths of Christianity would be known. Second, Luther very intentionally arranged the catechism so that the Commandments would be first, then the Creed, then the Lord's Prayer. Third, Luther divided the Apostles' Creed into only three parts, not the traditional twelve parts. Luther wanted to focus clearly on the three persons of the Holy Trinity and their respective saving work. Luther's little 1520 book was the foundation for his later catechetical work.

In 1525 Luther formally commissioned what he called the "children's catechism" (*catechismus puerorum*), using the term *catechism* for the first time. He directed his colleagues Justus Jonas and John Agricola to do this work. Luther felt he was too busy to do it himself, but as it turned out, Jonas and Agricola also did not do the job to Luther's satisfaction.

Luther continued preaching each year on the basic parts of the catechism and added sermons equally clear and simple on the Sacraments:

Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. In 1528 he again took over catechism instruction in the parish church in Wittenberg and preached three series of sermons that year—in May, September, and December—each containing about ten sermons. These thirty sermons would serve Luther well a year later, in 1529, when he finally wrote the catechisms.

What ignited Luther's passion to put the catechisms in writing was a visit he had made to Saxony at the urging of its Elector. Luther was horrified to see how bad things were in the Saxon churches. He realized how essential it was for him to get to work on his catechisms. Here is what he said:

The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare this Catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Good God! what manifold misery I beheld! The common people . . . have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! many pastors are altogether incapable, and incompetent to teach. Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians. . . . Yet they cannot recite either the Lord's Prayer, or the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live like dumb brutes and irrational swine. (Bente, 156)

Luther finished the Large Catechism in March 1529, and in mid-April the first copies were in print. The title was simply *German Catechism, Martin Luther*. He finished the Small Catechism in May 1529. Its title was *The Small Catechism for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers. Martin Luther. Wittenberg*. It was an instant best-seller, printed and reprinted many times in Wittenberg and other cities throughout Germany. In early 1529 Luther also had large posters printed containing the chief parts of the catechism. These posters were hung up on walls in churches, schools, and homes for the people to recite together.

#### Marriage and Baptismal Booklets

After the first printing of the catechisms, Luther added a few things, such as a short form for Confession, and orders for baptismal and wedding services. The main portions of the Small Catechism, first produced in 1529, were never essentially changed.

When the Book of Concord was prepared in 1580, there were disagreements about what to include with the Small Catechism. The Marriage and Baptismal Booklets had, early on, been included in editions of the Small Catechism and were particularly well liked by the Saxons and

others in Northern Germany. Therefore, in the first drafts of the Book of Concord, the Marriage Booklet and the Baptismal Booklet were included as part of Luther's Small Catechism. However, Jacob Andreae explained that their inclusion was the result of an editorial mistake, perhaps by a proofreader at the printer. Andreae removed them, leaving only a bit of the liturgical service (but not the doctrinal portions of those documents). Because Andreae left a portion of the Marriage and Baptismal Booklets in the book, Duke Julius of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel noticed and expressed his concern. Prince John George of Brandenburg also wanted them included, insisting that the Small Catechism be printed in the Book of Concord "without truncation." While the Saxons and others in Northern Germany wanted both of these little booklets included in the Small Catechism, Lutherans in Southern Germany did not. They regarded them as non-essential to the unity of the Church and expressed concerns about the exorcism in the baptismal rite. Additional concerns were expressed about mandating a precise liturgical order for Baptism and marriage and also for making a precise liturgical order mandatory and part of the Lutheran Church's formal Confessions.

Martin Chemnitz was able to resolve the disagreements by suggesting that the official copies of the Book of Concord deposited in the princely courts and libraries not contain the Marriage and Baptismal Booklets. Instead, the official copies would include blank pages where these could be inserted if a Lutheran territory wanted to have them as part of its church order. For example, two of the three official copies of the 1580 Book of Concord deposited in the state archives of Saxony, in Dresden, do not include the Marriage and Baptismal Booklets. Soon the Book of Concord was printed without the blank pages to mark where the Marriage and Baptismal Booklets would be in the Small Catechism. For these reasons, they were not included in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* or this compilation of the catechisms, even as they were not included in the *Concordia Triglotta*.

