

# The Effects of Luther's Catechisms on the Church of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

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This year, 1979, the Lutheran Church is observing the 450th anniversary of the publishing of Luther's Catechisms. Luther labored many years to produce these books. In order to appreciate the fruits of his labors, we shall attempt to point out the effects that these two books had on the church of his day and also the effects on the church in the latter half of the 16th century, the period after Luther's death. Let us see first how these books came into existence and then try to establish the impact they made on the church.

## The Beginnings of the Catechisms before 1529

From his early labors one is certain that it was not Luther's aim to write a catechism as we know a catechism. Nor did he ever harbor the thought that his catechetical efforts would be embodied in the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. One may ask then how he ever became the author of these two books.

When Luther in his earlier years used the term "catechism," he did not think of a book. Catechism meant instructing the people, especially by means of sermons. With that concept he used the term *Katechismus treiben* (do or carry on catechism). For him this did not mean questioning and answering, but it meant teaching by sermonizing and memorizing especially the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. At times, however, he did use the term catechism as instruction material.

What brought about his interest in catechism? Even before he nailed the Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, he preached several sermons on the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. In 1518 his explanation of the Ten Commandments appeared in print. Likewise, his explanation of the Lord's Prayer made its appearance in the following year. In the same year this was followed by the *Brief Form for Understanding and Praying the Lord's Prayer*. In 1520 he produced the *Brief Form of the Ten Commandments, Creed and the Lord's Prayer*. In this booklet he divided the Apostles' Creed into three articles according to the Persons of the Trinity, instead of using the twelvefold divisions as taught traditionally, with the supposition that each of the Apostles contributed a portion of the Creed. He deemed his arrangement necessary to simplify the understanding of the entire Creed.

An outstanding production appeared in 1522 in his *Betbuechlein*, a prayer booklet, intended to lead a Christian to know his sins and to lead him to prayer. In it the three parts, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, hereafter referred to as the "Trilogy," were briefly explained. In 1525 he enlarged this booklet by including sermons on Baptism, Confession, and the Lord's Supper. By 1529 this prayer book contained practically the entire contents of the Small Catechism. We take note of the fact that he also included the matter of Confession. Actually this was not new. As early as 1523 he taught that the Romish confession ought to have been discontinued; it had been abolished during the Wittenberg disturbances, but instead of re-introducing it, he urged that communicants announce their intentions to partake of Holy Communion, but that in doing so they submit to a type of examination on the catechism. Notice again how Luther stressed the necessity of understanding the Trilogy.

## The Need Felt

Luther had felt for some time that some kind of "catechism" should be developed. In fact, he had made such an assignment to Jonas and Agricola. However, these men never carried out his assignment.

In late 1528 and early 1529 the Saxon Visitation took place. Luther also took part in this endeavor. What he and his coworkers found was most deplorable. In their ignorance lay people were living in profound sin; clergy were not able even to pray the Lord's Prayer or recite the Creed fluently. They were not "fit to teach." The religious training of the youth had been utterly neglected by the Church. We may say, however, that it served a good purpose that Luther was involved in this visitation; he learned of these sad conditions not by hearsay, but he personally witnessed them. What was the result? No more hesitancy as to the developing and publishing the catechism! He knew that something would have to be done to instruct not only the laity, adults, young people, and children, but also the pastors and teachers, and that this had to be done posthaste. Evidently he never realized that the common people had been so totally neglected. He voiced his disgust in the following manner: "O you bishops, how are you going to give answer to Christ, when you have neglected the people and have not taken care of your duty! You give the laity communion in one kind, demand the keeping of human tradition, and don't even try to find out whether they know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments."

