

A Small Catechism on Human Life
By John T. Pless

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Notes for the Reader:

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Quotations from the Large Catechism and the Augsburg Confession are taken from *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). The Large Catechism is noted as LC, and the Augsburg Confession is noted as AC.

Hymn verses and prayers are quoted from the following sources: *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941); *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982); Excerpts from *Lutheran Worship Agenda* (© 1984 Concordia Publishing House). Used with permission. All rights reserved. These are noted, respectively, as *TLH*, *LW* and *LW Agenda*.

Quotations from the writings of Martin Luther are taken from Luther's Works, American Edition, volumes 31, 36 and 37 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957; 1959; 1961). These are noted as AE.

Sources for all other quotations are found in additional notes at the end of this volume.

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“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 — and I also do so gladly.”

– Martin Luther (LC, Preface, p. 380)

“Praise be to God — it has come to pass that man and woman, young and old, know the catechism; they know how to believe, to live, to pray, to suffer, and to die. Consciences are well instructed about how to be Christians and how to recognize Christ.”

– Martin Luther (“Warning to His Dear German People” 1531, AE 47:52-53)



INTRODUCTION



Four hundred seventy-five years ago, in 1529, Martin Luther prepared his Small Catechism as a “pattern of the sound words” (see 2 Tim. 1:13) to guide Christians in the life of faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Throughout the last five centuries, Lutherans have turned to this little handbook to guide them into the riches of Holy Scripture and help them understand what it means to live as a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The catechism orients all of life by the First Commandment and frames the story of our individual lives in the story of the Triune God, who is our Creator, Redeemer and Comforter. It shapes our view of the world and our purpose within it as those who live toward the resurrection of the body in the promise of Baptism. It teaches us how to call upon our Father in faith and how to serve our neighbor in love. It tutors us in repentance and faith. It prepares us to eat and drink Jesus’ body and blood, trusting His testament for the forgiveness of our sins.

The Small Catechism is a “life book,” to use the words of the German Lutheran bishop Ludwig Ihmels. It is a book about our life with God — a life created by the Father, redeemed by the Son and hallowed by the Spirit. This book that you now have in your hands is a companion to the Small Catechism. It seeks to let the Small Catechism speak about our life, the life of our Creator and His crucified Son in our dying world. We will use the Six Chief Parts of Christian Doctrine to engage questions about the beginning and ending of life, about marriage and family as places where God gives and guards life, and about our responsibility to show mercy in all stages of life. Drawn from God’s Word, the catechism provides a reliable and coherent framework for responding to issues of life and death, vocation and mercy, from the perspective of God’s Law and Gospel.

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Read the Preface to Luther's Small Catechism (pp. 246-252). Why did Martin Luther prepare the Small Catechism in 1529? While the world of 16th-century Germany is vastly different from the world we know, what are some of the ways Luther's diagnoses of church life still apply to us today?
2. How does the catechism serve to orient the Christian life to both faith and love? (See 2 Tim. 1:13.)
3. In the Bible, God speaks two distinct words to us. His word of Law exposes and condemns our sin. His word of Gospel proclaims the forgiveness of sins and peace with God through faith in Jesus. How do the structure and sequence of the Six Chief Parts of the Catechism reflect the right distinction between the Law and the Gospel? (See Rom. 3:19-31.)
4. What are some issues that challenge the sanctity of life in our day? While these issues might not be explicitly named in the catechism, how does the catechism provide us with "a reliable and coherent framework" for responding to these challenges?

ONE

“For no one of those who are alive today knows where he was during the first two years, when he lived either in the womb, or when, after being brought into the light of day, he sucked his mother’s milk. He knows nothing about the days, the nights, the times, the rulers. Yet he lived at that time, and he was a body joined to a soul — a body adapted to all natural functions. Therefore this is most certain proof that God wants to preserve man in a wonderful manner altogether unknown to him.”

– Martin Luther (“Genesis Lectures,” AE 8:316-317)





The Creation

WHO IS THE GIVER OF LIFE?

Luther's Small Catechism References:

The Creed — First Article

The Lord's Prayer — Introduction

First Commandment

An Explanation of the Small Catechism, Questions 24, 26-29, 112-117



There is but one God. He is without beginning and without end. He has life within Himself in that communion of persons which is the Holy Trinity. John puts it like this: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4). God is the source of all life, and it is His very nature to bestow life. Luther put it succinctly: “These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam’s fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and all his gifts.”¹ God is both Giver and Gift. There is no life apart from this God and His undeserved giving.

This brings us to one of the pet mythologies of our day: autonomy. Autonomy is taken from two Greek words meaning “self” and “law.” To be autonomous is to be a law unto oneself. It is to be self-contained. The Lutheran theologian Werner Elert rightly observed that autonomy is nothing more than an unfulfilled illusion.

It is yet another attempt to be your own god. The fact that you have a belly button proves Elert's point. You were not self-created. Your body was formed in the body of another. In other words, the life you have came to you from outside of yourself; it came as gift apart from your willing it. At the other end of life there is also the boundary of death. To paraphrase the words of Genesis, from dust you were taken and to dust you shall return. It is in between the boundaries of birth and death that we live; we may not transcend these boundaries, try as we might. Human life does not come into existence by its own willfulness, nor can it extend itself eternally. Autonomy comes crashing down on these two realities: birth and death. Many contemporary ethical issues like abortion, homosexuality and euthanasia are often argued for on the basis of autonomy, something that does not exist.

The First Commandment unmasks the lie of autonomy. God doesn't argue for His own existence. He simply asserts it: "*You shall have no other gods.*" Of course, God's very existence gets in the way of our quest for autonomy. This was recognized by the unbelieving philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that even if the biblical God did exist, we would have to pretend that He did not exist in order to be free in the way we think we want to be free. The problem is that we are not free. We are bound to the earth, as we were taken from dust and will return to dust. Try as we might, we cannot escape being creatures. And that is a good thing!

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is the connection between God and life according to John 1:1-4?
2. “God is the source of all life, and it is His very nature to bestow life.” Review Luther’s explanation to each of the three articles of the Apostles’ Creed. How does each person of the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — bestow life?
3. What is autonomy? Give examples of how this attitude shows itself today.
4. How do both birth and death prove that autonomy is an “unfulfilled illusion”?
5. The late theologian Gerhard Forde wrote, “If one starts from the premise and defense of freedom of the will one will end in bondage.”² How does the First Commandment show us that we are not free?



Image p. 8: The Creation; woodcut from the first illustrated edition of the Large Catechism, 1530, Wittenburg. Pritzlaff Memorial Library Rare Book Collection; Concordia Seminary Library, St. Louis, Mo.

Gen. 1:26a — “*Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...’*” As God gave life to the first man and woman, so now He gives life to all through His Son.