The text of the Small Catechism in this work is the 1986 translation. The text of the Large Catechism is from the 1580 German edition of the Book of Concord, which was the base text for the catechisms in the *Concordia Triglotta*.

## TIMELINE

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- 1516 Luther preaches sermon series on Ten Commandments
- 1517 Luther preaches sermon series on Lord's Prayer; posts Ninety-five Theses
- 1521 Luther excommunicated by papal bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*; appears before Diet of Worms; refuses to recant, stating, "Here I stand"
- 1524 Peasants' War begins, led in part by Thomas Münzer
- 1525 Luther asks Justus Jonas and John Agricola to produce a "catechism"
- Luther marries Katharina von Bora, June 13
- 1526 Diet of Speyer grants German princes right to establish religion in their territory
- Church visitation begins to assess needs of congregations
- 1527 Visitation articles prepared
- Plague strikes Wittenberg; Luther and Katharina turn their home into a hospital

- 1528 Luther teaches catechism instruction at the parish church; preaches three-sermon series on parts of catechism
- 1529 Luther publishes the *Large Catechism* in April and the *Small Catechism* in May
- 1530 *Augsburg Confession* presented to Charles V at Diet of Augsburg, June 25

## OUTLINE OF SMALL CATECHISM

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### Preface

- I. The Ten Commandments
- II. The Creed
- III. The Lord's Prayer
- IV. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism
- V. Confession
- VI. The Sacrament of the Altar

### Daily Prayers

### Table of Duties



**ENCHIRIDION**  
**THE SMALL CATECHISM**



## PREFACE OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER

*Martin Luther* to all faithful and godly pastors and preachers: grace, mercy, and peace in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

- <sup>1</sup> The deplorable, miserable condition that I discovered recently when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare this catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple
- <sup>2</sup> form. Mercy! Dear God, what great misery I beheld! The common person, especially in the villages, has no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine. And unfortunately, many pastors are completely unable and unqualified to teach. <This is so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it.>
- <sup>3</sup> Yet, everyone says that they are Christians, have been baptized, and receive the holy Sacraments, even though they cannot even recite the Lord's Prayer or the Creed or the Ten Commandments. They live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs. Now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all freedom like experts.

O bishops! What answer will you ever give <sup>4</sup>  
 to Christ for having so shamefully neglected the  
 people and never for a moment fulfilled your  
 office [James 3:1]? May all misfortune run from  
 you! ‹I do not wish at this place to call down evil <sup>5</sup>  
 on your heads.› You command the Sacrament in  
 one form and insist on your human laws, and yet  
 at the same time you do not care at all whether  
 the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the  
 Ten Commandments, or any part of God's Word.  
 Woe, woe to you forever! [See Matthew 23.]

Therefore, I beg you all for God's sake, my <sup>6</sup>  
 dear sirs and brethren, who are pastors or preach-  
 ers, to devote yourselves heartily to your office  
 [1 Timothy 4:13]. Have pity on the people who  
 are entrusted to you [Acts 20:28] and help us  
 teach the catechism to the people, and especially  
 to the young. And let those of you who cannot  
 do better take these tables and forms and impress  
 them, word for word, on the people [Deuter-  
 onomy 6:7], as follows:

In the first place, let the preacher above all be <sup>7</sup>  
 careful to avoid many versions or various texts  
 and forms of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's  
 Prayer, the Creed, the Sacraments, and such. He  
 should choose one form to which he holds and  
 teaches all the time, year after year. For young

and simple people must be taught by uniform, settled texts and forms. Otherwise they become confused easily when the teacher today teaches them one way, and in a year some other way, as if he wished to make improvements. For then all effort and labor <that has been spent in teaching> is lost.

