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THE SMALL CATECHISM



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Neal E. Snider

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PREFACE

Lutheran Christians are frequently asked, “What do Lutherans believe? No better answer can be given than that which Luther himself wrote in a small catechism in 1529. The beliefs and teachings haven’t changed over the years.

This small pocket/purse size catechism is for personal reflection or group discussion. Equally important it is for distribution. Give it to friends, relatives, neighbors or anyone who has any interest (or even those who do not). Return for additional copies. Those also can be given away.

This catechism is produced by the staff of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Marysville, Washington, and is a gift from this congregation to all who read it.

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The Ten Commandments (as the head a household should teach it simply to his family) (see Exodus 20:1-17)

Editor's Note: Observance of the Ten Commandments does not give one a right standing (standing of righteousness) before God. Such a standing is obtained only through Jesus Christ (outlined in the Apostles' Creed, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper). The Commandments are, nevertheless, God's law. They serve a dual function: They preserve order in society, and inability to keep God's commandments perfectly shows us our need of a savior, and leads us to Jesus Christ.

Introduction: "I am the Lord your God."
(Here God establishes his authority to issue commandments).

First Commandment: You shall not have other gods.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear, love and trust God above all things.

Second Commandment: You shall not abuse the name of your God.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not use his name to curse, swear, perform magic, lie or deceive, but call upon God's name in all troubles and use it for prayer, praise and thanksgiving.

Third Commandment: You shall keep holy the day of rest.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his (God's) word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Fourth Commandment: You shall honor your father and your mother.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not look down upon our parents, or others in authority, or cause them to be angry (with us), but hold them in honor, serve, obey and esteem them.

Fifth Commandment: You shall not kill.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not harm or cause any

pain to our neighbor's life, but help and benefit him in all of life's needs.

Sixth Commandment: You shall not commit adultery.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we live a pure and chaste life in words and actions, and husband and wife love and honor each other.

Seventh Commandment: 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 property nor get them by false dealing or fraud, but help him improve and preserve his property and livelihood.

Eighth Commandment: You shall not speak falsely against your neighbor.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not lie, betray, slander, or create an evil reputation for our neighbor, but excuse him, speak well of him and put the best construction on all that he does.

Ninth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not seek by craftiness to obtain his inheritance or house, or claim to have a legal right to them, but help and assist him in keeping what is his.

Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, servant, maid, cattle, or anything that is his.

What does this mean? Answer: We should fear and love God so that we do not entice, seduce or take our neighbor's wife, servants or cattle from him, but urge them to stay and do their duty to him.

Conclusion: What does God say about all these commandments? Answer: He says this: "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, and I punish the fathers' sins on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me; but I will do good to a thousand generations of those who love

me and keep my commandments.”

What does this mean? Answer: God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. We should therefore fear his anger and not disobey these commandments. But he promises grace and every good to all who obey these commandments; therefore we should love and trust him and gladly do what he commands.

The Apostles' Creed (as the head of a household should teach it simply to his family)

The First Article (About Creation): I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean? Answer: I believe that God has created me and all creatures. He has given and still preserves my body and soul, eyes, ears, and every part of me, my reason (intellect, understanding) and all my senses; also clothes and shoes, food and drink, house and homestead, wife and child, field, cattle and all my possessions. He richly and daily provides everything necessary for this body and life. He protects me from all danger, guards

and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all of this it is my duty to thank, and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

The Second Article (About Redemption): I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by (the power of) the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is sitting at the right hand of God the Almighty Father. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

What does this mean? Answer: I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten from the Father in Eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won (freed) me from all sin, from death, and from the power (authority) of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood, and with his innocent

suffering and death, so that I might be entirely his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns forever. This is most certainly true.

The Third Article (About Sanctification): I believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and an everlasting life. Amen.

What does this mean? Answer: I believe that I can not by my own reason (intellect/understanding) or effort believe in or come to my Lord Jesus Christ, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and preserved (kept) me in the true faith; just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies all Christendom (all Christians) on earth, and preserves (keeps) them in Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christendom (Christian faith) he daily forgives abundantly all my sins and the sins of all Believers, and on the last day will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.

The Lord's Prayer (as the head of a household should teach it simply to his family)

(Introduction): Our Father in heaven:

What does this mean? Answer: God wants (with this introduction) to encourage us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, therefore we should pray to him in all confidence and full assurance, just as dear children do to their dear father.

First Petition: Hallowed be your name.

What does this mean? Answer: God's name is indeed holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that he will make it holy in us.