In 1526 Luther published his *Deutsche Messe* (German mass) in which he strove for a simple German worship. In this treatise he wrote: "The German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism." With catechism he again meant instruction in the Sunday sermons, in the discussions and sermons in the daily services. In all these the Trilogy was to be explained. The parts were to be repeated or read aloud evenings and mornings in the homes for the children and the servants, "in order to train them as Christians." Notice that this advice was included in his treatise on the German Mass. In this treatise he not only showed how the Sunday morning service was to be observed, but also that he was interested in the training and in the Christian conduct of the children, young people, and adults—the common people. Since he sensed that the common laity did not understand the meaning and the correct use of the Lord's Prayer, he included a paraphrasing of the prayer in this service. This paraphrase has a striking resemblance to his explanation of the petitions in his catechism.

In addition to preaching and reciting the Trilogy, Luther recognized the educational advantage of visual education. He had placards printed, each placard having the text of a part of the catechism. These placards were made available to churches, schools, and homes. In fact, the texts on the placards were the same as those printed in the book form of the Small Catechism. One could therefore call the placards the first form of the Small Catechism. The "placard catechism" was very popular. The first placards made their appearance early in January, 1529. By February 12 the first printing was completely sold out. A second printing was ready on March 16.

We have said very little about Luther's Large Catechism. When did he write this catechism, before or after the Small Catechism? Actually he did them quite simultaneously. The Small Catechism was to serve as a textbook for Christian instruction in the home and in school. The treatises, or sermons, of the Large Catechism, were designated in his preface as "an earnest exhortation to all Christians, but especially to all pastors and preachers, that they should daily exercise themselves in the Catechism, which is a short summary and epitome of the entire Holy Scriptures, and that they may always teach the same."

In his preface to the Large Catechism Luther deplores the fact that the pastors are not studying the Scriptures. Ever since they have been freed from the canonical hours, which he calls "unprofitable and burdensome babbling," they should have had time to read a prayer or two in the Catechism, the Prayer Book, the New Testament, or elsewhere in the Bible, or pray the Lord's Prayer for themselves or their parishioners. In his "short preface" to the Large Catechism he calls the preface "a sermon, designed and undertaken that it might be an instruction for children and the simple-minded." However, it soon became apparent that he must have had the pastors and parents in mind, giving them explanations, illustrations, suggestions for expanding the truths briefly stated in the Small Catechism. One may look upon each essay of the Large Catechism as a type of sermon. The manuscript of the Large Catechism was completed in conjunction with sermons preached from the 22nd to the 25th of March, 1529. After he had published the charts in book form and called them the "Small Catechism," the new title "Large Catechism" gradually replaced the original title *Deudsch Catechismus*.

## **The Purpose**

Both catechisms served one purpose: to instruct the common man in the truths of the Scriptures, the Large Catechism giving more details as to application to everyday life; the Small Catechism to serve as a summary which could by repetition be easily memorized. Is it not remarkable that his Small Catechism contains absolutely no polemics? With all the problems Luther had, showing the laity the many fallacies of the Roman church, one finds not one word directed against that church. In his Large Catechism he does point out many abuses; for example, the dependance upon saints for any little trouble or ailment. In the Sixth Commandment he does call attention to the monastic system, which held that it was more blessed to live a life of celibacy than to live in wedlock. Yet all such discussions are brief; the real matter was not directed against Rome, but it concerns itself with leading the Christian into a deeper understanding of God's plan of salvation.

But Luther was also deeply concerned about the pastor. In 1527 he encouraged the pastors to teach the Catechism by special sermons. He urged them strongly to preach the Trilogy steadily on Sunday afternoons, this to be done four times each year. "Preach the catechism," fitting the contents into sermons, so that the people will understand God's plan of salvation as summarized in the Catechism.

Furthermore, he encouraged the pastors to read the Catechism often. He indicated that for himself this was a regular procedure and that he derived much comfort from such a constant review.

Luther also zeroed in on a big problem of our day: the lack of cooperation on the part of the parents in training their children. He pointed out that the children should be instructed individually, a procedure impossible for a large church but an obligation for the parents. He stated that every housefather should be considered a priest in his own home. His is the duty to instruct the children, to bring them to church to hear the catechism sermons, to have them *know* the catechism. He encouraged them to pray mornings and evenings, before the meal and after it. He urged the fathers to question and examine the family on the catechism at least once a week. He felt that the master of the house should also be concerned about holding the catechism before the servants.