8 Our blessed fathers understood this well also. They all used the same form of the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, we, too, should <be at pains to> teach the young and simple people these parts in such a way that we do not change a syllable or set them forth and repeat them one year differently than in another.

9 Therefore, choose whatever form you please, and hold to it forever. But when you preach in the presence of learned and intelligent people, you may show your skill. You may present these parts in varied and intricate ways and give them as masterly turns as you are able. But with the young people stick to one fixed, permanent form and manner. Teach them, first of all, these parts: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and so on, according to the text, word for word, so that they, too, can repeat it in the same way after you and commit it to memory.

But those who are unwilling to learn the cat- 11  
 echism should be told that they deny Christ and  
 are not Christians. They should not be admitted  
 to the Sacrament, accepted as sponsors at Bap-  
 tism, or practice any part of Christian freedom.  
 They should simply be turned back to the pope  
 and his officials, indeed, to the devil himself  
 [1 Corinthians 5:5]. Furthermore, their parents 12  
 and employers should refuse them food and  
 drink, and notify them that the prince will drive  
 such rude people from the country.

Although we cannot and should not force 13  
 anyone to believe, we should insist and encourage  
 the people. That way they will know what is right  
 and wrong for those among whom they dwell and  
 wish to make their living. For whoever desires to  
 live in a town must know and observe the town  
 laws, because he wishes to enjoy the protection  
 offered by the laws whether he is a believer or at  
 heart and in private a rascal or rogue.

In the second place, after they have learned 14  
 the text well, teach them the meaning also, so  
 that they know what it means. Again, choose the  
 form of these tables or some other brief uniform  
 method, whichever you like, and hold to it. Do 15  
 not change a single syllable, as was just said about  
 the text. Take your time in doing this. For it is not 16

necessary for you to explain all the parts at once, but one after the other. After they understand the First Commandment well, then explain the Second, and so on. Otherwise they will be overwhelmed, so that they will not be able to remember anything well.

- <sup>17</sup> In the third place, after you have taught them this short catechism, then take up the Large Catechism and give them also a richer and fuller knowledge. Here enlarge upon every commandment, <article,> petition, and part with its various works, uses, benefits, dangers, and injuries, as you find these abundantly stated in many books
- <sup>18</sup> written about these matters. In particular, urge the commandment or part that most suffers the greatest neglect among your people. For example, the Seventh Commandment, about stealing, must be strongly urged among mechanics and merchants, and even farmers and servants. For among these people many kinds of dishonesty and stealing prevail. So, too, you must drive home the Fourth Commandment among the children and the common people, so that they may be quiet and faithful, obedient and peaceable. You must always offer many examples from the Scriptures to show how God has punished or blessed such persons [Deuteronomy 28].

In this matter you should especially urge magistrates and parents to rule well and to send their children to school. Show them why it is their duty to do this and what a damnable sin they are committing if they do not do it. For by such neglect they overthrow and destroy both God's kingdom and that of the world. They act as the worst enemies both of God and of people. Make it very plain to them what an awful harm they are doing if they will not help to train children to be pastors, preachers, clerks, and to fill other offices that we cannot do without in this life. God will punish them terribly for this failure. There is great need to preach this. In this matter parents and rulers are now sinning in unspeakable ways. The devil, too, hopes to accomplish something cruel because of these things.

Last, since the tyranny of the pope has been abolished, people are no longer willing to go to the Sacrament, and thus they despise it. Here again encouragement is necessary, yet with this understanding: We are to force no one to believe or to receive the Sacrament. Nor should we set up any law, time, or place for it. Instead, preach in such a way that by their own will, without our law, they will urge themselves and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer the Sacrament.