How does this happen? Answer: When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as children of God live according to it – to that end help us dear Father in heaven! But whoever teaches and lives otherwise than what God's Word teaches profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this dear heavenly Father.

Second Petition: Your kingdom come.

What does this mean? Answer: The Kingdom of God comes entirely by God himself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come also to us.

How does this happen? Answer: When the Heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word and live a godly life throughout time and eternity.

Third Petition: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

What does this mean? Answer: God's good and gracious will happens indeed without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it will be done also in us.

How does this happen? Answer: When God breaks and hinders every evil suggestion and will, which would hinder us from hallowing his name and the coming of his kingdom, such as the Devil, the World, and the will of our own flesh, but strengthens and keeps us steadfast in his word and faith to our very end. That is his gracious and good will.

Fourth Petition: Give us today our daily bread.

What does this mean? Answer: God gives daily bread also entirely without our prayer, even to evil people; but we pray in this petition that he would make us understand and receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.

What is meant by "daily bread?" Answer: Everything related to the support and necessities of life: such as all food, drink, clothes, shoes, house, farm, field, cattle, money, goods, devout spouse, devout children, devout servants, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, good health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and other similar things.

Fifth Petition: And forgive us our sins (indebtedness/guilt) as we forgive those indebted to (who sin against) us.

What does this mean? Answer: We pray in this petition that the Father in heaven would not look at our sins nor deny our prayer because of them, because we are not worthy of that for which we pray, nor do we deserve them, but (we pray) that

he would give us all things by grace, because we daily commit many sins and deserve nothing but punishment. We will certainly in return heartily forgive and gladly (willingly) do good to those who sin against us.

Sixth Petition: And lead us not into temptation (trial)

What does this mean? Answer: God certainly tempts no one (to sin), but we pray in this petition that God would protect and keep us so that the Devil, the World, and our (own) Flesh would neither deceive us nor lead us into misbelief, despair and other great disgrace and vice, and even though we are tempted by them we will, nevertheless, in the end win and obtain the victory.

Seventh Petition: But deliver us from evil

What does this mean? Answer: We pray in this petition, as in a summary, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from all evil to body and soul, property and reputation, that finally when our last hour shall come (he will) give us a blessed end and by grace take us from this vale of tears to himself

in heaven.

[*Conclusion:* For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

This ending was not a part of the original Lord's Prayer as given by Jesus to his disciples, and Martin Luther did not include it in his catechism. However, as early as the late first century or early second century we know that at least a part of this conclusion was added to the Lord's Prayer, and used by the faithful when they gathered to worship.]

AMEN

What does this mean? Answer: That I should be certain that such prayers are agreeable to our Father in heaven and are heard by him, because he himself has also commanded us to pray like this, and he has promised that he will hear us. Amen, Amen: that is, Yes, Yes, it will happen.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism (as the head of a household should teach it simply to his family)

The First (Question): What is Baptism?

Answer: Baptism is not only water, but it is water connected with God's command and bound to his Word.

What is that Word of God? Answer: Our Lord Christ speaks at the end of (the Gospel of) Matthew: "Go into all the world, teach all heathen, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The Second (Question): What does baptism give, or of what value is it?

Answer: It works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from Death and the Devil, and gives eternal life to all who believe it just as the words and promises of God say.

What are such words and promises of God? Answer: Our Lord Christ speaks at the end of (the Gospel of) Mark: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

The Third (Question): How can water do such great things?

Answer: Water (alone) certainly does nothing, but

it is God's Word with and through the water, so faith grabs hold of God's Word (that comes) in (or through) the water. For without God's Word water is merely water and no baptism; but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a merciful water of life and a "bath of New Birth in the Holy Spirit," as St. Paul says to Titus in the 3rd chapter: "Through the Bath of the New Birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit which he has poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, out of that, by his grace, we are made righteous and become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." This is most certainly true.

The Fourth (Question): What is the meaning of this water baptism?

Answer: It means that the old Adam in us, through daily remorse and repentance should be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and on the other hand a new person daily come forth and arise who lives in righteousness and purity before God forever.

Where is this written? Answer: St. Paul writes to the Romans in the 6th chapter, "We are buried with Christ through baptism into death so that as Christ

has been raised from the dead by the majestic power of the Father, we may also walk in a new life.”

How the Unlearned Should Be Taught to Confess

What is Confession?

Answer: Confession consists of two things. First, that a person confesses (his/her) own sin; secondly, that one receives the “absolution” or forgiveness from the Confessor as from God himself, and thereupon never doubting, but firmly believing that (his/her) sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

Which Sins Should One Confess?

