



Care for Creation in Luther's Catechisms

MARTIN J. LOHRMANN

Martin Luther valued environmental stewardship, critiqued the misuse of natural resources, and promoted the holistic wellbeing of creation and communities. These concerns appear clearly in the *Large Catechism* and the *Small Catechism*, both of which were first published in 1529. In addition to specific ecological concerns that appear in the catechisms, Luther commended God-given activities like preaching, education, public service, and daily vocations as resources to equip all believers in their faith-filled efforts to share God's love for creation. The Lutheran understanding of the proper distinction between law and gospel further informs how contemporary Christians can both be honest about the ways that sin impacts creation and how the gospel positively reshapes our relationships with God, the earth, and each other.

In his catechisms (Small and Large), Martin Luther links God's gracious care of humanity and all creation with the subsequent teaching that it is our human obligation to further this care of creation, so that all people and all creation can enjoy these God-given gifts. These obligations to care for creation are both law and gospel for the believer.

LUTHER ON THE FIRST ARTICLE OF THE APOSTLES CREED

In his explanation of the first article of the Apostles Creed in the *Small Catechism*, Luther emphasized that God provides abundantly for life on earth. God's creative work takes place both on a universal, cosmic level and in the uniqueness of individual lives.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, CREATOR of heaven and earth.

What is this?

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.

In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. All this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.¹

Already in Luther's restatement of the first sentence of the creed, the capitalization of the word CREATOR connects God the Father with the unspeakable I AM WHO I AM who met Moses at the burning bush.² Instead of describing a hands-off creator who is distant from our lives in both time and space, the *Small Catechism* presents God the Father as having made this world at its beginning and as continuing to play an active role in the wellbeing of creation in the present.³

¹ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354.

² Exodus 3:14. On Luther's use of capitalization, see Gordon A. Jensen, *Experiencing Gospel: The History and Creativity of Martin Luther's 1534 Bible Project* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 77–80.

³ On Luther's understanding of God as Father, see Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "Luther's Theological Anthropology and View of Women's Roles," in *Women Reformers of*

The Lutheran teaching of justification by grace alone through faith alone also appears in this explanation, as creation was made purely out of “divine goodness and mercy” apart from any worthiness within creation itself. Truly, life is grace. Luther thus strongly asserted the past, present, and future goodness of God’s creation as such. This goodness endures apart from problems of sin, corruption, or entropy.

The second-generation of Lutheran reformers affirmed this positive appreciation of God’s handiwork in article one of the *Formula of Concord*, citing both the *Large* and *Small Catechism* on this point. After citing several biblical passages about the enduring goodness of creation, the *Formula of Concord* states, “These verses testify clearly that even after the fall God is the creator of human beings and fashions the human body and soul.”⁴ This view stands in contrast to theological perspectives that might devalue ongoing importance of environmental stewardship because of its fallen condition.

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Luther also held an expansive care for creation that recognizes necessities and resources of daily life, such as bodies, possessions, and relationships. The catechism’s move from the universal to the particular further emphasizes the mutuality and interconnectedness of creation: every self is both blessedly unique and connected to “all that exists.”

Another important insight from Luther’s explanation of the first article is that “reason and all mental faculties” are created gifts of God. Although Luther rejected the role of reason or the free will in justification, he believed that God gave us minds to use for praise and service,

Early Modern Europe: Profiles, Texts, and Contexts ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 269–280.

⁴ BC, 538.

including service to neighbors, as taught in the Ten Commandments that precede the Apostles Creed in the *Small Catechism*. Lutherans can continue to live into this affirmation of human reason through respect for the natural sciences and intellectually responsible deliberation in public matters.

LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE FIRST ARTICLE

The *Large Catechism* expands upon these insights by connecting faith in God as a good creator with the recognition of human failure to live into this trust. In this way, Luther showed how “law and gospel” work in the same article to reveal human sin and to turn believers back to the Lord in their hearts and actions.

Hence, because everything we possess, and everything in heaven and on earth besides, is daily given, sustained, and protected by God, it inevitably follows that we are in duty bound to love, praise, and thank God without ceasing, and, in short to devote all these things to God’s service, as the Lord has required and enjoined in the Ten Commandments.

Here much could be said if we were to describe how few people believe this article. We all pass over it; we hear it and recite it, but we neither see nor think about what the words command us to do. For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served....

