



The Catechism in Christian Education

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Luther's *Small Catechism* is one of the teaching gems of the church.¹ It was, of course, written because of Luther's concern for Christian education. The ignorance of the people in the parishes of Saxony in the fall of 1528 combined with Luther's observation that "many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching" led the reformer to entreat pastors and preachers to assist him in teaching the catechism "to the people, especially those who are young."² There is, therefore, an intrinsic tie between the catechism and Christian education.

The concerns that led Luther to write the catechism still rear their heads to a greater or lesser extent in the twentieth-century church. We too should be concerned about the general churchgoer's lack of theological learning. A good grasp of theology will inform the people's response to God in worship and form the basis for service and evangelism; without it the church is greatly impoverished. The catechism is an important resource for developing such a theological perspective.

I. THE TEACHER

Luther was correct in placing the responsibility for theological teaching squarely on pastors. If the pastor gives the impression that teaching really is not important enough for her or him to be engaged in, or that he or she is not equipped to teach, then a clear message is sent to the congregation that Christian education is a low priority. The pastor is uniquely equipped through seminary training to be a central theological teacher in the congregation. Teaching is one of the most important aspects of ministry.

¹While Luther's catechism is used as an example in this paper, the author believes that the points made about Luther's catechism and Christian education translate readily into the ways in which Christians of other traditions may use their catechetical or identifying documents in Christian education with various age levels.

²Martin Luther, "Preface," *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 338.

On the other hand, the pastor cannot do it all. We can thank God that the situation in churches in the United States is better than that in Saxony in 1528! Competent and qualified lay teachers, as God's gift to the church, share jointly in the teaching ministry of the congregation. However, most volunteer lay teachers do not have seminary training and many do not have access to adequate theological libraries that would help equip them for their teaching task. Pastors need to be encouraged to set aside sufficient time to supervise the theological growth of their congregation's trusted lay teachers.

Luther placed responsibility for Christian education also upon families, urging parents to instruct their children. He was absolutely correct in recognizing that without adequate adult Christian education, parents cannot in turn teach their offspring. Thus, there is a need for theological education for all laity, not just for teachers of particular programs; as well as a need to provide guidance to parents on communicating the faith to their children.

II. THE METHOD

What of Luther's contention that the form of the instruction be fixed rather rigidly as in the catechism? Luther told his preachers that "young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form" and recommended that the young repeat the text word for word after the teacher "and retain them in their memory,"³ Luther of course had good reason to suggest this rigid approach. He doubted the theological teaching ability of most of the pastors and so encouraged them not to tamper with the text.

Today, however, we will generally want to add our own variations in method and presentation of content, while preserving the theological integrity of the catechism's text. Using a rote form of learning can be sterile and boring and often results in little reflection and understanding of the material. Fortunately, Luther did encourage the teachers to bear in mind that after the people had become familiar with the text they should be instructed on its meaning. It is essential that students hear the catechism as relevant to their daily lives. Teaching the catechism calls for a law/gospel approach, in which students are called to reflect both on their human state before God and the gospel answer of God's gracious mercy and forgiveness. And certainly at this level the teacher's ingenuity in helping students do their own thinking and wrestling with the text and its application allows for—and calls for—creativity and individuality in teaching.

Published lesson materials designed to help teach the catechism can of course be a boon in suggesting ways in which theological understanding and application can be pursued at various age levels. Published materials are of most value when they are used flexibly as helpful guides that need to be adapted to the particular group of students. Some pastors prefer to develop their own catechetical lessons. A good rule is: use your own lesson plans only if they are better than the published materials! And if you do prepare your own, remember that it takes three hours to prepare for a one-hour lesson using prepared materials, but about six hours per teaching-hour to prepare your own materials.

³Ibid., 339.

What of memorization of the catechism? This was a much more popular approach in the past than at present. It has gone out of vogue because we know that memorizing simply for the sake of memorizing is not the most helpful way to grasp the meaning of a text. However, many persons will testify to the value of committing the catechism to heart. Martin Marty writes, "As a product of such catechismal instruction in the 1930s, I can testify that the little book was a constant companion, its every page subjected to memory, its lines cough-upable at the behest of pastors or elders....Several decades of graduate theology have not succeeded in supplanting in my mind a view of the structure of the universe and of the faith that Luther's book, with its 'Chief Parts' provided. Even the theology section of my library is still catalogued to follow its sequence."⁴

III. THE LEARNER

All in all, any church's catechism and other confessional documents should inform its whole Christian education program, giving theological direction for the teaching content. Scripture will always be the sole standard for all that we teach, and, as Lutherans, we confess that the Lutheran confessional documents accurately reflect the gospel message of the Scriptures. But this does not mean that the catechism itself will be the sole content for all lessons taught at all age levels in every Christian education program in Lutheran churches. In fact, at some age levels the catechism is quite unsuitable as directly teachable content. It actually works best with adults and least well with children.

The catechism is a wonderful theological resource for adults. It gives a solid interpretation of the message of the Scriptures which provides a theological basis for all of life. Provided, of course, that the adults retain what they learn. And retention requires review and more review. Adults need more than a one-time exposure to the catechism. Luther's concern about committing the catechism to memory shows that he wanted the people to carry the catechism with them and not lose it. Until something is "overlearned" (for example, the alphabet is learned so well by most people that it almost cannot be forgotten), it will assuredly be forgotten eventually. So the catechism should be overlearned or reviewed for all adults often enough that they "know it"—that is, have it at their fingertips.

The catechism is excellent content for new members. Often persons coming into Lutheranism from another denomination are treated to information on the local congregation ("how we do things here"), group dynamics and getting-to-know-you exercises, and perhaps a brief Bible study to encourage faithful worship attendance, stewardship, and service. Such things cannot substitute for an introduction to a denomination's theological stance, those things that are important for the way in which the denomination understands God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. For this, the catechism (Small or Large) is a good place to start.

