



## Preaching the Catechism

JAMES ARNE NESTINGEN

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Speaking of the Small Catechism's place in recent American Lutheran congregational life, Gerhard Frost, longtime professor of catechetics at Luther Seminary, once remarked, "For years, the catechism glowered at us menacingly. Then it went behind trees and hid, peeking out occasionally. Now we're hoping that it will come out and smile again."

Poetic as always, Frost sketches both a transformation and a prospectus. The transformation is in the catechism's standing. There were and are those of Frost's own generation who remember it with the intimacy of old love. For much of the generation that followed, however, the catechism was apparently something different: a stern taskmaster which turned up in confirmation class to set out the theological values of an enforcement-minded majority.

But if the generation now providing a good share of the leadership in American Lutheranism remembers the catechism in primarily negative terms, there is another generation after them 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 witness of Scripture in the language of daily experience to serve preaching and reflection on the church's faith and mission.

Given such a transformation, it may be mere poetry to speak of a prospectus. This much is certain: the catechism cannot become a vehicle for the recovery of a lost golden age of Lutheranism. The past wasn't so golden; now it's gone. Neither can the catechism be called back on terms of enforcement. That was a failure. If the catechism is to be for this and future generations of Lutherans what it was for those who went before us, it will only be because, as Frost put it, it has smiled again.

All of this may require an impertinent question, however: Does the catechism have a smile? In order for us to see it, the catechism has to get more than the piecemeal analysis it usually receives when the parts are taken individually, apart

from their connection. It is when it comes together that the catechism does what it does best—setting out, in its simple yet profound way, the depths of law and gospel in life shaped by the cross. The catechism's smile occurs in its witness, when it gets a chance to preach.

The purpose of this essay is to see the catechism smile—to listen to it preach—and then to consider preaching its own paradigm for the hearer both within and beyond the Christian community. This will involve, first of all, considering the preaching of the catechism itself and

secondly, reflection on ways in which the catechism can serve current preaching.

## I. THE LUTHERAN PARADIGM

Historically examined, two factors shape the preaching in Luther's Small Catechism: first, its catholicism; second, its analysis of daily life shaped by the forces of law and gospel.

### A. *The Catechisms as Catholic Documents*

Both of Luther's catechisms, the Small and the Large (or German), are inherently catholic documents. In part, this reflects the situation in which they were written—the Small in late 1528 and early 1529, the Large over a slightly more extended period in the same years.<sup>1</sup> But the catholicism of the catechisms also reflects the considered commitment of Luther and his fellow Wittenberg reformers.

After having been blocked by circumstances and interdict through the early years of the reformation, the Saxons in 1526 finally got what they took to be legal authority to proceed to the reform of the congregations. Planning methodically, they first wanted to survey the prevailing conditions. They established what later came to be institutionalized throughout the Lutheran reform, the visitations. Committees consisting of a couple of theologians and some canon lawyers were sent out to evaluate the circumstances and make recommendations. *Ad hoc* as they were, these visitation committees are the institutional seeds of what became the Lutheran church.

There was no such vision at the time, however. The visitations were for strictly provisional purposes. The local congregations had suffered serious neglect in the late middle ages; the reformation had contributed its own disruptions. There were problems aplenty, with immediate pressure for remedy. Something had to be done to tide the congregations over until church life was regularized according to the priority of the gospel.

But there was also something provisional in the agenda of the reformers themselves. Though time has dimmed its impact in Lutheranism, the original Lutherans were fully apocalyptic. Luther thought of himself in prophetic terms.<sup>2</sup> He was widely interpreted as a new Elijah, another John the Baptist, raised up as a harbinger of the end times to prepare for the apocalypse. This hope drove original Lutheran theological reflection; it also undermined any long-term structural or organizational reflection. Something had to be provided for the meantime; there would be no long term.

<sup>1</sup>The best introduction to the catechism in English is still J. Michael Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of its Origin, its Distribution, and its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg, 1929).

