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Luther's Small Catechism: An Examination Of Its Structure, Intent, and Use for the Church Today

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LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM:
AN EXAMINATION OF ITS STRUCTURE,
INTENT, AND USE FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

A Seminar Paper Submitted to the Faculty
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Master of Sacred Theology

By

Kenneth R. Watson

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INTRODUCTION

Four hundred seventy years later, the question still stands: With what intent did Martin Luther set forth his *Small Catechism*? Could it have been the seemingly limited and pedantic use into which it seems generally to have fallen today -- as a predominantly pedagogical text studied for the narrowly defined time of confirmation instruction, and then discarded as of no further value? For many in the past, as James Nestingen has observed, the *Small Catechism* became solely "a stern taskmaster which turned up in confirmation class to set out the theological values of an enforcement-minded majority"¹; and for all the many of the past who were left with a predominantly negative memory of the *Small Catechism*, there exists yet another multitude, another

generation ... that remembers it not at all. For these people, the catechism was at best an occasional visitor at Christian education.

Either way, recalled as a glower or sensed vaguely in concealment, the catechism has clearly lost the place that it has held in Lutheranism for centuries. It is no longer the working paradigm, encompassing the witnesses of Scripture in the language of daily experience to serve preaching and reflection on the church's faith and mission.²

Certainly, pedantry in regard to the *Small Catechism* is nothing novel. Commenting on the significance of the catechisms of Luther on their 450th anniversary (1979), Arthur Drevlow stated in regard to their use: "The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod has found the catechisms to be treasured *instructional manuals*" (emphasis added).³ While Drevlow's statement stands here admittedly a.) out of context and b.) as certainly true, still one must wonder if such a statement doesn't, in fact, candidly reflect a state of

¹ James Arne Nestingen, "Preaching the Catechism," *Word & World* 10 (Winter 1990), 33.

² *Ibid.*

³ Arthur H. Drevlow, "The History, Significance, and Application of Luther's Catechisms," *Concordia Journal* 5 (September 1979), 175.

practical abandonment into which the *Small Catechism* has fallen in more recent times. In any case, Drevlow's words present a far different understanding of the use of the *Small Catechism* than that affirmed in the words of Paul J. Hoh just fifty years earlier:

[The catechism] is a religious book, not a theological one, -- written out of the experiences of a believing Christian soul. It is a confession of the heart, not of the head, and intended primarily for the heart, not for the head.

It is a personal book, not a church book, -- born from an individual's life and meant for individual lives. True, it has become a confession of the church -- its simplest, profoundest, most spiritual, most popular, most potent confession; and yet it is preeminently the confession of the individual members of the church rather than of the church as a whole.

It is a practical book, not a theological one -- produced to meet practical needs, not to satisfy speculative cravings. It is capable of definitely practical uses, in the Christian home, for the religious development of youth, for the winning of adults for Christ, for the edification of the congregation, and for the inculcating of eternal verities into the life of even non-Christian groups.⁴

The *Small Catechism*: an instructional manual? a confession? a prayer book? a practical life's compendium? Twenty years later, does the use of the *Small Catechism* today reflect the pedantry of Drevlow's "instructional manual," or does it in any way embrace the manifold possibilities set forth by Hoh? Does its use today, in fact, reflect what Luther intended in its compilation? Indeed, what did Luther intend?

It is toward suggesting answers to such questions (the last specifically) that this paper shall direct itself. It will do so basically in three parts: 1.) recognizing the difficulty in definitively disjoining structure from intent, intent from structure, this paper will focus primarily on the structural development of the traditional parts of the *Small Catechism* as delivered to, accepted by, and used in the church today; 2.) it will set forth an analysis of the specific intent behind the development of the *Small Catechism's* structure; and 3.) it

⁴ Paul J. Hoh, "The Practical Possibilities of Luther's Small Catechism," *The Lutheran Church Quarterly* 2 (January 1929), 58.

will examine and offer contemporary considerations and suggestions with reference to the use of the *Small Catechism* in the church today.

I. STRUCTURE / INTENT

Luther's foundational structure for catechesis: the triad of Decalog, Creed, Lord's Prayer

With the appearance of the *Eine kurze Form der zehn Gebote, eine kurze Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers* in 1520 the foundational structure of the *Small Catechism* had been defined. Luther had chosen to retain the traditional catechetical triad of the Middle Ages -- the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Decalog:

These three parts contain fully everything that is in the Scriptures and that should ever be preached and also everything that a Christian needs to know, basically and thoroughly grasped, and all so briefly and plainly put forth that no one can complain or make excuse that what he needs for his salvation is too long or too hard to remember.⁵

Luther, however, rearranged this traditional catechetical triad into a structure that better suited and revealed his own catechetical intent (moving the Decalog from terminal to primary position in the triad):

There are three things a man must know in order to be saved. First, that he knows what he must do and allow. Second, when he finds that he cannot do or allow what he ought, he must know where he must seek and find what it takes to do them.... The Commandments teach a man to know his illness, so that he sees and senses what he is to do and not do, permit and not permit, and knows himself to be a sinner and wicked person. Thereafter, the Creed shows and teaches him where he can find the remedy, the grace to help him to become pious and keep the Commandments; it shows him God and His mercy, revealed and offered in Christ. Third, the Lord's Prayer teaches him how to ask, get, and take it to himself.⁶

⁵ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883, hereafter cited as WA [Weimarer Ausgabe]), vol. 7, 204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 204-5.

Luther's intent is clear: that a person might know the condemnation of the Law, the way of salvation through Christ, and a lifelong, daily empowering by the work of the Spirit.⁷ James Nestingen observes that

Luther was not setting a theological priority in this sequence. Rather, as his own statement makes clear, his purpose was to follow the order of experience: life begins, is lived, and ends under the force of the law; the gospel enters the realm of the law as an alien word, giving the faith, hope, and love necessary to live in such a context; prayer arises as both necessity and gift in life lived between law and gospel.

... [Luther] addresses the original questions of human life, not theoretically or conceptually, but actually, truthfully, in terms of what can be known: What does God expect of me? What does God do for me? How can I get hold of God to get some help? As usual for Luther, it is a thinking of the faith hammered out in temptation, where the irreducible issues of life and death, faith and unbelief emerge.⁸

This delineated catechetical structure/intent is not abandoned by Luther in subsequent writings, rather more firmly entrenched and expanded. This can be seen as early as the appearance of *Eyn bett buchlin* in May, 1522. Martin Brecht observes that in setting forth this publication as a “‘simple form and mirror’ for recognizing sin and for praying” Luther was simply returning to what he had already formulated in *Eine kurze Form*, “modernized somewhat in a few places and purged of Catholic presuppositions.”⁹ The triad of Decalog, Creed, Lord's Prayer remained the solid foundation for forming a “new evangelical piety, especially before Luther's catechisms appeared.”¹⁰

⁷ Cf., Robert C. Schultz, “The Theological Significance of the Order of the Chief Parts in Luther's Catechism,” *Teaching the Faith: Luther's Catechisms in Perspective* 24 (1967), 51: “Luther began with the decalogue in order to use the knowledge of sin created through the study of the law as a preparation for the proclamation and teaching of the gospel. He understood this to be not only the pattern of the initial conversion experience but also the basic pattern of the Christian life as it is lived day by day. Luther can also say that the Christian daily lives out and recapitulates his baptism within the context of his vocation.”

⁸ Nestingen, 36.

⁹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532*, tr. James L. Scaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

By the revised edition of *Eyn bett buchlin* of 1525, Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar had appeared as parts for catechesis alongside the triad of Decalog, Creed, Lord's Prayer.¹¹ This expanded structure was maintained in the appearance of the first editions of the *Small Catechism* in 1529. In the 1531 edition of the *Small Catechism*, confession/absolution was included as a part for instruction, inserted between the parts on Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. This structure of six "chief" parts is that generally maintained in contemporary editions.