The catechism is also a splendid tool for work with older teens. The college years are often a time for serious theological reflection. Many young adults turn to books and documents that challenge their thoughts or against which they can

⁴From Martin Marty's Foreword to Arthur C. Repp, *Luther's Catechism Comes to America: Theological Effects on the Issues of the Small Catechism Prepared in and for America Prior to 1850* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1982) xii.

measure other ideas they have encountered. The Small and Large Catechisms can be very helpful for this purpose.

The Small Catechism is also an excellent resource for teaching students in grades 8 through 10. However, here much more caution must be exercised in the way in which the content is presented, so that youth gain maximum benefit from studying the catechism. Research in cognitive development in the last few decades has shown that, like the rest of the body, the brain and nervous system develop and mature over a number of years. Such development results in qualitative changes in thinking throughout the childhood years. Jean Piaget identified six distinct stages in thinking.⁵ These stages are roughly related in many children to approximate age levels. But the important thing for Piaget is that the stages are invariant and sequential, regardless of the age at which any particular individual reaches them. Each stage in fact represents a

developmental capability which, with appropriate environmental influences, results in the kind of thinking characteristic of that particular stage.⁶ Generally around the age of twelve years or so, the average child moves from the stage of concrete thinking to that of abstract thinking. This is the last stage of cognitive development and the thinking stage that is typical of teenagers and adults. So the child is now ready to grasp and appreciate the complexity of the theological issues in Luther's catechism. But, the child has only just reached this stage. As with most capacities, the person needs to practice the new thinking skills for some time before he or she is able to operate with facility in this new mode. It may take a year or two of thinking in general abstract ways before the young person is ready to deal easily with theological concepts. So teachers of grades 8, 9, and 10 must know how to help adolescents work carefully and slowly with their new thinking skills. This calls for teachers who understand that some students may develop more slowly and not reach the abstract thinking stage until the age of fourteen or fifteen years. Such students may well be embarrassed when peers laugh at their concrete attempts to deal with the theological content of the catechism. Sensitive teachers can help students move at their own pace and encourage individual work as well as group discussion, so that the slower developer has a chance to deal with the material on his or her own level. The good teacher will understand that even early developers will sometimes tire of thinking in the new mode and will revert to the concrete thinking that is typical of the elementary-age child. Teaching the catechism to early teens requires frequent review, clear definitions, careful explanation of traditional theological terms, and plenty of illustrations with simple metaphors and analogies.

To be resisted at all costs is a recent trend in some congregations to shorten the program (usually to accommodate school or sports schedules) or to cram large amounts of catechetical content into a few weekend retreats. Abstract thinking takes practice and time. Retention takes repetition. Reflection that encourages incorporation into one's own belief system and its expression in daily life is a lengthy process. It requires frequent regular opportunities for learning. Weekly congregational classes or regular instruction in parish schools offer the best chance for long-term incorporation. A two- to three-year minimum program of weekly classes is most

⁵Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (London: University of London, 1968) 8-70.

⁶Such environmental influences need not be Western formal schooling; people in distinctly difference societies still exhibit the same stages of mental development.

appropriate, especially if the program begins at grade 8. Perhaps an eighteen-month program may be sufficient for classes that begin in the middle of ninth grade and continue through tenth grade, since by then students have had plenty of practice in abstract thinking.

How about children younger than twelve or thirteen years? Frankly, the age at which Luther might have used the catechism in its present form with children would now be considered inappropriate. Luther, of course, assumed that children were able to think like small adults. And lest we feel superior, we must admit that there are still many adults today who follow the same approach without Luther's excuse—that he lived four hundred years before the research in cognitive development that informs our contemporary educational approaches! Since we now know that children on the average reach the age of abstract thinking at about twelve years, we also know that asking a younger child, even a bright one, to study the catechism is asking for

trouble. Teaching material too abstract for the age level results at best in misunderstandings that must later be unlearned and at worst in frustration, boredom, discipline problems, and a conviction that the Christian faith is too difficult and makes no sense. Teaching too much too soon could well be a contributing factor in the desire of some children to get out of catechetics as fast as possible and quit the church.

Then, before grade 8 does the catechism have no value? Of course it does. But not in a way that involves direct teaching of the catechism. The catechism can be used as a basis for planning the themes of topical areas for a curriculum for children. It can be used in selecting helpful materials for a congregation. It can be used as a normative standard for those writing or developing materials. It can suggest topics that should not be overlooked. For example, in a curriculum for first graders, one might not use phrases from the catechism, but one might well want to teach about Baptism by selecting one or two simple concepts from the catechism (perhaps, Baptism is a time when we say that God loves this person; in Baptism we become members of the church). And of course teachers of children should be well-versed themselves in the catechism so that they bring a theological sensitivity to their teaching which, with a good understanding of their students, will enable the teachers to communicate appropriate concepts and to answer children's questions with integrity.

Thus the catechism can and should have a very important role in Christian education in Lutheran congregations whether used directly with older age levels or indirectly as a guide for content areas and planning with children. In fact, recent trends might suggest that the coming decade may be precisely a time in which we need to place more emphasis on the catechism. Nowadays people move from congregation to congregation and from denomination to denomination, meet Christianity for the first time and are converted in young adulthood, enter seminary with little background in their own denominational tradition, and are influenced by preachers in the electronic media. The '90s may be an ideal decade to encourage more focus on the catechism in congregations, in seminaries, and in church publications, so that people may become more strongly rooted in their tradition as a foundation for their own beliefs and as a basis for informed and open ecumenical discussion.