<sup>2</sup>Karl Holl, "Martin Luther on Luther," in *Interpreters of Luther: Essays in Honor of Wilhelm Pauck*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 9-35.

With this apocalypticism, there was also what might be termed an ecumenical commitment. As currently conceived, ecumenism is a strategy for dealing with the multiplicity of denominations; in Luther's day, the oneness of the church was a matter of faith that had some sight to support it. Religious unity was commonly understood to be a nonnegotiable requirement for public peace. The papacy was considered its visible expression. For all of their objections to the papacy, with all of their commitment to a conciliar settlement of the reform, Luther and the Wittenberg reformers viewed the prospects of separation from Rome with abiding horror. Even

in lectures finally published in 1535, some fourteen years following his excommunication, Luther could say, “To be sure, we censure, we denounce, we plead, we warn; but we do not on this account disrupt the unity of the Spirit....A love that is able to bear nothing but the benefits done by another is fictitious.”<sup>3</sup>

Situation and long-term commitment came together, then, to produce a catholic catechism. Excommunicant, apocalyptic prophet, Luther remained profoundly catholic. So when he set to work to provide documents that would serve congregations in their disrupted life, he took classic documents of the catholic faith—the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer—and added explanations of the indisputable sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and their nearest relation, Confession and Absolution.

With all its problems, C. P. Krauth’s old title, *The Conservative Reformation*, sums up Luther’s orientation. Unlike the radical reformers and even the Calvinists, he did not set out to establish something separate but equal. Nor in his catechism did he publish some Lutheran gnosis or private, personal insight. Instead he took over a catholic framework, confessing the faith in public formulas using the defining expressions of the Christian faith in command, promise, and prayer. As Old Testament professors habitually observe, the commandments are not Lutheran; they are originally Hebrew and have been taken over in the church. The Apostles’ Creed was at Luther’s time and remains the working creed of Western Christendom. The Lord’s Prayer belongs to all believers, as do the sacraments. The catechism is not a sectarian document; it is the faith held by the church, set out for parents to teach their children. Catholic to the bone, the catechisms transcend later developments like parochialism or denominationalism. The goal is to grasp and define the center—what holds for all—so that those who use it can be sustained in transitional times.

### *B. Life under Law and Gospel*

There is a novelty in Luther’s catechism, however: the order. Unlike earlier catechisms, Luther places the commandments before the creed and the Lord’s Prayer. According to Luther:

There are three things which everyone must know in order to be saved. First, he must know what he ought to do and what he must leave undone. Then, as he has discovered that it is impossible for him to accomplish either with his own strength, he must know where to obtain, where to seek and find the power that will enable him to do his duty. And, in the third place, he must know how to seek and obtain that aid.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Luther’s *Works*, 27.392f.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted by John C. Mattes and M. Reu, *Luther’s Small Catechism: A Jubilee Offering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1929) 15.

This innovation has been the subject of intense debate in recent theological discussion, virtually all of it resting on false assumptions about Luther’s presuppositions. 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 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's approach is radical in the truest sense of the term. Attempting to go beyond theological or psychological superstructures in which ideological commitments predominate, he wants to address 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.

*The Commandments.* Approaching the catechism in this way, Luther expounds the commandments as the sum of the demands God makes in the down-to-earth conditions of daily life.<sup>5</sup> If you are a creature, possessing neither life nor the future in and of yourself, you are going to have to get help from somewhere; where you turn for such assistance divulges the identity of your god. Since you have to have a god, you have to be able to get hold of him or her or it; this requires a properly used name—not just a generic title, but a name to which your god will answer. And you have to hear from this god, so that you know what your god demands and promises; time has to be taken from the everyday round for this hearing.

By the same token, creatures who receive life from outside of themselves have to get along with the neighbors. So we have to have parents, need protection to live, and require sexual order, basic property, a community in which words hold their value, and a context of trustfulness so that life can be lived in the open.