The catechetical intent of Luther with respect to the formulation of this structure is described at length by commentator Albrecht Peters. Peters assesses Luther's intent for catechesis as four-fold¹²: 1.) Catechesis for Luther meant chiefly and foundationally elementary instruction in the Christian faith. Luther emphasized this in the preface to the *Deutsche Messe*, 1526: "Catechesis means an instruction (*Unterricht*), wherewith those unbelievers who desire to be a part of Christianity are taught and instructed what they should believe, do, allow, and know about Christianity."¹³ 2.) This instruction was closely connected to the question/answer practice of the confessional.¹⁴ In the confessional office there was opportunity afforded for the believer regularly to hear the

¹¹ *Ibid.*; cf., Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 50. The inclusion of extra material in addition to the triad of Creed, Lord's Prayer, Decalog in medieval catechisms was common practice and nothing completely innovative; however, the inclusion of explanations which clearly reflected the teachings of Scripture in regard to those "extras" was something new offered by Luther.

¹² Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu den Katechismen Luthers, Band 1* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 16-7.

¹³ *WA*19, 76.

¹⁴ Cf., *ibid.*: "But they should be questioned part by part (*Stuck*) and give answer as to what each part means and how they understand it."

language of catechesis used and applied on a personal, individual basis. 3.) Luther's concern for catechesis focused primarily on the content of what was taught and witnessed:

I know of no better nor plainer way of instruction and teaching than has been done from the beginning of Christendom until now, namely, these three parts (*Stuck*): the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer. In these three parts is contained plainly and briefly all that a Christian needs to know.¹⁵

Peters notes that this third sense of the use of the term "catechesis" by Luther, as a sort of "key (*Chiffre*) to the central teachings of the Christian faith,"¹⁶ is the primary use of the word for Luther. 4.) Catechesis so defined, the term then came to be used as an abbreviation for the contents of the book which presented such instructional material, or, then, as a designation for the book itself.

That Luther primarily considered catechesis as a sort of "key to the central teachings of the Christian faith" is a point that impacts heavily on the structure/intent of those writings which he set forth to manifest those teachings. With the publication of the 1531 edition of the *Small Catechism*, the structure of Luther's "key" found its final form.

Developing the "key" for teaching the faith

It seems fair to assume that intent drives structure. Whether or to what extent Luther's intent in regard to catechesis changed as the structure of the catechetical materials he was preparing developed is difficult to assess. However, with the structure of the triad defined as the "key" to Luther's catechetical intent, one is lead to wonder, in

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Peters, 16-7. "*Diese dritte Sprachgebrauch: Katechismus als Chiffre fuer den zentralen Lehrinhalt des christlichen Glaubens ist von Luther vor allem intendiert.*" The concept of the *Small Catechism* as *Chiffre* -- the "key to the central teachings of the Christian faith" -- is to be understood not merely as a hermeneutical starting point, but even more as that which both "symbolizes" and "summarizes" that faith in total, encompassing all of Christian teaching and life (see p. 21 below).

regard to such intent, about the addition of other parts for instruction, especially with reference to how Luther's catechetical intent already had been reflected in the light of earlier catechetical structures. Luther's comment in the preface to the *Deutsche Messe* that the triad -- Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer -- contained plainly and briefly *all* that a Christian need know (this even after the addition of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar as parts for instruction) seemed to solidify the triad as *the* "chief parts" (*Hauptstuecke*), *the* "key" on which Luther intended *all* catechesis to rest.

The principal question that arises pertains to the other parts which were added: If the triad stands as the "key" to catechesis and constitutes the "chief parts" for instruction, what kind of parts are the others -- Baptism, Confession, Sacrament of the Altar -- traditionally, at least in more recent times, also designated by the title "chief parts," as well as the appended Table of Responsibilities and the household prayers, and what function do they serve toward attaining the goals of Luther's catechetical intent? Are the sacramental parts and the accompanying part on confession/absolution somehow secondary in their catechetical nature to those of the triad? What of the other appended parts included in the 1529/1531 editions and still retained by modern editions of the *Small Catechism*? Are these "other" parts to be considered then at very best tertiary in relation to the parts of the triad?

**Luther's catechetical superstructure:
materials added to the triadic foundation**

Johannes Meyer comments that although Luther, along with the ancient Church, considered the trilogy of Decalog, Creed, Lord's Prayer to contain all of Christendom, this

fact did not preclude the addition of further materials to that foundational structure of the *Small Catechism*. With the subsequent addition of other materials to the triad by Luther as parts also of necessity for proper and thorough catechesis, Meyer concludes that the compilation of the *Small Catechism* resulted in “a collection of instructional parts at different levels” (*Lehrstuecken von verschieden abgestuften Wertes*).¹⁷ In their additions, the parts concerning Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar appear, according to Meyer, to have been elevated to the level of the first three parts. The Table of Responsibilities and the household prayers, on the other hand, seem to have found their addition more as “appendages” at a different level. With its late addition (1531 edition), the part concerning confession/absolution and its insertion between the parts on Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, although not seen as merely an addition of yet another appendage, still cannot be taken as exactly equivalent (*gleichwertig*) to the other sacramental parts, since this part’s construction differs substantially from the two which stand at either side.¹⁸

Peters sheds some light on this last point noting that

the Reformer initially added only Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar to the foundational three chief parts as the two sacraments which the Lord Himself had instituted. The traditional confessional office (*Beichtbusse*), the “third sacrament,” is first mentioned only in connection with the fourth chief part as a constant “return” (*Widergang*) and an incessantly renewed “approach” (*Zutreten*) to Baptism,¹⁹

which is already witnessed as part of Luther’s catechetical formulation as early as 1520.²⁰

¹⁷ Johannes Meyer, *Historischer Kommentar zu Luthers Kleinen Katechismus* (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1929), 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 81-2.

¹⁹ Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu den Katechismen Luthers, Band 4* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 11.

²⁰ WA6, 528 (*De captivitate babilonica*); cf., *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, hereafter cited as BC), 445, 74 ff. (*Large Catechism IV*).

While one wonders what Meyer precisely meant by “parts at different levels,” particularly in regard to his use of the word “*Werte*,” there is certainly a sense in which a description of the parts as standing at different levels is valid. As one looks at the sequence of parts, there at least seems to be a progression in “levels of use” whether intended or simply implied: one first sees the “use” of the foundational triad as portrayal of the divine economy and salvific work which, in turn, is then further portrayed as that offered and actually conveyed to the church in the “use” of the subsequent sacramental parts and their attendant part on confession/absolution; the “use” of the additional parts regarding Christian duties and prayers speaks to how faith bestowed then daily lives out that divine grace portrayed in those parts traditionally entitled “chief.” In short, one might define the “different levels of use” in terms of: 1.) God’s saving act, 2.) the continued dispensation of grace to the church in the sacraments, and 3.) the Christian life lived out in the world in the power conveyed by such divine gifts. While one might tend to more highly “value” the use of those parts which more explicitly offer and convey the Gospel’s message of salvation, these seeming “different levels of use” of the parts of the *Small Catechism* do not imply a difference in the “worth” of the various parts set forth, rather a difference in how divine “worth” itself is dispensed and appropriated throughout the course of each believer’s journey at any given point along the way in salvation history, and more precisely and personally, in the believer’s daily life.

While there is no doubt that Luther intentionally ordered the parts of the triad to achieve his catechetical purpose in the believer’s daily life, the question yet arises, in light of the seeming sequence in levels of use in the subsequent catechetical parts, whether the

sequence of those parts added to the triad was also intentional on Luther's part. Is there an intentional sequential ordering of parts in the structure of the *Small Catechism*, and, if so, does that structural ordering of parts shed any light on the specific catechetical intent of Luther?

The ordering of parts

Meyer contends that Luther had no concise expression for what we today title "chief parts." Luther neither numbered nor counted the parts, and the descriptive term "chief part" was specifically limited in expression to the first three. This resulted already in the sixteenth century in a diversity of titles and numbers being applied to the parts set forth in the *Small Catechism*. Although "counting" of the parts began early on, none of this can be traced back to Luther himself.²¹

On the basis of Meyer's conclusions, one must consider if that "counting" of the parts of the *Small Catechism* represents in form an intentional progression of thought by Luther himself. The pursuit of answers to such considerations has been the focus of much debate since the previous century.

The thesis of the existence of an "inner progression of thought" in the structure of the *Small Catechism* was set forth preeminently by Gerhard von Zezschwitz and Theodosius Harnack.²² In that thesis, it was proposed that in the structure of the parts of the *Small Catechism* Luther had developed an intentional, systematic thought progression -- Moses, Christ, the Spirit,²³ which Zezschwitz saw as "the expression of the *Large Catechism's* trilogy, ... the *summa* of the way of salvation and the entirety of Christian doctrine as well

²¹ Meyer, 82.

²² Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 38-9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

as ethic.”²⁴ “[This] dogmatic thesis is concise: the sequential ordering -- Decalog / Creed / Lord’s Prayer -- would define the divinely appointed way of salvation: from law to salvation in Christ, from Christ’s salvation to a new communion of love in the Spirit.”²⁵

The theological counter-thesis originated with Johannes Gottschick and was furthered by Kurt Froer,²⁶ who argued that the chief parts of the *Small Catechism*, according to the intention of Luther, build no interrelated system of instruction; rather, they form a loosely arranged set of blocks which arose out of the historical setting of the time and from purely pedagogical necessity. While this loose set of blocks constitutes no structured teaching system, each block presents the intended subject (part/block) of instruction from its own unique perspective.²⁷ However, while “no chief part can be understood apart from the context of all the others,” the sequential ordering of parts is “neither prescribed nor essential.”²⁸ This sequential ordering of block-like parts is seen as a “methodical help” with each chief part always focusing on the center -- the grace of God revealed in Christ.²⁹

Essentially, these theses, both the dogmatic of Zezschwitz and Harnack and the catechetical of Gottschick and Froer, address the sequential ordering of the parts (*Reihefolge*) in the structure of the *Small Catechism*, and seek to determine whether this

²⁴ Gerhard von Zezschwitz as quoted in *ibid.* In regard to the catechisms setting forth “all Christian doctrine and ethic,” it should be noted that in the ancient church these two genres of instruction generally were kept distinct, although normally tandemed for purposes of instruction; see, Robert Kolb, *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther’s Catechism* (Hutchinson, Minnesota: Crown Publishing, Inc., 1992), 1-6.

²⁵ Albrecht Peters, “Die Theologie der Katechismen Luthers anhand der Zuordnung ihrer Hauptstuecke,” *Luther-Jahrbuch* 43 (1979), 2.

²⁶ Peters, *Kommentar* 1, 39.

²⁷ Cf., Johann Michael Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: A History of Its Origin, Its Distribution and Its Use*, (Chicago:Wartburg, 1929), 151: “To Luther, each chief part represents the whole of Christianity but each time from a different point of view.”

²⁸ Kurt Froer as quoted in Peters, *Kommentar* 1, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

sequential structuring is something objectively established and essential with respect to the intent for which the *Small Catechism* was compiled. Luther's intentional reordering of the triad from its traditional form in the Middle Ages to that found in the *Small Catechism* (in which the Decalog is moved from terminal to primary position in the triad), as well as Luther's own comments concerning the intent behind that very specific ordering, leave no doubt that the first three parts of the *Small Catechism* were intentionally sequentially structured by Luther. The intentional structuring of the triad establishes the pattern by which the intent underlying a sequential ordering of further catechetical parts must be measured.

"Luther ... knew how to restrict himself to essentials."³⁰ This was certainly true of the structure of the *Small Catechism*. Again, in the preface to the *Deutsche Messe* Luther gives analysis of the intended simplicity of the structure of the *Small Catechism*:

... [T]he heart may grasp the *Summa* of Christian knowledge in two parts, as in two pouches bound to the heart, namely: faith and love. The pouch of faith ought to have two pockets. Into the one pocket one should put that part [of faith] which believes that through Adam's sin we are thoroughly corrupted, sinners, and damned.... Into the other pocket, that through Christ all have been redeemed from this corruption.... Love's pouch ought also to have two pockets. Into the first pocket one should put this part: that we are to serve and do good to everyone, just as Christ has done for us. Into the other, that we should gladly suffer and endure all sorts of evil.³¹

Luther's words point in two directions: 1.) in the direction of "recognizing and bearing in mind that Luther objectively laid as the foundation of the Catechism the trinitarian/salvation-historical character (*Duktus*) of the early Christian confession"³², and

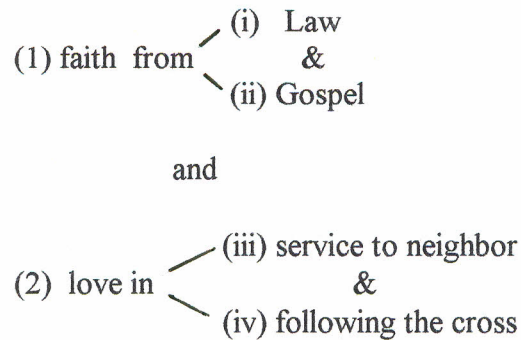
³⁰ Reu, 152.

³¹ WA19, 77.

³² Peters, "Die Theologie der Katechismen," 14.

2.) in the direction of “recognizing and bearing in mind that Luther expanded this trinitarian/salvation-historical layout (*Aufriss*) into a sort of outline of the true Christian church in regard to its orthodoxy as well as its orthopraxy.”³³

Albrecht Peters observes importantly that in this two-fold/four-fold catechetical arrangement set forth by Luther (in the preface to the *Deutsche Messe*)--



-- “the seminal crystallization (*Kristallisationskern*) of reforming formulation was without question fixed”³⁴ -- a reforming that embraced the totality of the Christian life itself. That the formulation of the *Small Catechism* is laid on the foundation of the trinitarian/salvation-historical character of the early Church places the doctrine of justification at the heart and center of its structure and intent.³⁵ This structure and intent, centered on the doctrine of justification,³⁶ finds its fulfillment in Luther’s expansion of the essential parts (*Kernstuecke*) of western catechetical tradition: the Apostles’ Creed³⁷,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 15.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ One must bear in mind that although the doctrine of justification stands at the center of Luther’s catechetical intent, “justification” *per se* is terminology never explicitly employed in the *Small Catechism*.

³⁷ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 44-5: “...The true center of the catechisms is the Creed/Explanation in its inner movement from creation through redemption to sanctification.... The same holds for the catechisms as for the Smalcald Articles: the heart and soul (*Kern und Stern*) is and remains the ‘office and work of Jesus Christ,’ the foundational article of our redemption.”

which itself stands then in its trinitarian/salvation-historical lay-out as foundational,³⁸ the Lord's Prayer with its eschatological dynamic and the double-command (love God/love neighbor) grounded in the Decalog, and the sacraments as visible conveyors of the divine dynamic of salvation.³⁹ The doctrine of justification stands, then, at the foundational center of Luther's catechetical understanding.

Peters observes that the "systematic ordering" of the three central chief parts which Luther had set forth in *Eine kurze Form* is retained throughout the catechetical sermons of 1523 and 1528, and provided the basic structure of the *Large Catechism* itself. While "the second sermon series of 1528 emphasized the full meaning of the Creed and the introduction to the Lord's Prayer under the scope of 'The Triune God giving Himself to us in creation, redemption, and sanctification, that we might fulfill His will laid down for us in the Commandments,'"⁴⁰ the first and third sermon series of that year, as in the *Large Catechism*, "more strongly preserved the unique character of each chief part" by treating the parts individually in sequential order.⁴¹ While an affinity to the formulae of *Eine kurze Form* is maintained here, Luther formulates something new as well -- he structures the three chief parts in a manner which conveys his desired catechetical formula⁴²: "The Ten Commandments teach us "what God wants us to do and not do"⁴³; the Creed informs us

³⁸ Cf., BC, 292, 1, 5: "The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification'.... On this article rests all that we teach and practice.... Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it.... Otherwise all is lost ..." (SA II, I).

³⁹ Peters, "Die Theologie der Katechismen," 17.

