



Catechetical Practices for the Family

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Martin Luther intended his Christian catechism to transform the family's relationship with God, the family's life in relation to one another, and the family's relationship to the community. Today, Luther's *Small Catechism* most often makes its only appearance in the daily life of a Christian in confirmation classes in Lutheran congregations—if ever at all. What if congregational leaders introduced the catechism to couples and families not primarily through church-based learning strategies that support *thinking* about the Triune God, but through contemplative practices that support a Christian way of life in the home directed towards well-being and relational integration?

A TALE OF TWO PAINTINGS

The difference between engaging the catechism with learning strategies at church and contemplative practices in the home is evident in the juxtaposition of two famous paintings. Jules-Alexis Munier's *La leçon de catéchisme* (*The Catechism Lesson*) shows an older pastor seated before a row of children in a beautiful garden.¹ The garden scenery surrounding the pastor and children is serene, but the

¹Jules-Alexis Munier, *La leçon de catéchisme* (1890), in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'archéologie de Besançon, France. Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:La_lecon_de_cath%C3%A9chisme_.jpg (accessed October 29, 2012).

The catechism need not be feared as though one learns it only for an examination. Used as a tool for daily prayer, it can shape and inform—perhaps even transform—Christian life in the family.

activity is far from relaxed. The pastor is examining the children, one by one, on their memory of the catechism. Each child is depicted in the painting as an individual, not relating to the others. The mood is pensive. The young man standing before the pastor has his arms crossed confidently as if to say, "I'm getting through this." The young girl waiting her turn has her eyes firmly fixed on the catechism in her lap, anxiously preparing for her exam. Another girl sits confidently at ease, assured that she is prepared. Perhaps she even imagines herself the better Christian. The young boy at the end of the bench is distracted, removing himself mentally by fixing his attention on a flower bud behind him. One can only imagine what he will remember of this experience in the future. The activity of standing before a pastor responding to questions and reciting the catechism from memory still causes anxiety among many who recall this scene from their own childhood.

A different painting from a few decades earlier depicts Martin Luther playing the lute in the kitchen of his home surrounded by his four singing children.² The oldest brother has his arm around his sister and the two are singing from the same piece of music. Another brother, standing closest to his father, is singing with perfect posture, seemingly putting forth his best effort to give glory to God and to please his parents and their guest. A younger brother is singing, but his gaze is fixed on his mother. His mother, Katie, is holding a sleeping child in her lap and, along with their houseguest Philip Melancthon, she is listening to the music of Martin and the children. The scene is relaxed and contemplative, marking a thoughtful moment of praise and thanksgiving to God, as the family relates to one another and to a family friend.

When Luther invites families to take up the catechism and learn it, it is the scene of his family gathered in the kitchen after a meal that he intends to depict. Everything about the moment is ordinary, causing the observer to wonder: Has the dear baby in Katie's arms just been screaming, thus leading Martin to call upon his older children to sing their little sibling to sleep? Or were Martin and Philip in a heated argument over dinner, so Katie decided to put a stop to their banter by inviting Martin and the children to sing for their guest? Or perhaps the clock struck the hour that the Luther family set aside for evening prayer. The scene calls for such imagining. The activity of singing together is quite different from the image depicted in the *The Catechism Lesson*.

MEMORIZATION, EXAMINATIONS, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Most children today no longer encounter the catechism through examinations. Two or three generations ago, however, examinations were the norm. Groans follow whenever I lift up a catechism in a room full of Lutherans who are over the age of sixty-five. Memories of long hours of memorization at home and

²Gustav Spangenberg, *Luther im Kreise seiner Familie musizierend (Luther Making Music in the Circle of His Family)* (1875). Available at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ALuther_im_Kreise_seiner_Familie_musizierend.jpg (accessed October 29, 2012).

public examinations at church flood the brains of those gathered. The audience literally feels the same anxiety they felt during those examinations because memories include emotions. The present experience of seeing a catechism is impacted by the past. Worse, since memories are retrieved and altered each time they are remembered, the memory of the collective groan created by holding up the catechism reinforces earlier negative associations with the catechism and probably makes future experiences even less popular. The catechism has ended up being as enjoyable as eating vegetables, not only for past generations, but for present ones as well.

Memorization and examinations are not inherently wrong, of course, which makes these matters more complex. In fact, memorizing the catechism has proven to be a powerful resource for faith in daily life, just as Luther intended. Now, however, the very thing that is given credit for strengthening faith is simultaneously experienced with fear and trepidation, thus inhibiting its intended use.