In interpreting the commandments, Luther attempts to read life from the bottom up, to get to the nonnegotiable requirements of the human condition. That the Ten Commandments were given to Moses, that they are in the Bible, that they are understood in the Old Testament as torah—all of this is incidental to their explication of the ineradicable minimums of creatureliness. Luther is not interested in ideal social orders or moral systems, or whether the law is found in nature or conscience. He wants to get down to the barest bones, to life-constitutive requirements.

Luther does make assumptions, however. One is rooted in experience: Luther believed that a creature attempting to live under the commandments inevitably lives with disappointment. It may be full-fledged guilt (though that is usually a believer's problem); it may be the simple frustration of trying to make creaturely inventions work; it may be despair; it may be passing difficulty with a flaccid upper lip. Whatever, to live as a creature with nonnegotiable conditions is to be continually confronted with limits and the consequences they impose: *lex semper accusat*.

There is also a christological assumption. In the commandments, however, this premise is far more important for what it disallows than for what it proposes.

<sup>5</sup>Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

Like Paul, Luther was convinced that since Christ saves, the commandments can't.<sup>6</sup> They can order life for the time being; the law is doing its best when it accuses. But the commandments were not, are not, and never will be meant to save. That is Christ's job; where he is at work, the commandments and the law they explicate have no saving force. The requirements of life may be

nonnegotiable, but they are not the last word—that belongs to Christ alone. Consequently, the law can never be more than penultimate—that is the limit of its allowance.

This christological assumption is not necessary to the interpretation of the law's requirements, however. Christ can interpret it, no questions asked, but so can a rabbi, a moral philosopher, or even an ayatollah for that matter—the minimums hold for all people, be they Christians, Jews, Moslems, or California gurus of inner peace. So there is no attempt to find a Christian law—we already have enough to handle as creatures. Moses does a good job as far as he goes; in the penultimate realm, Christ doesn't go into competition with him. But then Moses has to keep his nose out of Christ's work, too. It's when he won't stay at home that Moses gets into trouble.

*The Creed.* Luther's explanations of the creed are similarly rooted in the language of daily experience. Technical terms and theological concepts critical to the reformation—even slogans like the Word alone, grace alone, faith alone—fall into the deep background as Luther sets forth a direct declaration of God's work for us. The goal is the simple one: to get to the bottom of what God has done, is doing, and can be expected to do for us.

The explanation of the first article amplifies what has already been stated in the commandments. Creaturely life is shaped by the gifts provided—"food and clothing, home and family, daily work and everything else I need"—and by the ongoing experience of the obligation. The obligation has already been focused in the commandments. But here there is an additional force mentioned: "therefore surely I ought..." The gifts of daily life, in Luther's explanation as well as in daily circumstance, become the basis of obligation. Gifted, we face the demands that come with the gifts themselves. The demands are in the workings of interrelatedness, arising out of the conditions of life itself. They are consequently as unyielding as the stubborn particularity of each individual.

But in the explanation of the second article, just as in Bach's *Clavierübung* (also an exposition of the catechism), there is a new flow to the music—open, expansive, and free. For here Christ makes his entry, taking on all of the powers of sin and death with their claims, demands, and bondage; Christ takes us under a lordship which has as its trademark his own gracious self-giving. "He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, bought and freed me," all so that "I may be his own, live under him and serve him."

For Luther, the transfer described here is no abstraction, no theologoumenon. Christ's work is literally to "at-one" us, to restore us to the creatureliness lost in all of our attempts at self-transcendence.<sup>7</sup> His gift is that he takes us on precisely at the point of our bondage, where we are gripped by obligations that are not only moral demands but impingements, obsessions, resentments, addictions—all of them turn-

<sup>6</sup>WA 39.1, 354.

<sup>7</sup>Gerhard Forde, "The Work of Christ," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 79-98.

ing us in upon ourselves, inciting the desperate desire to become our own creators, to have life and the future within ourselves, at our beck and call. Taking hold of us here, Christ bestows himself in the forgiveness of sin and the promise of the resurrection to free us from the web of our self-seeking and to bestow the open-endedness that only he can give. He bestows peace by

bringing the conscience to rest in himself. It is Christ's business—his calling and his accomplishment—to restore creation and creature to their creator, or in Luther's words, "to make us what Adam and Eve were meant to be, only better."