Therefore this article should humble and terrify all of us... Yet Christians have this advantage, that they acknowledge that they owe it to God to serve and obey God for all these things.⁵

This article exposes collective and individual failures to trust God and believe that God really is the creator of all. Sin leads people to credit themselves for their being, possessions, and accomplishments

⁵ BC, 433.

in violation of the first commandment's requirement to look to God for all life and goodness.⁶ Sin also causes people to see creation as something that belongs to us rather than to God. The theological use of the law therefore reveals that dishonoring creation is a form of dishonoring God, a confession of sin which then invites a change in behavior rooted in faith in God.

In such humility, repentance, and faith, Luther described caring for others and for creation as a way to live into the forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal that God has first given us. Making explicit the *Small Catechism's* implied connection between honoring God and serving neighbors, Luther identified the gracious "advantage" that believers have of recognizing the truth of our place in creation and being empowered to act differently through faith. This stands in contrast to either viewing ourselves as our own creators or feeling stuck in despair about not doing enough. In that positive sense of knowing that we are beloved people in a good creation, environmental stewardship is a gospel response that comes freely from the grace and love first given freely by the creator.

DAILY BREAD AND CARE FOR CREATION

Luther's explanation of "daily bread" in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer addresses care for creation in ways that are at once theologically profound and socially transformative. The *Small Catechism* teaches:

Give us today our daily bread.

What is this? Answer:

In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving.

What then does "daily bread" mean? Answer:

⁶ See Luther's description of what it means to have a God, *BC*, 386.

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful ruler, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.⁷

This holistic definition of “daily bread” as all we need for daily life includes physical sustenance, interpersonal relationships, functioning political systems, and the well-being of creation. In a time when the earth’s climate is changing because of human actions, Luther’s phrase “good weather” is not only a matter of naturally occurring forces but a direct point of stewardship and accountability.

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther broadened the role of the environment in this petition by saying that this prayer for daily bread includes “not just the oven or the flour bin, but also the broad fields and the whole land that produce and provide our daily bread and all kinds of sustenance for us.”⁸ Recognizing that daily bread comes from abundance of the earth, he treasured the variety of natural and social processes that bring food to real stomachs.

The publicly transformative aspect of this petition then appears, as Luther noted the essential role that political systems play in people receiving food and other necessities for daily life. For Luther, this prayer for daily bread:

Pertains to the regulation of both our domestic and our civil or political affairs. For where these two spheres are interfered with and prevented from functioning as they should, there the necessities of life are also interfered with, and life itself cannot be maintained for any length of time. Indeed, the greatest need of all is to pray for the civil authorities and the government, for it is chiefly through them that God provides us daily bread and all the comforts of this life...

It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread

⁷ BC, 357.

⁸ BC, 450.

instead of a lion or a wreath of rue, or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins, in order to remind both princes and subjects that it is through the princes' office that we enjoy protection and peace and that without them we could neither eat nor preserve the precious gift of bread.⁹

Luther thus presented effective social, economic, and political systems as ways that God's blessing of daily bread get fulfilled. Good government helps fulfill this holy prayer. Rather than blessing the status quo within a given dominant society, Luther reoriented social values in such a way that the reception of daily bread among a people becomes the measure by which to evaluate the health of human communities.

Furthermore, Luther affirmed how vocations that support people receiving "daily bread" are also helping answer this prayer for neighbors. People who grow, transport, prepare, sell, and serve food are included in this prayer. Public servants who support scientific teaching, clean environmental policies, fair weights and measures, and social stability are helping their neighbors receive daily bread. People in homes and businesses that make it possible for people to buy, cook, and provide food for their families belong to God's blessings of daily bread. Luther's words about "daily bread," therefore, invite us to view our various roles and vocations in daily life as places where care for creation happens regularly and matters immensely, a vital connecting point between the spiritual and physical sides of human existence.

In addition to praying *for* physical sustenance, Luther also pointed out how this petition prays *against* all that would get in the way of receiving daily bread, especially our spiritual adversary, the devil.

But especially is this petition directed against our chief enemy, the devil, whose whole purpose and desire it is to take away or interfere with all we have received from God. He is not satisfied to obstruct and overthrow the spiritual order, by deceiving souls with his lies and bringing them under his power, but he also prevents and impedes the

⁹ BC, 450. For more on Luther's connection between daily bread and functional political structures, see Kellie Lisi and Martin J. Lohrmann, *Food Theology: Nourishing Faith in Local Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2025), chapter 4.

establishment of any kind of government or honorable and peaceful relations on earth. This is why he causes so much contention, murder, sedition, and war, why he sends storms and hail to destroy crops and cattle, why he poisons the air, etc.¹⁰

In this passage, Luther identified environmental degradation with the work of Satan, who disrupts earthly relationships, damages food systems, and “poisons the air.”