It was not experience alone that led to the decline of the catechism's use. The turn away from text-based, authoritative learning toward student-centered, constructed learning in the early twentieth century left little room for catechism advocates. At the time these significant new learning styles were introduced, few could imagine using the catechisms in any other way than had been used in the past. However, as Richard Osmer noted in the late twentieth century:

After almost a century of experiential religious education, with its heavy emphasis on process over content, personal creativity over communal identity, and emergent experience over biblical-theological knowledge, it is safe to say that the members of mainline Protestant churches know less about the faith, are more tenuously committed to the church, and are less equipped to make an impact on the surrounding world than they were at the turn of the century.³

To speak the Christian faith today requires fluency with biblical and theological language. Discipleship in daily life requires facility with regard to the rituals, narratives, and norms of a practicing community of disciples. To engage the catechism's content with integrity does not mean the teacher has to be cold and distant and the end result filled with fear and trepidation. Nor does teaching the catechism mean alluding to it unsystematically, now and then, as it appears in emergent experience of the learner. With these two choices as the persistent backdrop for the catechism's use today, families need a more compelling approach in order to fall in love with the catechism again.

LEARNING IN RELATIONSHIP

Human beings learn through relationship with other humans. Children learn skills such as sharing, forgiving, respect, and listening, because parents and caregivers offer them opportunities to see such skills in action. Human brains contain "mirror neurons" that explain why a newborn can stick out his tongue to mimic

³Richard R. Osmer, "The Case for Catechism," *The Christian Century*, April 1997, 411–412.

his parents or why watching someone else take a drink makes us thirsty as well. Mirror neurons allow humans to imitate behavior, understand intentions, and interpret the emotions of someone else.

When relationships are cold and people are essentially distant, critical or competitive, that influences what the child expects relationships to feel like. On the other hand, if the child experiences relationships full of nurturing warmth, connection, and protection, then that will become the model for future relationships—with friends, with other members of various communities, and eventually with romantic partners and their own children.⁴

Luther never intended for the catechism to be a memorized instruction book absent of warm relationships. In fact, Luther was the first theologian in one thousand years who was shaped by his role as a father. Timothy Wengert writes,

[The Small Catechism] was not simply an instruction book; it was Luther's personal, direct confession to the Hanses and Magdalenas of his congregation and to today's readers. That is why there's a shift in pronouns in some of the explanations. In the commandments, if Luther simply were paraphrasing, he would have written, "You shall not take the name of God in vain," or "You are to fear and love God." But what did he write? *We! We* are to fear and love God. Luther did not stand over his people shouting at them. "Learn this, believe this, do this...or else!" Instead he stood alongside them and cried: "*We, we* are to fear, love and trust in God above everything else."⁵

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To restate the question then, what if congregational leaders modeled engaging the catechism to couples and families through contemplative practices that support a Christian way of life in the home directed toward well-being and relational integration?

In our family, we recite Luther's morning prayer before we leave the house for work and school. We gather at the door and say together,

We give you thanks heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected us this night from all harm and danger, and we ask that you would preserve us this day also from sin and all evil, so that all our doings and life may please you. Into your hands we commend ourselves: our bodies, our souls, and all that is ours. Let your holy angels be with us, *so that the wicked foe may have no power over us.* Amen.⁶

⁴Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bruson, *The Whole-Brained Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (New York: Random House, 2011) 127.

⁵Timothy Wengert. *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 12–13.

⁶Author's version of Luther's "Morning Blessing." See Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (hereafter *BC*), ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 363.

Our family enjoys this practice and we often engage it with playfulness. We have taken to punctuating the final words, saying each of them with vigor. And with the “Amen” still sounding we often race out the door because we are late for where we need to be. At times it might appear that our praying is downright irreverent, because we say the words as fast as we can (so much for the contemplative). Our prayer practice could be susceptible to Luther’s critique of the monastic daily prayers because they lack intention and meaning. Quite the contrary, this kind of catechetical practice is exactly what Luther intended.

In the evening, when our children say their bedtime prayers we conclude their prayers with the Lord’s Prayer. Then we trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads and say, “Mama loves you. Daddy loves you. Your sister and brother love you. And Jesus loves you very much.” Our children heard the Lord’s Prayer long before they could speak, and they have felt the image of their baptism traced on their forehead nearly every night of their lives. For our oldest, who just turned nine, that means the sign of the cross has been traced on her head over 3,000 times. Our evening conversations at bedtime range from “Why does Jesus not cure ‘boo-boos’ right away?” to “What does the cross on my forehead mean?” Together with mealtime prayers and dinnertime opportunities for conversations about loving God and loving our friends, we are covering the catechism’s content—unsystematically, but consistently. In the coming years, we have plans to introduce more catechetical practices as our family’s needs arise and abilities develop. What we desire for our children is that they have a relationship with the catechism’s content that will ensure their understanding of the Christian faith long before they encounter it in confirmation.