He was strongly concerned about bringing the catechism to the children and to the young people. Servants and young people were encouraged to attend church services on Sunday afternoons, when they could be taught the Trilogy and the meaning of it. Every catechetical sermon was to end with a recitation of the Trilogy. Already as early as 1516 he had said: "If ever the church is to flourish again, one must begin by instructing the young." What a truth which we should impress on our minds and hearts at this time!

## **Acceptance**

Luther felt that it would be good to have the catechism in printed form, but that it was to be taught orally. He did not intend to have a book which was to be the basis for formal instruction. However, with the appearance of his catechisms there was a rash of other catechetical writings, both among the Lutherans as well as among the Reformed. Many of these expositions were intended for the higher classes of the Latin schools; they were written in Latin as well as in German. Before long Luther's efforts took precedence, culminating in their being incorporated in the Book of Concord in 1580.

The Small Catechism was used as a first reader, employing the simple texts without Luther's explanations; as the children progressed they were taught to read and to memorize his explanations also. We see from this that Luther's Catechism became the basic material for the instruction of the children and the young people. In the higher grades there followed extensions, sometimes very lengthy, of Luther's explanations. One of the outstanding productions was Tetelbach's *Gueldene Kleinod* (Golden Treasure) in 1568. Actually Tetelbach did what we are doing in our present versions, namely, introducing and explaining nothing else but the verbal contents of Luther's Catechism. So popular did his Small Catechism become that it was carried to Bohemia, Denmark, England, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Holland, Sweden, Norway, and Spain.

In his catechetical labors Luther also indicated the value of basing the teaching of catechism on Bible Stories. He did this in an edition in which he had 20 Bible illustrations, one for each of the Commandments, one

for each article of the Creed, and one for each petition of the Lord's Prayer. Although these illustrations were poorly drawn, the method indicated that he was urging the instructors to use Bible Stories as a basis for teaching catechism. In many church services parts of the catechism with explanation were read from the pulpit after the sermon had been preached. This was encouraged especially for the rural congregations which did not have Latin schools. On Sunday afternoons catechetical lessons were taught and discussed with the children and the young people. Catechetical sermons were preached, especially for the children and young people in Sunday afternoon services and in some churches in the matins and vespers during the course of the week.

When children were thought to be ready for communion, they were examined on the chief parts of the catechism. It may surprise us that some pastors used the catechism for premarital counselling.

Since the Small Catechism was used so widely and since this included the memorization of the chief parts, Luther urged text uniformity lest the children become confused. Some have charged Luther with overdoing memorization without an understanding of the text. This charge is not true. In his preface to the Small Catechism he stated: "After the children have learned the text, then teach them the sense also, so that they know what the text means." Furthermore, at the beginning of each part he placed the statement: "As the head of the family should teach them (or it) in all simplicity to his household." The expression "in all simplicity" surely indicates that explanations were to be given. As we indicated above he urged the use of Bible stories as examples, and he added biblical pictures to call attention to the biblical examples.

How did the Lutheran pastors and teachers accept his catechisms? Many expositions of the Small Catechism were written between 1530 and 1600. One that received general approval was the Nuernberg *Sermons for Children* by Osiander and Sleupner in 1533. These expositions of Luther's texts had a strong influence within and beyond Germany during the 16th century and also later. *Sermons on Luther's Catechism* were written and published in the years from 1565 to 1602 by Spangenberg. Musaeus likewise prepared sermons based on Luther's Small Catechism from 1568 to 1589. It is noteworthy that in England Cranmer together with several coworkers prepared *The Bishop's Book* in 1537 with an explanation of the Apostles' Creed and with other treatises which indicate a strong dependence on Luther's Catechisms. A catechism appeared in England in 1548 (the year after Henry VIII's death) which was definitely based on the Nuernberg *Sermons for Children*. These sermons Cranmer translated for the Church of England. So we see that for some years Luther's Catechisms had a strong influence on England.