⁴⁰ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 42.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴³ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, hereafter cited as BSLK), 646, 5.

of “all that we must await and receive from God”⁴⁴; and the Lord’s Prayer tells us “how we should pray.”⁴⁵ While such a formula emphasizes the keeping of the Law, at the same time, it clearly demonstrates the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. Peters notes that as command shows us what “God desires that we should do and not do,” so the Creed teaches us what God wants to give us.⁴⁶ This differentiation by Luther between command as Law and Creed as Gospel, forces the Creed and its second article (redemption/justification) into the center of the catechetical intent and, thereby, its subsequent structure.⁴⁷

The second article of the Creed stands then as the “ground zero” center of both structure and intent in the catechisms. So then, as Peters observes, with the second article always clearly in focus, Luther “unhooks” the first article and with it the Decalog and its foundational first commandment, and in them consequently focuses attention on God as the “eternal fountain source” of all good things in life as Creator/Father who pours out His loving kindness on all creation.⁴⁸ In such a move, Luther “concentrates on our creaturely relationship with God”⁴⁹ -- Decalog and first article focusing attention on and corresponding to *lex naturae*: “a general (although distorted) knowledge of God and ... a rational insight into our responsibility toward our neighbor.”⁵⁰ The legitimacy of such an

⁴⁴ BSLK, 646, 7.

⁴⁵ BSLK, 662, 19.

⁴⁶ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 43.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 44: “On the one hand, from “*Eine kurze Form*” on, Luther lifts the Decalog out and relates the Creed as well as the Lord’s Prayer to the fulfillment of the Commandments in a subservient role; on the other hand, he accentuates the tension between command and Gospel, thereby forcing the Creed with its second article into the very center.”

⁴⁸ Ibid., 45-6.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁰ Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529-153*, tr. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 69.

“unhooking” of Decalog and first article from the foundational center of the second article is found in the fact that there is nothing distinctively Christian about either the Decalog or the Creed’s first article. Their orientation is toward the creation, in general -- toward life in the secular realm.⁵¹

Something similar to this “unhooking” can be seen also in Luther’s treatment of the third article, although its connection to the center in the second article is more solidly maintained.⁵² Nonetheless, again from the perspective of the second article, in the third Luther sets forth the Spirit’s work of sanctification, that work through which Christ’s gifts as Victor over all the powers of corruption in life are given to and made a part of the believer’s life -- a work expressively emphasized by the Lord’s Prayer which follows,⁵³ itself “an in-depth repetition of the Decalog” with special regard to the battle waged in the believer’s everyday life against the dominion of Satan, the world, and the flesh.⁵⁴

Peters accurately delineates the connections of this “in-depth repetition of the Decalog”: while in the Decalog Luther looked at the believers’ obedience vis-à-vis the Creator, in the Lord’s Prayer he depicts “dramatically” both the struggle of the believer against the forces of chaos in the world and the salvation in which God ever grips anew those who belong to His daily work of justification/sanctification.⁵⁵

The central petition concerning the coming of the divine kingdom summarizes all that is contained in the second, as well as the third article of the Creed; the first petition is linked to the mandate concerning the keeping of holy name, whereas the third petition takes aim at the adversary, against

⁵¹ Cf., Charles P. Arand, “Luther’s Catechisms: Maps for the Study of Scripture,” *Issues in Christian Education* 24, 2 (Summer 1990), 25 (see p. 26 below).

⁵² Peters, *Kommentar* 1, 46. Peters notes Luther’s own words here: “Sanctification is nothing other than to be brought to the Lord Jesus” (BSLK 654, 39).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

whom the battlefield must be held. All three “Your-petitions” display God’s spiritual reign breaking in on this vanishing realm of death.

The “bread-petition” places anew that which is worked in the first article and the fourth Commandment under the scope of God’s rule of the world in His battle against satanic domination. The further “our-petitions” reach out into God’s eschatological future. Out of daily forgiveness we implore on soul and body the very rescue that is accomplished therein. The Reformer sketches an analogous movement with respect to Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar -- out of the continuous forgiveness of Christ we approach the divine, gracious countenance in the daily dying of the old Adam and the rising of the new man.⁵⁶

The thought-pattern set forth by the progression of the parts of the *Small Catechism* can be seen as “always making a backward connection, constantly taking up anew, and proceeding into ever greater depth”⁵⁷ in the divine work of justification/sanctification throughout salvation history. Commenting on the old self dying/new self rising-character of life in Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer, Nestingen notes that

living in the context of law, but under the power of the gospel, the believer is simultaneously an unbeliever. Gripped in Christ, he gets caught up in immortality games all over again; caught in desires for control, she [*sic*] is freed once more in forgiveness. Thus a believer must learn “where to seek and obtain the aid” needed to live in the tension, for this tension is the crucible of daily life.⁵⁸

It is into this “crucible” that the thought-pattern of the *Small Catechism* leads the believer -- life bestowed as the redeemed of God and then lived out in an unbelieving world.

A two-directional outlook -- “into the world / into the church”

Charles Arand comments that Luther wrote his catechisms

[to summarize] the Bible in such a way as to draw attention to its central message ... [to shed] light on the overall structure, content, and purpose of the Bible.... [A] close reading of the catechisms and interpretation of ideas therein will reinforce the contention that the second article acts as the prism

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47-8.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁸ Nestingen, 38.

through which the whole light of Scripture receives its unity and direction. Put another way, the second article of the creed provides the vantage point from which to view and understand the catechism in its entirety, and with it, the Bible. It enables us to keep the overall theme and purpose of the Scripture in view.... From the perspective of the second article, *the catechism looks out in two directions -- into the world and into the church* (emphasis added).⁵⁹

Arand points out that this two-directional outlook from the central article of the *Small Catechism* demonstrates to the Christian, on the one hand,

God's work of creation in the first article and His will for creation in the Decalog. On the other hand, from the second article one learns how to understand properly the third article and the subsequent chief parts of the catechism that deal with the life of the Christian in the church.⁶⁰

Arand not only demonstrates Luther's intent in regard to catechesis, but also his intent behind the actual structure of the catechisms. This intent in structure proceeds out of the very heart and core of the traditional triad but is not limited to it, rather, it encompasses all the other parts of the *Small Catechism* within the scope of trinitarian salvation history, begun, fulfilled, and even yet being consummated in Him who stands at that very heart and core center -- Christ, the One who has "redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, etc."

When the Christian looks backward from the vantage point of the second article into the structure of the *Small Catechism* which precedes, he/she sees the salvific God of the second article as also the creating God of the first article -- a God whose saving work can be seen as proceeding out the very same source as His creating work: "... out of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy." As the Christian looks into the Decalog, he/she

⁵⁹ Arand, 23-4; cf., Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 44-9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

sees there that same God who out of that same “goodness and mercy” gave His holy, perfect Law, His holy, perfect will for His creation.

When the Christian looks forward from the vantage point of the second article, he/she sees that very same Creator-God “recreating” His redeemed “by the power and office of the Holy Spirit.”⁶¹ This is revealed both in the third article and in that “Father” of the Lord’s Prayer, the One whose kingdom is coming in that eschatological hope of the redeemed, a hope which is already, even now, realized in the sacraments⁶² (Baptism, Absolution, Sacrament of the Altar), and yet is still in a state of coming; it remains a hope lived out in the everyday devotion of a church called to bear witness to that very hope in the world through prayer and the fulfillment of divine calling and dominically mandated responsibilities.⁶³

The catechisms of Luther

... declare that the message of the Bible centers on the belief that Jesus Christ has become our Lord. They regard this as the overall picture and destination that one should arrive at when putting together the various pieces of Scripture, and that which serves as *the perspective from which to view all that Scripture has to say about Christian doctrine and life. The catechisms themselves demonstrate through the ordering of the chief parts as well as the interconnectedness of each part how this is accomplished* (emphasis added).⁶⁴

Intent drives structure; structure serves intent.

Albrecht Peters observes along this line that in the structural ordering of the three foundational chief parts (and therewith one must assume all the other material which Luther included as important to attaining the goal of catechesis) Luther offers

⁶¹ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 44.

⁶² Cf., *ibid.*, 45: “The sacraments reach backwards to the second article.”