Luther's very contention for the immediate reality of Christ's work sets up the dialectic in the explanation of the third article. Being told that Christ has actually freed her, a Christian can only confess to seeing evidence of the opposite: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him...." That is one pole of the dialectic. Yet, given the identity of the one who both creates and redeems, there is another pole: "He has called, gathered, enlightened, sanctified and kept." Redeemed, the believer receives the gifts yet lives in hope of the future realization of them, observing the daily reality of unbelief yet living in the confidence that the Spirit is setting him apart, restoring her to her creaturely purpose. So, for the time being, until the last day, the true identity of the believer exists in the absolution alone. There, in the oral declaration of forgiveness, the future is disclosed, life is given, and the power of the resurrection is unleashed.

*The Lord's Prayer.* The doubleness that emerges in the third article of the creed characterizes Luther's entire explanation of the Lord's Prayer—the least known part of the catechism, yet the masterwork of it. Living in the context of law, but under the power of the gospel, the believer is simultaneously an unbeliever. Grippled in Christ, he gets caught up in immortality games all over again; caught in desires for control, she 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.

The explanations of the Lord's Prayer acknowledge the tension while declaring the help that can be expected from God.<sup>8</sup> The old Adam or Eve, who prays, "hallowed be my name, my kingdom come, my will be done," is prayed against; the new self, who lives in the Word and in faith, is prayed for, because only the one who is relentlessly committed to both creature and creation will sustain the self created in the absolution. By the same token, the old self's relentless seeking of daily bread in all its forms meets its Waterloo in the realization of God's gifts, a realization for which we must pray because our hearts become as hard as adamant. Rather than being a patch on the old self's inner tube, forgiveness emerges as the force of the new creation, the very basis of freedom with God and the neighbor. The old self's heroism is just the reverse side of "unbelief, despair and other great and shameful sins"; yet "even though we are so tempted," we continue to pray for God's preserving grace knowing that finally only he can deliver us from every evil.

As beautiful as they are, the other parts of the catechism—the explanations of the sacraments, the keys, confession and absolution—concern what could be considered technical matters. For Luther, the catechism *per se* was the first three parts. The explanations of the sacraments were added because of the circumstance of the

<sup>8</sup>Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) I.199-306.

reformation, in particular some of the seemingly perpetual confusion around the means of grace. Yet Luther isn't satisfied with mere clarification. He goes to the root to emphasize that it is God who is at work in Word and sacraments to reclaim creature and creation. So, in each case, he spells out the relationship of Word and element and examines the implication for life in faith.

It is no wonder that Luther considered the catechism (along with the *Bondage of the Will*) his finest work. It is also no wonder that the catechism held such a deep grip on Lutheranism until recent times. Setting out the heart of the catholic faith, Luther also reads daily experience and depicts the rhythms of life in terms of law and gospel, unbelief and faith, death and resurrection. Born under the law, living in the midst of obligation and the bondage that comes when we resist our limits, we are graced by the gospel of Jesus Christ, who recreates, making us creatures again—people of the earth, fit for God, the neighbor, and the earth itself.

Taken together, the themes of the catechism’s preaching form a paradigm—a way of understanding the Word of God and human experience for the sake of continuing witness. It is a paradigm with both feet on the ground, an assessment of daily life and the gospel emphasizing the reality of the obligations that confront and the gifts of grace that sustain us. As stoically responsible as it is about the demands of creatureliness—one of its focal points—it breaks into a smile when it sets out the other: the even deeper and more abiding reality of God’s grace in Christ.

## II. THE PARADIGM AND PREACHING

A paradigm such as that proposed by the catechism does two things: it offers organizing principles which simplify the complex—clarifying and focusing the conversations of those who share it—and it provides a basis for speaking with those who don’t hold it, keying particular themes that open up possibilities for extending the conversation. The catechism’s paradigm serves preaching in both ways, providing a shared language within the community and a basis for speaking to those outside of it.