This is done by telling them, “When someone does not seek or desire the Sacrament at least four times a year, it is to be feared that he despises the Sacrament and is not a Christian, just as a person is not a Christian who does not believe or hear the Gospel.” For Christ did not say, “Leave this out, or, despise this,” but, “Do this, as often as you drink it” [1 Corinthians 11:25], and other such words. Truly, He wants it done, and not entirely neglected and despised. “Do this,” He says.

- 23 Now, whoever does not highly value the Sacrament shows that he has no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no danger, no hell. In other words, he does not believe any such things, although he is in them up over his head and his ears and is doubly the devil’s own. On the other hand, he needs no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nor anything good. For if he believed that he had so much evil around him, and needed so much that is good, he would not neglect the Sacrament, by which such evil is remedied and so much good is bestowed. Nor would it be necessary to force him to go to the Sacrament by any law. He would come running and racing of his own will, would force himself, and beg that you must give him the Sacrament.

Therefore, you must not make any law about 24  
this, as the pope does. Only set forth clearly the  
benefit and harm, the need and use, the danger  
and the blessing, connected with this Sacrament.  
Then the people will come on their own without  
you forcing them. But if they do not come, let  
them go their way and tell them that such people  
belong to the devil who do not regard nor feel 25  
their great need and God's gracious help. But if  
you do not urge this, or make a law or make it  
bitter, it is your fault if they despise the Sacra-  
ment. What else could they be than lazy if you  
sleep and are silent? Therefore, look to it, pastors 26  
and preachers. Our office has now become a dif-  
ferent thing from what it was under the pope. It  
has now become a serious and saving office. So it  
now involves much more trouble and labor, dan-  
ger and trials. In addition, it gains little reward 27  
and thanks in the world. But Christ Himself will  
be our reward if we labor faithfully [see Genesis  
15:1]. To this end may the Father of all grace help  
us, to whom be praise and thanks forever through  
Christ, our Lord! Amen.



# I. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

AS THE HEAD OF THE  
FAMILY SHOULD TEACH THEM IN  
A SIMPLE WAY TO HIS HOUSEHOLD

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GIVING OF THE COMMANDMENTS  
(EXODUS 19)

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## The First Commandment



WORSHIP OF THE GOLDEN CALF  
(EXODUS 32)

**You shall have no other gods.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

## The Second Commandment



THE SON OF SHELOMITH IS STONED  
FOR BLASPHEMY (LEVITICUS 24)

**You shall not misuse the name  
of the LORD your God.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

## The Third Commandment



HEARING AND DESPISING  
PREACHING AND HIS WORD  
(NUMBERS 15)

**Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

## The Fourth Commandment



HAM DISHONORS HIS FATHER,  
NOAH  
(GENESIS 9)

**Honor your father and your mother.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

## The Fifth Commandment



CAIN KILLS ABEL  
(GENESIS 4)

**You shall not murder.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.

## The Sixth Commandment



DAVID AND BATHSHEBA  
(2 SAMUEL 11)

**You shall not commit adultery.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honor each other.

## The Seventh Commandment



ACHAN THE THIEF  
(JOSHUA 7)

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**You shall not steal.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

## The Eighth Commandment



BEARING FALSE WITNESS AGAINST  
SUSANNA (SUSANNA 34-41)

**You shall not give false  
testimony against your neighbor.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

## The Ninth Commandment



JACOB COVETS LABAN'S FLOCK  
(GENESIS 30)

**You shall not covet your neighbor's house.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbor's inheritance or house, or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it.

## The Tenth Commandment



JOSEPH FLEES POTIPHAR'S WIFE  
(GENESIS 39)

**You shall not covet your  
neighbor's wife, or his manservant  
or maidservant, his ox or donkey,  
or anything that belongs to your neighbor.**

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not entice or force away our neighbor's wife, workers, or animals, or turn them against him, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

[The text of the commandments is from Exodus 20:3, 7, 8, 12–17]

The Close of the Commandments  
What does God say  
about all these commandments?



Answer:

He says, “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.” (Exodus 20:5–6)

*What does this mean?*

Answer: God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.