Answer: Before God one should admit all sins, including those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. But before the Confessor (that is, in private confession) we should confess only the sins that we know and feel in the heart.

Which are these (sins)?

Answer: Here consider your situation over against

the Ten Commandments, whether you are father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or servant; whether you may have been disobedient, unfaithful, lazy, slothful, quarrelsome; whether you have hurt someone by words or actions; whether you have stolen, omitted, neglected, or done any other harm.

Give me a short way to confess.

Answer: So shall you speak to the Confessor (the one to whom you make confession): “Worthy and dear sir, I request that you would be willing to hear my confession and speak (the word of) forgiveness to me as God wills.”

“Proceed!” “I a poor sinner confess before God all sins (of which I am) guilty; especially do I confess before you that I am a servant, maid, etc., but, unfortunately, I serve my Lord unfaithfully; for in this and that I have not done what they have called me to do; I have angered and irritated them, have been negligent and allowed harm to happen, acted shamefully in words and actions, have been angry with my equals, have grumbled at and cursed my superior, etc. I am sorry for all this, and I ask for grace. I want to do better.”

A man or woman may therefore say: "In particular I confess to you that I have not been faithful in nurturing my child, servant and wife to God's glory. I have cursed, set a bad example by words and actions, done harm to my neighbor and spoken evil of him, have overcharged and given false and less than entirely good merchandise."

And whatever else he has done against God's commandments and position, etc.

But if a person does not find himself burdened by these or greater sins, he should not grieve or seek to widen or expand his sins and thereby turn his confession into an agony, but tell one or two (sins) that you know. Consequently, "in particular I confess that at one time I cursed; again, at one time I used improper words, at one time I neglected this or that." Let this be enough.

But if you know none at all (which would be hardly possible) then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness of the general confession which you make before God to the Confessor.

Then shall the Confessor say: God be gracious to you and strengthen your faith. Amen.

Furthermore: Do you also believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness? Answer: Yes, dear sir.

Thereupon he speaks: As you believe, so it is to you. And I, by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace.

But those who have great trouble of conscience or are distressed and tempted the Confessor will know well to comfort with more words, and to stimulate faith. This shall be only a general way of confession for the unlearned.

The Sacrament of the Altar (as the head of the household should teach it simply to his family)

What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

Answer: It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and drink, instituted by Christ himself.

Where is this written? Thus write the holy evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and St. Paul: "Our Lord Jesus Christ in the night in which he was betrayed, took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, Take it and eat it. This is my body which will be given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he also took the cup after supper, gave thanks and gave it to them, and said: Take and drink from it all of you. This cup is the New Testament in my blood that will be spilled out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me."

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?

Answer: It is pointed out in these words: "Given for you and poured out for the forgiveness of sins," namely, that in the sacrament the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us; for where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?

Answer: Eating and drinking certainly do not (do such great things), but the words that stand here: Given for you and poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Which words are, accompanying the bodily eating and drinking, the main point in the sacrament, and whoever believes these words has what they say and what they declare, namely, the forgiveness of sins.

Who then receives such sacrament worthily?

Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation is an entirely excellent outward discipline; but (the person) is fully worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words. Given for you and poured out for the forgiveness of sins. But whoever does not believe these words or doubts (them) is unworthy and unfit (to receive them); because the word "For you" requires simply a believing heart.

REMEMBER

Martin Luther wrote this catechism in the 16th century. As times change so do forms of expression. Few of us today think of cattle and maids as an expression of God's blessing. We may include medical technology and means of communication as a blessing.

In *How the Unlearned Should be Taught to Confess* we would not be so formal in our conversation as in Luther's day, and we might replace "unlearned" with "all people."

With those minor notes *Luther's Small Catechism* of 1529 is as contemporary as this morning's newspaper.

THE LUTHER ROSE

Luther explained the symbolism of his crest in a letter written on July 8, 1530 as follows: "The cross must come first, black and within a heart, which has its natural color, so that I can be reminded that it is our faith in Christ crucified which makes us blessed and happy ... Such a heart should be placed in the center of a white rose, to grant my faith joy, comfort and peace ... This is why the rose must be white and not red, as white is the color of all spirits, souls and angels. Such a rose in turn is in the middle of a sky-colored field symbolizing heaven; my joy in faith is the beginning and my heavenly bliss is the future. The golden ring around the sky colored field is a symbol of my eternal happiness in heaven, a bliss which is greater than all joy and possessions. It is gold as gold is the most precious and exquisite ore."