⁶³ Arand, 24-6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

neither a systematic *ordo salutis*: Moses - Christ - the Spirit, nor has he placed the individual parts next to one another in a block-type fashion; but much more, the Reformer opens up for us, with the help of this triad, the eschatological way of Christianity as well as that of the individual believer from our existence as creatures to the final Fulfillment. Therein the Christocentric is always in view; from out of the second article of the Creed, *Luther unveils the deep dimensions of our Christian existence* (emphasis added).⁶⁵

While Luther intended to offer no schematic plan of salvation in the structure of his catechisms, in and through that structure he hoped to “carefully lead those committed into his care from their everyday lives (*Alltag*) into the eschatological belief of a mature Christian person.”⁶⁶ The structure was set forth with such “reflection and filled with such content” that to change the structure would impact on the intended meaning which Luther wished to convey. In fact, in order to accomplish this, a “delicate ordering of the individual chief parts is needed to encompass the totality of Christian teaching.”⁶⁷ Indeed, as Peters concludes, “a historic-systematic interpretation, which ought to be allowed to

⁶⁵ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 48.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-9. Here Peters identifies a complex three-step unfolding of that ordering: “1.) The creedal explanation, which is concentrated on the second article in our redemption through Christ becoming Lord over us, forms always the present, hidden center of the catechisms. 2.) However, the first article, just like the preceding Decalog, is detached astonishingly far from the Christocentric; under the guiding thought of the Creator’s gifts of preservation, as well as that of the thankful obedience of believers, an ‘entry-way’ (*Vorhalle*) is built in front of the second article. At the same time, the third article and the Lord’s Prayer are brought together also as an independently standing third center for the second article; the guiding thought therein is our continual sanctification in the battle with the powers of chaos. 3.) In an intentional backward connection, on the one hand, the Creed, just like the Lord’s Prayer, is placed under the scope of the fulfillment of the Commandments, while on the other hand, the first article is revealed as standing in the light of the second and third. At the same time, an ever deepening progression opens up a view of the goal of our faith’s struggle with the forces of death, namely, on the eschatological, divine rule through Christ in the Holy Spirit. This three-step unfolding not only leaves its stamp on the *Large Catechism*, but it also directly structures the *Small Catechism* when in it Luther is unable to expound *expressis verbis*. A historical/systematic interpretation, which is itself guided by the intention of the author, should not overlook this living movement, but carefully copy it.”

lead the way according to the intentions of the author, should not overlook this living movement, rather carefully copy it.”⁶⁸

That same “living movement,” evidenced as the result of an intentional structuring of the parts of the triad by Luther, is also seen in the parts which he later added to that structure. Whether Luther intended to set forth a “systematic” order in the sequencing of the parts of the triad or not, the intentional structuring of both those and subsequent catechetical parts resulted in just such a “system” actually being set forth: beginning with the triad (Decalog, Creed, Lord’s Prayer), one sees the portrayal of divine mercy and grace throughout all of salvation history offered and conveyed to believers in and through their new life as church (Baptism, Absolution, Sacrament of the Altar), and then played out in the realm of everyday life in Christian duty and devotion (Table of Responsibilities and household prayers). The structure resulting from an intentional ordering of parts, not only “encompass[es] the totality of Christian teaching,” but the totality of the Christian life.

II. INTENT / STRUCTURE

The foundation: *im Alltag*

The structure of the *Small Catechism*’s parts, with the Creed and its second article at the center, clearly reflects Luther’s intent for catechesis *per se*, as stated in the prefaces of the *Large Catechism*:

... [Y]ou ought gladly to read (*lesen*), recite (*reden*), ponder (*denken*), and use (*handeln*) the Catechism, even if the only blessing and use you get from it is thereby to rout the devil and evil thoughts; for he cannot bear to hear

⁶⁸ Ibid., 49.

God's Word. And God's Word is not like some other empty prattle ... but ... the power of God which burns the devil and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help.⁶⁹

Luther insisted that to read, recite, ponder, and use the catechisms was to be engaged in that which cannot ever be learned to perfection, nor which God Himself will ever be finished teaching⁷⁰:

[D]aily employ and continually use [the Catechism], thereby with all care and diligence to guard [your]selves against the poisonous infection of security and vanity, putting a stop to both by reading (*lesen*), teaching (*lehren*), learning (*lehren*), pondering (*denken*) and meditating (*tichten*), and never stopping....⁷¹

Charles Arand notes that

Luther regarded the texts of the catechism as of such fundamental importance that one should continue to practice them throughout life.... [T]hese fundamentals, individually and collectively, lay the foundation for a person's lifelong spiritual formation. In this sense, both catechisms were intended more to be daily companions for meditation and spiritual guidance than one time instructional textbooks for confirmation.⁷²

Indeed, as Luther himself states, the contents of the catechisms "represents that which is required of a Christian to know"⁷³ -- a knowledge that embraces and lives out all of life in Christ and His gifts, from creation to its eschatological fulfillment. Luther writes of the intended effect which the *Small Catechism* is to have in the lives of those who use it:

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

⁶⁹ BSLK, 549, 35-550, 7.

⁷⁰ BSLK, 551, 39; 552, 4.

⁷¹ BSLK, 552, 43-553, 7. The annotation in the BSLK offers *nachsinnen* (to reflect, to meditate, to muse) as a modern synonym for *tichten*.

⁷² Charles P. Arand, "Handbook for a Lifetime of Learning: The Method and Message of the Small Catechism" (unpublished paper), 11; cf., Schultz, 51.

⁷³ BSLK, 554, 1.

suffer, and to die. Consciences are well instructed about how to be Christians and how to recognize Christ.⁷⁴

Luther's intent for catechesis was firmly grounded in life, in the *Alltag* -- the everyday life's experiences of those for whom the catechisms were written. " ... Luther begins at the point where people encounter and experience life with its demands and gifts, its disappointments and joys."⁷⁵ That "everyday life," that is, the daily life of the believer in Christ, is the very subject to which the catechisms are addressed by Luther; their quest is to identify "the essential and the discriminating, the elementary and the fundamental of the Christian faith, [and] to explain it in simple language."⁷⁶

"A four-fold directive for life"

In search of that identity and explanation, Peters defines a four-fold direction into which the catechisms look⁷⁷: First, as Luther himself stated,⁷⁸ the *Small Catechism* is a "short abstract and copy" (*kurzer Auszug und Abschrift*) of the Bible's central content, which would assemble and demonstrate in simple fashion, with a trinitarian/salvation-historical character, "the essential salvific pronouncements of the biblical witness of the divine revelation of God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son in the Holy Spirit."⁷⁹

Second, the spiritual center of the Scripture is not presented as some sort of "insight" to be won by the spiritually gifted individual, rather as that delivered in the essential texts themselves which have endured in Christianity and its history of interpreting them. The

⁷⁴ *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957-74), vol. 47, 52-3.

⁷⁵ Arand, "Handbook for a Lifetime of Learning," 8.

⁷⁶ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 17.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁸ *BSLK*, 552, 32.

⁷⁹ Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 18.

historical tradition of catechetical texts must always be considered in their contemporary use. Peters quotes an unknown source: "It's never merely a matter of dealing with a catechetical statement in itself, rather it's always a matter of dealing also with [that statement's] history."⁸⁰

Third, even as the *Small Catechism* looks at daily life (*Alltag*) and orientates itself on vocation and position in God's created order, it becomes more than merely an instructional book or confession -- it becomes also a prayer book and comforting devotional book, as Christians daily practice and demonstrate faith in love.

Fourth, the *Small Catechism* places all of Scripture, the confession of the church, and our everyday life within the perspective of the end times by concentrating on that which is not only essential to living but also on that which is essential to dying -- "bottom line" in both life and death. Peters quotes Luther:

We, one and all, are destined to die, and there is no one who will die for another. Rather, there is that personal something in each individual which must battle against death.... Therefore, everyone must know the chief parts himself, for such belongs to a Christian -- to know and to be prepared.⁸¹

Indeed, the scope of Luther's intent in the *Small Catechism* was to embrace all of the Christian life in its many facets, spheres, and roles from birth into this world onward through temporal death to birth into the life of the world to come. This Christian life is that which is lived nowhere else than in Christ, the center, and at the same time, in the world and in the very midst of those things which the world bring to bear upon the life of the believer in his/her everyday existence.

⁸⁰ Ibid.: "Wir haben es nirgends nur mit einer Katechismus-Aussage an sich, sondern immer auch mit ihrer Geschichte zu tun."

⁸¹ WA10 III, I, 7, as quoted in Peters, *Kommentar 1*, 18.