The generation that produced the Formula of Concord referred to the Small Catechism in a phrase that until a generation or two ago was commonplace: “the layman’s Bible.”<sup>9</sup> While the title has some overtones which aren’t so helpful, it suggests the catechism’s paradigmatic function. Amidst the welter of biblical assertions, ideas, forms, and arguments, the catechism highlights themes it takes to be crucial in the deepest sense. It does this not to exclude, but to underscore—asserting that whatever else the Bible can and does say, it is a book of law and gospel in which the last word is the declaration of Christ. So doing, it weights such themes as sin and grace or death and resurrection—themes which by any generally accepted criterion are central in Scripture.

This weighting has performed a helpful service within the Lutheran community. Since the reformation, there have been dramatic changes in the way law is understood. Yet, among Lutherans, the commandments and their explanations give specificity to the consideration of law, so that even those who argue for a Lutheran misunderstanding have something concrete to deal with. Similarly, where you find Lutherans you can generally expect to hear something of the grace of God. The

<sup>9</sup>*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 465.

explanation of the second article has a way of focusing on God’s gracious act in Christ, so that grace itself doesn’t float off into some conceptual ether or get reduced to mere tolerance. So, too, the *simul* set out in the explanation of the third article and of the Lord’s Prayer still has a way of bringing a deep comfort to people battling with an abiding sense of their own unbelief.

In this way, the catechism serves as a multiplication table or, for the more advanced perhaps, a calculus of the faith. It establishes a shared vocabulary, defines essentials, and lays down a basis for reflection. Talking pastorally or reflecting theologically with a person nurtured in the catechism, there is always a common point of reference, an oral word echoing out of the years which can now once more be spoken to specify the demand or the promise.

This internal community function of the catechism is particularly important in a context where there are so many competing paradigms. The public schools have one—a pop psych interpretation of the child as a self-contained individual replete with all the necessities for coping with life if only the artifices are removed so that feelings can be freely expressed. The marketplace has another—using advertising to present an image of selfhood which is actively in charge of its destiny, shopping for its fate, but at the same time only truly in control when in possession of the particular product. Television religion has its own version of the marketplace paradigm, only in theirs the essential product is different, and “shop ‘til you drop” takes on a different meaning.

These public paradigms have been very effective in undermining the Lutheran witness. Each of them is premised on a free will which classical Lutheranism regards as myth and *prima facie* evidence of rebellion; each of them tries to manage or manipulate the free will they’ve posited in some particular direction, insisting on the necessity of law to contain it, while Lutheranism’s classic declaration is the freedom of the gospel. Conflict comes at every level. Not surprisingly, until they discover how the old Lutheran paradigm makes sense of experience in the light of grace, people often respond to it with some shock and offense. “You mean there’s no free will—you’ve got to be kidding!”

But this turns the question over to the other side: Given the offense, can the Lutheran paradigm speak to those outside it, those who don’t have an oral point of reference echoing out of the past but who live in the common paradigms of the culture? If the old Lutheran way of reckoning is to have any value, it must be catholic and oriented to life experience. Failing that, it will become what it was not and never should be: a gnosis, a secret knowledge preserved only by and for the insiders.

There have been many critiques of Lutheranism aimed at just this point, though they don’t all have equal claims to quality. There is something funny about Krister Stendahl’s argument before a group of psychologists and psychiatrists that people don’t feel guilty anymore!<sup>10</sup> But whatever the source or quality of the complaint, it is at least asking the right questions: How is Christ proclaimed? How is Christ brought home to those who don’t know him?

The problem in the critiques themselves and in many attempts to reply hinges on a false assumption about the relation of law and gospel, particularly concerning

---

<sup>10</sup>Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 78-96.

the firstness of the law. That the law comes first is to Luther and the original Lutherans not a prescription to be fulfilled by a pastor or witness who, armed with the law, seeks to inculcate guilt or need. Rather it is a description of what is commonly known: that we have our lives in the context of law, living under limits, in the midst of demands and various forms of accusation or

imposition, and that we don't generally begin to examine our illusions of control until the situation is uncomfortable enough to require it. In this sense the law must come first; gospel preaching that doesn't recognize or deal with this firstness loses contact with the realities of daily life, becoming one more illusion of transcendence.