THE CATECHISM IN THE HOME: THREE ANALOGIES

Luther’s vision of the catechism’s use in the home presupposes three important analogies. First, *as the monastery is to monks so the home is to families*. When Luther wrote the *Small Catechism* in 1529, he was already a husband and father. Yet, the monastic rhythms of his life as a monk were still deeply imprinted on his body and soul. Luther marked every day with prayer, rising to give glory to God before a word was spoken to another brother and returning to bed in the evening with prayer on his lips. The catechisms presuppose Luther’s commitments to contemplative practices of daily meditation and prayer, and he explicitly transferred his monastic practices to his new role as spouse, father, and pastor.

In the *Small Catechism* Luther offers families a liturgy for the Christian household.⁷ This household liturgy does not occur just once, but multiple times, marking the course of the day with morning, mealtime, and evening prayer. Luther adapted morning prayer for the household, for instance, instructing family members as they rise to make the sign of the cross, say the Apostle’s Creed and the

⁷Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms*, 163.

Lord's Prayer, recite a little prayer, sing a hymn, and then move into the day's work with joy. In his preface to the *Large Catechism*, Luther likens reading the catechism to God's invitation to meditate on God's precepts in Deut 6:7–8. "We should meditate on his precepts while sitting, walking, standing, lying down, and rising, and should keep them as an ever-present emblem and sign before our eyes and on our hands."⁸ This household liturgy is the ground for engaging the catechism's thoughtful meaning-making about the Triune God and God's relationship with human beings.

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Second, *as theological education is to pastors so the catechism is to families*. For Luther, the catechism was a brief digest and summary of the entire Holy Scriptures and contained all the Christian needed to know about a life of faith. Summing up the importance of the catechism's first three parts, including the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, Luther wrote, "For in these three parts everything contained in the Scriptures is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms. Indeed, the dear Fathers or apostles (or whoever they were) thus summed up the teaching, life, wisdom, and learning that constitute the Christian's conversation, conduct, and concern."⁹

Luther encouraged mothers and fathers to determine whether their children and servants knew the catechisms at least once a week. He also wrote in the *Large Catechism* that children should not be given food or drink until they recited the catechism's contents. This practice has little to do with harsh discipline or examinations and everything to do with the monastic discipline of prayer before meals. If children were to recite the catechism before they were given food or drink, they would meditate on the catechism throughout the day: when they rise, before mid-day meals, and before evening meals. Through daily practices, Christians would learn all they need to know about faith.

Third, *as the Bible is the manger for Christ so Christian practices in the home are the manger for faith*. Unlike a habit, practices are social and shared. Practices depend upon relationships between people. An individual might practice prayer, but the constitutive elements of the practice—its resources, frameworks, and perspectives—arise out of a situated context, historical and social in nature.¹⁰ Thus, to learn how to pray as a Christian requires learning the words, patterns, and stories

⁸Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *BC*, 382.

⁹*Ibid.*, 385.

¹⁰Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 72–85.

used by previous generations. Learning to be a disciple of Jesus Christ happens as those mirror neurons pick up on Christian practices carried out in the home through warm and consistent relationships among family members. As Charles Arand notes:

The catechisms lead a person into the fullness of the Christian life, a fullness that can best be described as the *ars vivendi fide*, that is, the art of living by faith. In other words the Small and Large Catechisms seek to form within us a habit of the mind and heart that is lived from faith to faith.¹¹

The catechisms are a guide for learning these Christian practices in the home.

PRAYER AS THE GATEWAY TO THE CATECHISM

As a child and teenager, when I set out to read the Bible, I started in Genesis. Since it was the beginning of the book, it seemed like a good choice. As I grew up, I started my reading in different places. Over the last ten years, my starting place within the Book of Books has been the Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible. Meditating on the Psalms through *lectio divina*, study, and prayer—both by myself and in community—has opened up the storylines, the characters, the emotions, and the God encounters of the biblical world in ways that I never imagined. So too, I wonder if the doorway to encountering God today is not to be found at the beginning of the catechism with the Ten Commandments, but in the middle with mealtime, morning, and evening prayer practices. We should introduce the catechism with the practices that might be most familiar and least intimidating for families.