Other catechetical works based on Luther's followed. Georg Walther at Halle in 1581 used Lutheran hymns as explanatory material. Such a work surely used all of Luther's catechism hymns. In 1591 Victorius gave each part of the Small Catechism a corresponding Biblical picture; in addition to the pictures he cited appropriate Bible passages. In 1580 Rosinus arranged the six parts for the six days of the week and prescribed which psalms and hymns were to be used together with the recitation of the Small Catechism, both in the Matins and in the Vespers.

In one of the *Kirchenordnungen* (church regulations) of 1578 a description is given, telling how the Small Catechism was to be used in the Sunday afternoon services. First a portion of the Catechism was to be sung (very likely according to Luther's catechism hymns); this was to be followed by the reading of the chief parts; after that a sermon was to be preached on one of the parts; two pupils were then to recite the catechism with the explanations; all children and young people were then to be catechized. The catechization was to be followed by a prayer and the Lord's Prayer, a hymn of praise, and the Benediction. Again we sense the great stress placed upon the contents of Luther's Small Catechism.

### **The Ministry of the Keys and Confession**

Although Luther never used this as a chief part of his Catechism, the matter of Keys and Confession had already been used in sermons preached by certain leaders even before Luther's death. Luther felt that Confession was an important part in the life of the Christian. Bugenhagen, who worked diligently with Luther especially in writing orders of worship in northern Germany and in Denmark, included the "Office of the Keys"

as the 5th part of the Catechism in his *Kirchenordnung* of 1542. Likewise there were others who were including this as one of the chief parts of the Catechism.

### **Effect upon the Church**

*The Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books* in the *Triglott* lists five services rendered by the Catechisms of the 16th Century:

1. They brought about a revival of instruction in the catechism of the ancient church;
2. They completed the ancient catechism (Decalogue, Creed, Lord's Prayer) by adding Baptism, Confession, and the Lord's Supper;
3. They rid the teaching of falsehoods;
4. They eliminated Romish interpretation in the interest of work-righteousness;
5. They refilled the ancient forms with their evangelical and scriptural meaning.

When one considers the above-named points, one can certainly sense the great impact Luther's Catechisms had on the Christians of the second half of the 16th century. There is no doubt about it that the church had neglected the instruction of the people, children as well as young people and adults. One can also be certain that during the many controversies that raged during the years soon after Luther's death, our gracious God preserved His Church through the thorough study of the Biblical truths as summarized in the Catechisms.

Graebner in his *The Story of the Catechism* points out the positive character of the Small Catechism in that we see no trace of polemics. He directs our attention to the fact that the Catechism is permeated with justification by faith, even in its explanations of the Ten Commandments, where Luther introduces every explanation with "We should fear and love God." Another quote from Graebner states: "No other instruction book has survived as did Luther's Small Catechism. It can safely be said that it is the textbook supreme of religious doctrine. Its merits are recognized not only by Lutherans, but by men of all denominations."

J.T. Mueller in his booklet *In Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Publication of Luther's Small Catechism* points out why Luther was the logical man to write the Catechism: 1) He wrote excellent Catechism sermons; 2) he was a faithful Bible student; 3) he knew which Bible truths were fundamental; 4) he was a man of and for the people; 5) he loved children; 6) he was a master of languages; 7) he was not of the world but in close contact with it.

Luther's Small Catechism is brief and simple; its language is masterful; it is well arranged and rich in content. With such a wonderful book of instruction we surely are not going too far when we conclude that the Catechisms were a real guide and source of comfort for the many who have been instructed on the basis of both of Luther's Catechisms. This noble work has been referred to as a standard by which we can judge doctrines to determine whether they are scriptural.

As one considers the many blessings which the Church has derived from the two catechisms, we should be led to thank God that He so graciously preserved the Church by means of the soul-saving doctrines which He led Luther to state so simply, so clearly.

Luther encouraged the pastors and teachers of his day to use the Catechism as a prayer book. He used it as such. Should we not do likewise? So, let us follow his advice: Pray the Catechism!

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