This does not mean that the law must always come first in witness, however, as though one could only hook after having sufficiently jabbed. To a person already afflicted, the gospel may be the first word: Christ is for you! On the other hand, to a person who imagines himself possessed of a robust conscience, free from any demand or accusation, another word may claim priority: You are the one!

In either case, what is required is some sense not only of the text but of the hearer and of how they meet. And it is just here that the old Lutheran paradigm starts to hit its stride. For its assumptions are keyed to daily experience: creatures who do not have life in themselves experience law as limit and accusation—not simply in a moral sense, but more broadly as entrapment, containment, the terrors of recognized mortality. It is Christ, “a man born of woman, born under the law,” whose work it is to enter into such obligation, impingement, and terror and speak the word: “In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Some of the best research into the origins of Lutheranism indicates that what gave it a compelling quality for its sixteenth-century adherents was the doctrine of vocation.<sup>11</sup> The Lutheran witness desacralized or depietized the religious overlay which encumbered and ultimately devalued everyday life in the sixteenth century. At the same time, it re-valued the common stuff of the family, work, and citizenship, declaring the freedom of the gospel bestowed in Christ to enter into these earthy relations.

The genius of the Lutheran paradigm for contemporary witness is at the same point. It attacks all the mythologies of fulfillment, self-transcendence through self-actualization, creating a new world through product relationships—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.

Preaching the catechism to the outsider is not so much a matter of handing it out on the street or using it directly in evangelism calls. Rather, the catechism specifies some things to look for and some ways to address them. There is no point, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared long ago, in invading people's closets to drag out dirty linen. There is every good reason, however, to be sensitive to the points where the law is bearing down, enclosing, pinching, and driving so that the word of grace

---

<sup>11</sup>Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven: Yale University, 1975).

can be addressed to just such points. Jesus didn't affirm the frustrations of the blind, telling them how much he understood—he gave them sight. In the same way, he didn't tell the poor about his humble origins in Nazareth—he preached good news to them.

That's how the catechism can work in witness. It sets up 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.

With this, there is a remaining question: How or when? In Luther's day, there were several Sunday services—it was customary to continue preaching on the catechism at one of them while following the lectionary in others. Given the competition for leisure time nowadays, that is an unimaginable luxury. But there are times when the rhythm of the church year offers a particular opportunity.

The most appropriate time for preaching on the catechism is Lent, the traditional season of instruction when the catechumens used to be prepared for baptism. To take one of the chief parts of the catechism each year, for example, would provide themes for five years of Lenten preaching. Or, by pushing hard, one might be able to cover the whole catechism in Lent, though there would hardly be any time for digestion and discussion. Just think: something besides Lenten dramas.

Another possibility is breaking into the lectionary for a series of sermons on each of the parts, once a year over a succession of years, or for an entire year early in the pastor's ministry in a particular parish. There is every good reason to be loyal to the lectionary. But the value of preaching a sermon on each of the commandments, for example, or on each article or each petition, is such that even the lectionary might yield. The Sundays late in Pentecost, from the time school starts until American Thanksgiving, are good ones for a series on the commandments. The Sundays of Lent are good for preaching on the creed or the Lord's Prayer.

There are lectionary texts that lend themselves to preaching on the sacraments. The anti-sacramentalism of American Protestantism affects Lutherans also. They have to be taught, and regularly. This should not be merely inculcating the latest fashions in sacramental piety, but the deep down gifts of Word and element.

With such use—clarifying and focusing the discussion inside; opening up the Word in terms recognizable to those outside—the catechism may regain something of its hold as the living confession of Lutheranism. But the catechism is more interested in witness than in gaining power, and so it may smile prematurely—just for the sheer joy of being able to say it again, to name the name that is above every other.