This emphasis on the devil's activity in daily affairs differs from many contemporary post-Enlightenment perspectives of science and the supernatural. Even so, there is something powerful and right about denouncing the greed, violence, and harm that negatively impact the world. Such forces are more powerful than our good intentions and best efforts. Instead of making people feel powerless, however, radical honesty about the challenges we face and our inability to overcome them sends us to God in prayer, as we ask the Lord of Life to thwart such harmful powers and support creation's thriving.

LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE FOURTH PETITION

As a word of law, this prayer (and Luther's explanations) directly speaks against practices that we all participate in which harm creation. It confronts the personal, political, social and economic ways that sin prevents people from receiving what they need for daily life.

Just as the Lutheran dialectic of law and gospel was present in Luther's explanation of the First Petition of the Apostles Creed, the prayer for “daily bread” includes both clarity about sin and a powerful claiming of God's goodness, grace, and love. As a word of law, this prayer (and Luther's explanations) directly speaks against practices that we all participate in which harm creation. It confronts the personal, political, social and economic ways that sin prevents people

¹⁰ BC, 451.

from receiving what they need for daily life. Greed, unsustainable uses of the land, and unjust or dysfunctional socio-political systems do not match God's good will for creation but rather identify the power of sin in and among us. Once again, the *Small Catechism* has pointed out our need for large-scale confession and forgiveness.

Instead of leaving us to suffer in such brokenness, however, Jesus has invited us through this prayer to call upon God for what we really need one day at a time and to care that others are also receiving physical nourishment. This petition, therefore, lets God be God, from whom alone comes life and all goodness. It also then affirms the beauty and blessedness of caring for one another through daily vocations, restoring us to right relationship as we participate in daily activities that support a healthy environment and the thriving of our communities. "Daily bread" is truly a taste of gospel promise and restoration.

CARING FOR NEIGHBORS THROUGHOUT LUTHER'S CATECHISMS

Additional support for Luther's strong statements about environmental stewardship appears throughout Luther's catechisms, especially in the ways that Luther connects faith in God with works of love for those around us. For instance, in his explanation of the fifth commandment ("You shall not murder"), Luther described a thoroughly holistic concern for the wellbeing of our neighbors. "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs."¹¹ This certainly includes policies and practices that promote safe living conditions like clean air and drinking water, regulation of toxins, public health, employment opportunities, and access to the kinds of basic necessities listed in the prayer for daily bread.

The inclusion of the word "fear" in Luther's explanation to the commandments is another sign of the "law and gospel" dialectic at work in the catechisms. To set ourselves up as worthy to decide which of our neighbors deserves to live or die, to thrive or suffer, is not only a violation of the fifth commandment but of the fifth. Judging others in that way means setting ourselves up as judges of creation and not fearing God's righteous judgments. Indeed, for those who might

¹¹ BC, 352.

be tempted to act as if this command does not apply equally to all people or contexts, we might recall the question posed to Jesus by a lawyer: "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29). Jesus responded with the parable of the good Samaritan, expanding the definition of neighbor and upending notions that neighbors are limited to those who belong to self-identified in-groups.

Luther's *Large Catechism* uses this broad definition of neighbor, as Luther wrote, "Therefore it is God's real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directly especially toward our enemies. For doing good to our friends is nothing but an ordinary virtue of pagans, as Christ says in Matthew 5[:46–47]." ¹² Luther's words challenge "not in my backyard" approaches to local policymaking and community development. In light of the harms caused by environmental racism and the disproportionate impact of climate change on poorer nations, Luther's catechisms identify such self-interest as being a violation of this commandment. Indeed, confronted with the failure to care for those in need, Luther asked rhetorically, "How would I appear before all the world except as a murderer and a scoundrel?" ¹³

In contrast, Luther then viewed caring for those around us as a gospel opportunity to fill one's life with the true good works that come from faith in God. "Once again we have God's Word by which he wants to encourage and urge us to true, noble, exalted deeds, such as gentleness, patience, and in short, love and kindness toward our enemies. He always wants to remind us to recall the First Commandment, that he is our God; that is, that he wishes to help, comfort, and protect us, so that he may restrain our desire for revenge." ¹⁴ Such neighborly concern transforms "the ordinary Christian life" into a holy calling of service and mutual blessing, rooted in the self-giving cross of Christ. ¹⁵

Here one sees the Lutheran insistence that good works follow faith in Christ. As the Augsburg Confession states, "Faith alone always takes hold of grace and forgiveness of sin. Because the Holy Spirit is given through faith, the heart is also moved to do good works.