“A three-fold dimension” / “A two-fold perspective”

The intent of the *Small Catechism*, like its structure, hinges on the foundation of the second article of the Creed, looking in turn at each of those facets, spheres, and roles of the individual Christian's life, a three-fold life centered in Christ: life in the created world, life in the redeemed world, life in the sanctified world; or, put another way, living amidst and as a part of the affairs of the created order, living as the redeemed of God, those who through faith in Christ are given His rich gifts of grace, and living as Christ's holy church in the world. From the explanations of the Decalog on, we encounter Luther at every turn embracing the totality of the Christian life and defining its very essence. "... [H]ow emphatically the constant repetition of the words 'We should fear and love God' turns back the entire Christian life to its oneness of origin and thereby frustrates all calculating ways in Christian piety"⁸² -- a piety of life which must find itself centered on Christ and His redemption while being lived out in the world as His church.

In the triad -- Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer -- Luther lays out in vivid portrayal the scope of living as a Christian amidst and as a part of the affairs of the world in all its many facets, spheres, and roles. In a backward-looking perspective from the vantage of faith in the Redeemer-God of the second article, the believer catches glimpse of the God of all creation, the very One who stands at the center of faith and piety in life, the One whose Commandments find their summary for the believer in the very first, and, in

⁸² Johann Michael Reu, "The Peculiar Characteristics of Luther's Catechism," *The Lutheran Church Review* 24 (July 1905), 441-2.

fact, pointedly and simply, in the Creator-God Himself -- the One to be “feared, loved, and trusted above all things.” This is the God of our everyday existence, our *Alltag* in the world, the One in whom we “live and move and have our being,” the One whom, in Christ, we trust as He who out of “fatherly, divine goodness and mercy” provides *me* in His merciful creative goodness with all that life requires.⁸³ This is the God who wants hearts to embrace and cling to Him in all of the life He has granted. Luther remarks in the *Large Catechism*: “To cling to Him with all our hearts is nothing else than to entrust ourselves to Him completely.” It is that complete trust in God as the fount and source of all of life that stands as the basis for the believer’s life amidst and as a part of the affairs of the world.

Those things of which the Commandments speak are the very gifts of the Creator-God of the first article. In the Creed, one learns of the gifts God has given and in the Commandments how He would have them used. Once again, as was stated above,

... one can observe that in these gifts and tasks there is nothing distinctively Christian about the Ten Commandments. If anything, they have a secular or worldly hue about them. This stands as a reminder that the second article sends the Christian back out into God’s created world where the believer lives life as belonging to God alone, and in so doing, manifests Christ in the world.”⁸⁴

Conversely, in a forward-looking perspective from the vantage of faith in the Redeemer-God of the second article, the believer then encounters the One who through Christ in the Holy Spirit, as set forth in the third article, is now He whom the believer is bid to call “Father“ -- the One in whom the believer lives out the *Alltag* of being the redeemed of God. Indeed, it is the Spirit who enables the believer to go before his/her

⁸³ Cf., Arand, “Luther’s Catechisms: Maps for the Study of Scripture,” 25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Father in prayer, asking Him for the good gifts which the Creator/Redeemer-God graciously would give as the God who also sanctifies all of life in those very gifts. In order that the believer might live in the gifts of His holy Law and that the blessings of the Gospel -- His redemption⁸⁵ and sanctification⁸⁶ -- might be manifested in the believer's everyday life, He would have the Christian daily call on Him in prayer -- the very Prayer He has taught us to pray.⁸⁷

It is once again from the vantage of a perspective that looks out from of the center of the second article that the believer sees the gifts of the Creator/Redeemer/Sanctifier-God, confessed in the third article and prayed for in the Lord's Prayer, now manifesting His gifts in the believer's life in the sacramental act -- Baptism, Absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Once again, the manifestation of the love of God in Christ for the world, which is portrayed in the trinitarian/salvation-historical character of the *Small Catechism*, takes place in the *Alltag*, the everyday life of the believer as a member of Christ in His holy church. Albrecht Peters notes:

The eschatological fulfillment, the forgiveness of guilt and new life, being redeemed from the tyranny of the powers of corruption and being set under the lordship of Christ, these are all ascribed to Baptism, because the here and now of God's salvation is part of the plan through it. The Triune God takes us through this instrument of salvation into His almighty, salvific present.... Baptism promises and gives us nothing less than the Triune God Himself; Baptism promises and gives us: 'victory over death and the devil, the forgiveness of sins, God's grace, Christ in His fullness, and the Holy

⁸⁵ Cf., BC, 420, 2: "Mankind is in such a situation that no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, even though he has begun to believe. Besides, the devil, along with the world and our flesh, resists our efforts with all his power. Consequently nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and obedience to the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us from fulfilling them" (LC III).

⁸⁶ Cf., BC, 415-6, 39: "Therefore to sanctify is nothing else than to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, which we could not obtain by ourselves" (LC II).

⁸⁷ Arand, "Luther's Catechisms: Maps for the Study of Scripture," 25.

Spirit with His gifts.... [Luther] wants to make it perfectly clear, that the true fight of faithful obedience can be accomplished only in the grace of Christ promised to us in Baptism. Therefore, Baptism is for him the *sacramentum fidei* in a strong eschatological sense of the word.... Our Baptism is indeed the concrete promise of Christ (*Christusverheissung*) in which, by faith, we should and dare to shelter ourselves.”⁸⁸

Baptism is the shelter of faith for the everyday life of the believer -- that which beckons him/her in grace to “daily contrition and repentance” and leads him/her to the grace of forgiveness in Him with whom the believer has been joined in death and resurrection in Baptism’s waters.

From the perspective of the second article (redemption), Baptism is the visible sign of promise which itself delivers and bestows that which it promises: that the believer in his/her life as one redeemed by the Creator/Redeemer/Sanctifier-God is firmly anchored in the center -- in Christ Himself and in His life-giving water -- for the struggles in the wastelands of his/her everyday life. “Just as a desert host washes his tired guest who survived dangers of the desert, so God seals his love in the water of baptism for those who have to face the desert of this life.”⁸⁹ Indeed, Baptism is the “*Christusverheissung*” in and through which God gives the believer shelter from the *Alltag* -- a shelter built on the sure and certain promises of Him who washes with the waters of life.

As Baptism itself beckons the believer in its remembrance to “daily contrition and repentance,” so it also delivers what it promises in the words of the Absolution, second article words, which echo out of the first article from that very One who out of “fatherly,

⁸⁸ Peters, *Kommentar* 4, 91, 100.

⁸⁹ Eric W. Gritsch, “Luther’s Catechisms of 1529: Whetstones of the Church” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 60 (1980), 9.

divine goodness and mercy” provides all that the believer needs, even, and most importantly, the forgiveness of all sin in Christ.

In the Sacrament of the Altar, the believer is brought full force by the *Small Catechism* to that place where God comes uniquely into the life of the believer with eschatological hope and fulfillment. In dominical flesh and blood, the believer is met head-on by those second article gifts of the Creator/Redeemer God that have set the powers of chaos and corruption at naught, as well as by all the divine gifts of the third article -- all those gifts in which the Feast is prepared and served *im Alltag*.

“No easy answer, but a concrete hope” for daily life

Eric W. Gritsch seems vividly to capture Luther’s intent in setting forth first the triad and then its subsequent parts in the *Small Catechism*:

Luther’s catechetics ... is an initiation into ... the knowledge that life between baptism and death is a struggle between good and evil, without easy answers, yet with a concrete hope that those who follow Jesus will partake in his victory over death, sin and evil. In this sense, Christian education is a never-ending recall to the sacrament of baptism, which is the “daily garment” of the Christian, marking him/her as a member of the people of God who move from the old world of death to a new world of never-ending life. Catechetics is the instrument, the whetstone, which enables the church and its members to discern the difference between the old and the new Adam through theological reflections and sacramental nurture.⁹⁰

It’s in the heat of the fray of that “struggle between good and evil,” that affair of the each believer’s *Alltag* in which the believer is reinforced by “theological reflection and sacramental nurture,” that Luther adds those parts to the *Small Catechism* described above as “appendages ... worthy of instruction” in and for the everyday life and use of the

⁹⁰ Gritsch, 10-1.

While the Table of Responsibilities and the household prayers have not been given the status of the triad and its attendant sacraments as “chief parts” in Luther’s structure and intent for the *Small Catechism*, they are, nonetheless, parts integral to that structure and intent -- integral to the life of each Christian who is admonished “to read, teach, learn, ponder, and meditate without stopping,” and as the words of M. Reu suggest above, in a way that serves as a “stronghold of life.”