My proposal might seem at first to run afoul of Luther's radical revision of the order of the catechism to begin with the Ten Commandments. However, I do not intend to suggest we reorder Luther's catechism itself, but that we invite families to open the catechism and begin engaging it on a page other than the first. The family's practice of prayer is a way into Luther's theological approach to the Christian life in the same way that Luther's prayer life formed his relationship to God's grace and mercy. Prayer is what happens after an encounter with the Ten Commandments reveals our need for grace and mercy and leads us to profess our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. To pray is to be utterly dependent upon God, as if one cannot live apart from God. To pray is to experience the breaking in of God's kingdom through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. To pray is to breathe out, "I cannot believe, except by the Holy Spirit."

Daily life in a family is itself evidence of Luther's theological move from law to gospel. There is more than enough material by eight o'clock in the morning for my family to need prayer. I imagine this is the case in many households. If there is only one faith practice that your family can adopt in the coming year, I encourage you to pray in the morning. Pray alone and pray together. Put Luther's morning prayer on a piece of paper at each person's breakfast spot. Write the prayer on a

¹¹Charles P. Arand, "Does Catechesis in the LCMS Aim for the *Ars Vivendi Fide*?" *Concordia Journal* 22/1 (1996) 58.

post-it note stuck to the mirror of the bathroom. Place the prayer on top of everyone's backpack, purses, or briefcase. My family received framed artwork of Martin Luther's morning prayer as a gift, and we hung it by the front door of the house.

Luther's morning prayer begins with thanks to God through Jesus Christ for protection from harm and danger during the night and moves to petition, asking God for a new day free of sin and evil, and that all of our actions might be pleasing in God's sight. In the prayer we commend our whole selves—body and soul and all that we are—into God's care, asking the angels to take on evil throughout the day so that we might live this new day protected with the same hand that shielded us through the night. The theological claim grounding Luther's morning prayer is simply that we can do nothing apart from the God who gives us life (John 15:5). Morning prayer propels us into whatever the day brings, ultimately dependent upon God for forgiveness, mercy, love, protection, and care.

ON BEING MINDFUL

Consistent practices of morning prayer frame the day by an encounter with God and yet also orient the family simultaneously towards one another and towards the community they will encounter beyond the door. New research in interpersonal neurobiology makes clear that the practice of mindfulness is critical to well-being and integration. To be mindful is to be intentionally present to what is happening in the moment without resorting to judgments or evaluation. In other words, mindfulness helps us understand our own minds by being present to our current moment while also understanding another person's mind by reserving judgment until we can fully interpret the situation. Mindfulness is particularly attentive to the ordinary moments of daily life. The rule of life practiced by many Eastern religions and monastic communities leads directly to less anxiety, more clarity, safety, security, and overall well-being. Prayer is life sustaining.

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A common critique of mindfulness practices—such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, or centering prayer—is that these practices are self-oriented and not neighbor-oriented. Interpersonal neural biological science has demonstrated that primary care physicians who practice even minimal amounts of mindful awareness experience increased empathy for their patients and less burnout.¹² Practicing mindfulness increases our capacity to be in relationship with one another. Daniel

¹²Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012) 45.

Siegel writes, “When we are loving of others, we are in an interpersonally integrated and mindful state, and when we are loving of ourselves with self-compassion and kindness, we are in an internally integrated and mindful state.”¹³ According to a recent study, families that scored high on a rituality index did not have to practice their routines every night for the ritual to be meaningful for the family. What was even more meaningful than the ritual itself was the planned nature of the family time set apart for relationship building and maintenance.¹⁴ To invite a contemplative moment into the hustle and bustle of the morning routine is not only theologically critical for life, it is also biologically, psychologically, and sociologically critical for life. What better way, then, to introduce the catechism into a family’s life of faith?

The catechism offers us the gift of learning the precious way of life under God, in relationship with Jesus Christ and dependent upon the Holy Spirit. The catechism has been experienced so often as a threat and a powerful tool over people that it is no longer deeply loved. Yet, the catechism can be something more as we find ways to engage its wisdom faithfully. The catechism provides scope for what can be an overwhelming task of living life as a disciple in the twenty-first century. My desire is that families love the catechism and cherish it for the blessing it provides in our lives, offering a simple introduction to the Christian faith and life in Jesus Christ. I pray we might continue to foster a renewal of Luther’s intention for the catechism’s use in the family. ☩

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¹³Ibid., 44.

¹⁴Laurel Kiser, et al, “Family Ritual and Routine: Comparison of Clinical and Non-Clinical Families,” *Journal of Child & Family Studies* 13/3 (September 2005) 367–368.