¹² BC, 412.

¹³ BC, 412.

¹⁴ BC, 413.

¹⁵ BC, 413.

For before, because it lacks the Holy Spirit, the heart is too weak.”¹⁶ This connection between faith and good works allowed Luther and his colleagues both to teach justification by faith alone—apart from works—and to promote good works, avoiding an antinomianism that would suggest that human behavior or God’s will as expressed in the Ten Commandments no longer matter.

The first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer similarly connect faith in God with acts of love and service. On the petition “hallowed be your name,” for instance, Luther wrote that God’s name is made holy among us, “Whenever the Word of God is taught clearly and purely and we, as God’s children, also live holy lives according to it.”¹⁷ The faith that arises when God’s name is honored through the pure teaching of God’s Word bears fruit through “holy lives.” As readers of Luther’s catechisms learn throughout its pages, holy lives are not marked by self-righteous striving but by down-to-earth acts of service that grow from the love and grace that God has first shown to us.

The Large Catechism’s explanation of the third petition—“your will be done, on earth as in heaven”—connects God’s gracious will for creation with our own prayer to endure in pursuing God’s goodness in the face of manifold obstacles. This endurance is necessary, “For where God’s Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind.”¹⁸ With a view of the human condition that expects opposition to God’s kingdom to increase when the gospel is being shared and experienced, Luther paraphrased this petition by saying,

Therefore, there is just as much need here as in every other case to ask without ceasing, ‘Dear Father, your will be done and not the will of the devil or of our enemies, nor of those who would persecute and suppress your holy Word or prevent your kingdom from coming; and grant that we may bear patiently and overcome whatever we must suffer on its

¹⁶ BC, 56.

¹⁷ BC, 356. Similarly, commenting on the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Luther described how God’s kingdom comes through faith in the Word and lives of loving service: “Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we believe his Holy Word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity,” BC, 357.

¹⁸ BC, 448.

account, so that our poor flesh may not yield or fall away through weakness or sloth.¹⁹

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While we have already seen the “law and gospel” dynamic at work in various parts of Luther’s catechisms, the specific practice of confession and absolution is an additional catechetical resource in the daily journey of following Jesus Christ. Rooted in the daily dying and rising with Christ that is the life of the baptized,²⁰ Luther viewed confession and absolution as a blessed opportunity to reflect honestly about sin and brokenness in light of the Ten Commandments, to ask God for forgiveness and reconciliation, and to “go in peace,” confident of the Holy Spirit’s persistent guidance and strength.²¹ As a practice of environmental stewardship, confession and forgiveness centers us in the cleansing waters of baptism for the sake of clean habitats today.

CONCLUSION

Luther’s catechisms directly support care for creation in many inspiring and relevant ways. First, through gratitude for God’s good providing, people are moved to thank God for the abundance of this world. Having been justified freely by grace through faith in Christ, believers get to participate in God’s self-giving love through service to others, which includes care for healthy environments, socio-political

¹⁹ BC, 449.

²⁰ BC, 360.

²¹ BC, 360–362.

systems, and personal relationships of mutual concern. Confidence in God's loving care for creation invites Christians to pray for strength to overcome the challenges that inevitably come while following Christ in lives of service.

For centuries, Luther's catechisms have prepared people to meet the challenges of their times by sharing the power of Christ's gospel given abundantly through the Word, faith, prayer, and the means of grace. As Luther wrote at the end of his suggested pattern for *The Morning Blessings*, believers start their day by trusting themselves to God in prayer and then "go to your work joyfully."²² In our generation, environmental stewardship is challenging but essential work that each of us can courageously engage through the faith in God and love of neighbor that Luther's catechisms teach from beginning to end. ⊕

Martin J. Lohrmann is Associate Professor of Lutheran Confessions and Heritage at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. Among other works, he is the author of Book of Harmony: Spirit and Service in the Lutheran Confessions, Stories from Global Lutheranism: A Historical Timeline, and (with Kellie Lisi) Food Theology: Nourishing Faith in Local Communities.

²² BC, 363.