“Tools” for living

The inclusion of both the Table of Responsibilities and the household prayers as “parts” for catechetical instruction was no innovation by Luther. In fact, the nature of the responsibilities listed and the prayers offered by Luther stands in the continuing tradition of the western church.⁹⁵ However, the *Small Catechism*’s Table of Responsibilities and household prayers are set forth in distinctive Lutheran character. That character finds its foundations in the three-fold hierarchical institution defined by Luther in his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* of 1528 as the realm of Christian existence in daily life: family, state, church.

The Table of Responsibilities

With close affinity to the fourth and sixth Commandments, Luther places the emphasis of the realm of Christian existence in daily life squarely on “honor and the family” from and through which one lives and deals in the realms of state and church.⁹⁶ With “family” defined in terms of its role as “priestly office” (*Priesteramt*) and “worldly

⁹⁵Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu den Katechismen Luthers, Band 5* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 98-104, 194-203.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

authority” (*weltliche Oeberkeit*), “the Table of Responsibilities stands analogous to the call of all believers universally to love neighbor ... as well as to unceasingly intercede for all people...”⁹⁷

This relationship between the all-encompassing order of neighborly love and the three specific divine institutions, or between our proper estate as Christians and the offices and estates distinct therefrom, reflects ... the foundational relationship between the first Commandment and all other Commandments. So, just as the first Commandment as “chief and source” runs through all other Commandments and holds them together, so the Christian estate also hovers (*schwebt*) over all other estates, permeating them and joining them into the Christian community of service. In its external as well as internal structure, the Table of Responsibilities builds thereby a counter-part to the Decalog, particularly to the fourth Commandment. More strongly established than in the Decalog is the bridge (*Bogen*) from the fundamental institutions of the Creator over the Christocentric redemption to the service/prayer community of Christendom in the sanctifying Spirit. Therefore, the Table of Responsibilities like the Creed and Lord’s Prayer reaches back to the Decalog and thereby unifies the Catechism; it unfolds the love which flows from belief in Christ and moves all of created life into the light of the “*usus practicus evangelii*.”⁹⁸

While the Table of Responsibilities speaks about the tenets of Christian duty within the wide range of all of created life’s various estates, whether ecclesiastical, societal, or economic, it does so from the foundation of the “home” as that which embraces all of life and its affairs.⁹⁹

The Household Prayers

The focus on family as central to living in the realm of Christian responsibility is carried over into the prayers offered by Luther in the *Small Catechism*.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 97-8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 104.

The heading in the *Small Catechism* “How the head of the house (*Hausvater*) should teach his household ...” shows that the household prayers should serve as fixed (*gepraegte*) and repeatable (*wiederholbare*) texts for the practice of daily prayer, wherein the Morning and Evening Prayers are considered as the prayer of the individual (“I”), and the prayers before and after meals as the prayer of the household in common (“we”).¹⁰⁰

The long-established formulae of daily prayers,¹⁰¹ both individual and corporate, were redefined by Luther within the “household” context as “the dutiful service of the family for the Christian community in the outposts of the world.”¹⁰²

This “front-line” duty of the Christian family in daily prayer within the context of life lived out in the world is reflected in Luther’s exhortations concerning the second Commandment in the *Large Catechism*:

...[T]he heart first gives God the honor due him and then the lips do so by confession. This is a blessed and useful habit, and very effective against the devil, who is ever around us, lying in wait to lure us into sin and shame, calamity and trouble.... To defy the devil, I say, we should always keep the holy name on our lips so that he may not be able to injure us as he is eager to do. For this purpose it also helps to form the habit of commending ourselves each day to God -- our soul and body, wife, children, servants, and all that we have -- for his protection against every conceivable need. This has originated and continued among us the custom of saying grace and returning thanks at meals and saying other prayers for both morning and evening.¹⁰³

Frieder Schulz points out that this practice of daily prayer which arose in the tradition of the Latin church within the day to day existence of the “monastic family” was translated

¹⁰⁰ Frieder Schulz, “Die Hausgebete Luthers,” an essay included in *ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 196: “... Luther’s corresponding prayers ... [are] actually compilations out of the inheritance of the Latin church”; 201: “With his Table Prayers, in the form of substantive though terse collects, Luther again remains in the tradition of the Latin church.”

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁰³ *BC*, 374, 70-3.

and elevated by Luther into a devout use by the “worldly family” in their own day to day existence to the extent that

[1.] Luther’s household prayers are “initiating-prayers” for God’s service of life (*Gottesdienst des Lebens*), not mere religious trifle (*Mindestpensum*). They are rather elements of a structured life’s course (*geordneter Zeit*) and stand as watchmen over a responsible life; [2.] in the Morning and Evening Prayers, the person driven by worldly fears and desire [in life] is first taken up and invited to come home to the fatherly and motherly goodness of God, in order that he might then go to work with courage, or, come to rest unburdened when his work is done...; [and 3.] Luther’s Table Prayers can give renewed meaning to prayer in danger of being silenced by making a connection with the obviousness of the gifts of creation, broadening one’s view over “all that has life,” and always bringing to mind the One who “gave Himself in Bread for the salvation of the world.”¹⁰⁴

Luther’s household prayers, like the sum of the other parts of the *Small Catechism*, find their rationale “in the natural course of daily life.”¹⁰⁵

III. THE SMALL CATECHISM’S USE IN THE CHURCH TODAY: Contemporary considerations and suggestions

Two planes of intent

Juergen Henkys makes the interesting observation that in order for the church today to properly understand Luther’s catechetical intent it must be seen on two different planes -- one minimal, the other maximal.¹⁰⁶ In the minimal aspect one sees that “Luther’s

¹⁰⁴ Schulz as quoted in Peters, *Kommentar 5*, 203-4. Note that in regard to “the One who gave Himself in Bread” Schulz interestingly points out the anamnestic character of the recitation of the *Small Catechism’s* Table Prayers at meal time in relation to the recitation of the consecratory *verba Domini* at the eucharistic Meal time.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁰⁶ Juergen Henkys, “Ist der Katechismus ein Gebetbuch?” *Zeichen der Zeit* 18 (1964), 353-9.

catechetical energy stood in service to the introduction of the elementary.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, for Luther, primarily and essentially catechesis was *Kinderlehre* -- the teaching of children, in age or spiritual maturity, the foundational elements of the Christian faith. It dare be no less for the church today.

The Catechism as a canon of biblical foundational texts offers elementary Christian instruction for children, servants, and the everyday person. Without a knowledge of these parts, no one is a Christian. For the appropriation of such understanding, the church must offer ways of helping through on-going publications and instruction.¹⁰⁸

While Luther’s *Small Catechism* has enjoyed a rich history in the church as a text for educating the young and old alike in the essentials of the Christian faith and has certainly proven itself to be a “treasured instructional manual” among us, according to Luther’s intent, it is and must remain more than that alone. In regard to the second plane of his theory, the maximal aspect of the *Small Catechism*’s intent, Henkys notes Luther’s words from the new preface to the *Large Catechism*:

Even if they consider their knowledge [of the parts of the Catechism] to be totally perfect (which is not possible in this life), it is still quite useful and fruitful to daily read it and use it in thought and conversation, because in such reading, talking, and thinking the Holy Spirit is present and gives ever new and greater light and devotion to it, so that it tastes and enters in ever better and better.... Nothing helps as much against the devil, the world, the flesh, and evil thoughts, than one being occupied with the Word of God, talking about it and meditating (*tichtet*) on it....¹⁰⁹

To be occupied with the *Small Catechism* is to be occupied with the Scripture, as a “short abstract and copy” of the same. Henkys comments: “The arrogant disdain the Catechism as well as the Scriptures; but the patient, thoughtful reader discovers that the Catechism

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 355.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 356.

