A Review of Luther’s Small Catechism

Series: Introduction: History

As part of our Lutheran heritage and in order to remain firmly grounded in Lutheran doctrine, it is critical that we recall and relearn Luther’s Small Catechism. All too often, after we have “graduated” from eighth grade confirmation classes, the Catechism is laid aside to collect dust and is used infrequently. I believe that this seeming lack of in-depth familiarity with Luther’s Catechism is detrimental to us as Lutherans and as a congregation because this contains basic Lutheran doctrine that we should thoroughly know from cover to cover. Therefore, it is vitally important that we as Lutherans know the Small Catechism.

So let’s start by asking a series of questions: How well do you know your Catechism? When was the last time you studied it in depth? Are you able – without looking at your Catechism at this very moment– to name the six chief parts of doctrine?

If you answered “No” to any of those questions, and even if you answered “Yes” to all to questions, this Catechetical series is for you.

The purpose of this series is to reacquaint you with Lutheran doctrine as taught by Dr. Martin Luther in the Catechism. The outcome is that you will be better informed and stronger in your faith as a Lutheran.

The outline below mimics Luther’s Small Catechism’s numbering system with Luther’s question and answers followed by commentary.

So – let’s begin our discussion:

History

1. What do we call the book which we are about to study?

   We call this book “The Catechism."

2. What is a Catechism?

   A catechism is a book of instruction in the form of questions and answers.

   As you might recall from your confirmation classes, the simple explanation is “a catechism is a book in question and answer form.” Why did Luther use the question and answer form? The answer is that these were questions raised by Luther, who was appalled at the lack of knowledge of basic doctrines of the Bible and felt the easiest way to teach the masses of uneducated and educated people was through the question and answer format. So when we teach our children and adults today, their instruction and participation often happens in question and answer form.

3. Who wrote our Catechism?

   Dr. Martin Luther wrote our catechism in 1529 A.D.

   Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, 10 November 1483, and was brought up by his parents, Hans Luther and Margarethe Luther, in the faith of the Catholic Church – the main church that people belonged to. It was expected that you would be baptized a Catholic, marry a Catholic, practice as a Catholic, and be buried as a Catholic.

   Over the years, Luther developed a keen interest in the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church. His father, a common businessman, wanted Luther to become a lawyer, which would raise the prestige of the family name in the
community. Luther went to law school and completed three out of the four years. As he was about to begin his last year of law school, he and a dear friend were caught in a violent thunderstorm, and when they took refuge under a nearby tree, lightening struck the tree killing his friend instantly and frightening Luther terribly.

Scared and believing this to be an act of God directed at him, Luther vowed right then and there to commit his life to God and joined a monastery in 1505. Needless to say, this caused a serious family argument because Luther’s father was very angry that Luther – being so close to graduating as a lawyer – would choose to “throw away” all the hard work and prestige to become a poor monk who had to beg for a living – at least his father saw it that way! And from that day forward, his father refused to speak to Luther and did not welcome him in his home. This was a constant source of sorrow for Luther most of his life – being adored by his supporters but being rejected by his father. It was only later in life - after Luther had established himself as a reformer and toward the end of his father’s life - did Luther and his father reconcile.

As a monk, he became seriously concerned about his soul’s salvation. However, he found no peace of conscience in the teachings of the Catholic Church and the monastic discipline of the seminary. But from the Bible he learned that God freely forgives sins for Christ’s sake, and that this forgiveness was his by faith in God’s promises. As he continued to study the Scriptures, he found that many teachings and practices of the Catholic Church did not agree with the Bible.

When he became a Doctor of Divinity at the University of Wittenberg (the youngest professor ever in its history at that time), he began to teach and preach what he had learned from the Bible. Through his Biblical preaching and teaching he became known as a Reformer within the Catholic Church. Luther never intended to break away from the Catholic Church in a separate movement but wanted to restore the Bible’s teachings by acting within the structure of the Catholic Church. However, as history shows, the Lutheran Church would gradually take shape.

On 31 October 1517, Luther published his 95 thesis (statements) on the church door (common practice to put notices, advertisements, issues for the public to read – if they could read) against the sale of indulgences (paying the Catholic Church money in exchange for piece of paper that said your loved one would get out of purgatory sooner based on the amount you paid so your loved one could go to heaven sooner. If you didn’t pay it, your loved one had to serve out their suffering time in full).

Purgatory is the teaching that when a soul dies in grace, the soul must go to this place where it must undergo a limited amount of suffering to finally be cleansed and purified from all its sins. Only then can the soul be admitted to heaven. You can easily understand why the people would want to pay money for their loved ones – hoping that their family would do the same for them. After all, who wants to suffer?

From 1522-1534, under protection of his Duke (governing official) at a secret Castle location because an assassination order had been placed on his life by the Pope, Luther worked on the translation of the Bible into the German language. In 1529, through the wonders of the Guttenberg Press which had just been invented, Luther published his Small and Large Catechisms. The Small Catechism is the book we use today. The Large Catechism, which contains extensive commentary by Luther on the Six Chief Parts, is contained in the Book of Concord. The Augsburg Confession, contained in the Book of Concord, in which the doctrines of the Lutheran Church are set forth, was publicly read in 1530 before the Imperial Diet: the highest representative assembly consisting of landholders and called together by the Emperor to discuss, in this case, a religious controversy.

Luther was excommunicated: officially excluded from participation in the sacraments and services of the Catholic Church. The term “Lutherans” was originally introduced as a derogatory word to demean and humiliate the followers of Luther. Luther never wanted the movement to be named after him, but as the Catholic Church increasingly used
this term to describe the movement, the title eventually stuck. Today, we are proud to call ourselves Lutherans – using a term in history that was once meant as an insult.

Luther died in Eisleben (his birth place) 18 February 1546 at the age of 63 years old, confessing the faith he had preached in his life: Sola Fide (Faith Alone), Sole Scripture (Scripture Alone), Sola Gratia (Grace Alone).

Luther's Comments

Luther comments: “The deplorable destitution which I recently observed during a visitation of the churches has impelled and constrained me to prepare this Catechism or Christian Doctrine in such a small and simple form.”

In other words, the book is intended particularly for beginners, and because of its simple form and language is an excellent book for instruction of children and adults who should learn to understand and be held to memorize the text.

6. From which book did Luther take these chief parts of Christian doctrine?

Luther took the chief parts of Christian doctrine from the Bible.

Luther did not invent these doctrines nor take them from other non-biblical sources. Rather he took them directly from the Bible. The explanations that follow these individual catechetical questions show that the Catechism’s teachings fully agree with the Bible.

If you have any questions, please feel free to comment at dheller@trinity-athens.org. I always welcome dialogue and discussion because through it we can learn even more.

Next month we will ask: What is the Bible and have a discussion on that topic.

Blessings in your further catechetical studies!

Pastor Heller