¹⁰⁹ BSLK, 549, 3-13, 21-5.

stands not only at the beginning of the study of Scripture but also at the end, not only as a key, but also as the *Summa*.¹¹⁰

“Handbook for Christian living”: a maximal paradigm of life

That Luther intended the *Small Catechism* to reflect Scripture gives it a character that exceeds its use as a book of instruction. To a great extent, the *Small Catechism* was for Luther more a book of prayer.¹¹¹ Henkys quotes Karl Witt:

Luther’s *Small Catechism* is no “lay-dogmatic” in the sense of “a systematic summary of the teachings of our church,” rather it is the impetus (*Anstoss*), “the enduringly definitive of our church,” to be laid out anew in each generation. The *Small Catechism* is no “instructional book for the young,” rather a “prayer book.” ... [It] is no “dry school book,” no lesson-plan oriented “instructional foundation,” to which one must stick point by point in teaching, rather it is a contemplation to be totally grasped of how and, indeed, that the Holy Scripture itself wants to be the living Word of God for *me*” (emphasis added).¹¹²

As Charles Arand points out, the structure of the catechisms reveals this maximal plane of intent defined by Henkys. Indeed, the catechisms themselves

make it clear that they were never intended to be components of systematic theology, much less reference books for the dissemination of information. They are handbooks for Christian living.... [The catechisms] seek to form within us a habit of the mind and heart that it is lived from faith to faith.¹¹³

Such “habit of the mind and heart” is not the acquisition nor possession of mere theoretical knowledge as in Henkys’ minimal plane; rather,

[a]s commentaries on life the catechisms do not consider doctrine as *scientia*, a fixed body of theoretical knowledge, but as *sapientia*, a practical knowledge that includes both the head and the heart. It offers a theological approach to life.... [T]he catechisms thus deal with what is

¹¹⁰ Henkys, 357.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 353-4.

¹¹³ Charles Arand, “Does Catechesis in the LCMS Aim for the *Ars Vivendi Fide*?” *Concordia Journal* 22 (January 1996), 58.

called the *studium sapientiae*, that is, with the pursuit of practical wisdom. They provide the working paradigm for a Christian that encompasses “the witness of Scripture in the language of daily experience to serve preaching and reflection on the church’s faith and mission.” They seek to provide the Christian “with an organic grasp of the universe, with a sequential, though by no means rigid and straitjacketing, view of life.”¹¹⁴

The catechisms reveal a “view of life” that gazes through the filter of God’s Word of revelation and is brought into sharp focus by the lens of grace -- a view of daily life lived in the context of Law and Gospel.

Such a view of daily life is vividly and accurately described by James Nestingen as “a paradigm for sober-minded discernment of law and gospel, a witness which acknowledges the reality of the day but at the same time declares the hope and freedom given in the midst of it.”¹¹⁵ The *Small Catechism* confronts and supplies those who use it with just such a common paradigm of life. For those nurtured in it, the *Small Catechism*

establishes a shared vocabulary, defines essentials, and lays down a basis of reflection..., a common point of reference, an oral word echoing out of the years which can ... once more be spoken to specify the demand or the promise.... It attacks all ... the secular pieties and all their religious counterparts ... by telling the truth about the limits and impingements of creaturely life. But it does so by speaking a word that is beyond goals, accomplishments, life-styles, and alternatives: in Christ, God has come to reclaim creature and creation for himself and so sets us free to live in the very good for which we were created.¹¹⁶

Sadly, this “common point of reference” cannot be assumed today. The *Small Catechism* is no longer the monolith for catechesis within our church body that it once

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 58-9.

¹¹⁵ Nestingen, 42.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 40-1.

was; indeed, a Lutheran laity generally unfamiliar with the *Small Catechism* is seemingly the contemporary reality.¹¹⁷

The “how” of the catechetical paradigm of life -- the establishing of a shared vocabulary and common reference point -- appears to have been either as misunderstood or neglected as it is obvious. “An oral word echoing out of the years” cannot exist unless that word has been brought to speech faithfully and continually in and from out of the past. A shared vocabulary and common reference can only exist in that language and manner of expressing the faith to which the church has been and remains faithful in its daily life over the years. A paradigm, by the very nature of the word, is that which is meant continually to be repeated. The words of the *Small Catechism* can and will “echo out of the years” as the paradigm of Christian life only if they are once and faithfully, repeatedly and continually spoken by the church.

Speaking catechetical language every day

By all practical assessment, with the rarity of private confession and absolution in the contemporary church, much of the opportunity once afforded to bring catechetical language to voice and to instill and reinforce it on an individual basis has been lost. Today, it is in the corporate language of proclamation and teaching, as well as in that of worship and daily devotion, that the paradigm must be borne. Unless the catechetical paradigm is borne by the church at worship and study, the common ground on which catechesis is to be built will never be found. Catechetical common ground -- the “every day” in which the church has its existence -- can only be claimed and settled when and if

¹¹⁷ Cf., William E. Thompson, “Catechesis: The Quiet Crisis,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56 (2/3), 1992, 99ff.

the church *faithfully and continually uses* the language given it: the dominically gifted language of Scripture, as well as that handed down from the fathers in the faith, including, and perhaps especially, that of the catechisms. Use of the *Small Catechism's* language as paradigm of the Christian life must extend beyond use *in* the church to use *by* the church in every sphere of daily life, if that use is to fulfill the intent with which Luther set it forth. While the use of the *Small Catechism's* language must certainly encompass the bounds of catechetical preaching, liturgy, established curricula, or even formalized devotions, it must exceed them, spinning out into all of life itself. Catechesis addresses and takes place where life is lived.

Robert Kolb observes that “the *Catechism* is not really learned until life strikes....”¹¹⁸ It's at that juncture -- anew each and every day -- that the sword of faith is catechetically tempered and the daily battle won in the victory of baptismal grace; there the words that “echo out of the years” are prayerfully met over again; and, if Luther's exhortation be heeded, in a unique way the intangible of the verbal is met by the tangible of creaturely senses -- in a touch associated with the sound of a name. There each day anew we feel and hear again the touch and echo of the baptismal gifts that initiated and sustain us on the path of daily Christian life:

Luther began the day under sign of the cross and the name of the Holy Trinity. He concluded the day in the same way.... Christ's cross reminds us that our God has brought us into death as sinners and into new life as His children. In the sign of the cross and the name of the Trinity, we summarize the Creed; we summarize our lives under the action of God.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Kolb, 1-12.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-14.

Perhaps it might serve us well to reclaim in our own circles the daily use of that ancient, anamnetic touch and echo in the sign of the cross, that it might cause us repeatedly to feel and hear those baptismal gifts which reverberate across the centuries of the holy, catholic faith to us -- gifts brought to memory in the touch and echo which Luther himself connected with Creed and prayer, with the cadence of baptismal faith as it is played out in the continuum of life's everyday walk and calling. Devout use of such "sign language" might well serve as the vehicle which sets the Christian squarely within the context of Luther's central catechetical intent -- life under the cross, every minute of every day, that to which the faithful use of the *Small Catechism* always points and leads, that which finds expression in what must become once again the familiar language of the *Small Catechism's* common point of reference for all of life.

Life under the cross proceeds day by day. If catechesis (and the *Small Catechism* as its heart and core) is the "key" to carrying us along in that procession toward the full-measure of what God has planned for us both *im Alltag* and *in aeternum*, then Charles Arand's observations must eventually and finally be taken to heart: catechesis will demand our "time," our "ardent effort," and our "earnest attention."¹²⁰ It will demand that we eventually and finally bring its language faithfully and continually to use -- to voice and action in a life lived under the cross.

¹²⁰ Arand, "Does Catechesis in the LCMS...," 63-4.

CONCLUSION

In both its structure and intent, the *Small Catechism* of Luther reflects the totality of the Christian life. It's a book for daily use throughout the life of the believer -- a book not only full of the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, the words of eternal life, but also a book full of prayer and devotion to Him who gives that life as His gift; indeed, it's a book full of grace for the life of the child of God. Yet, it seems in general to remain a seemingly untapped and unrealized potential by the church today. The *Small Catechism*, as described above, can only be the true source of its intended blessings to those who use it as intended -- daily and devotionally. Possibly, the problem with its relative disuse lies in how the church today both understands and approaches the challenge of catechesis *per se*. Were such an understanding and approach informed and structured by Luther's own apparent catechetical intent, perhaps the *Small Catechism* would find itself the object of greater appreciation and a renewed, faithful use in the struggles as well as the blessings of the Christian life of faith.

Catechesis begins at the font; it continues for a lifetime; it's briefly interrupted by the grave; it finds its consummation alone in seeing face to face Him to whom it always pointed along the journey, *every day*.

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