

With the Same Heart

An overview of the Book of Concord

Session 8 - The Small and Large
Catechisms



Warm up question

If you were confirmed Lutheran, what was that experience like for you?



What misery!

Luther's Small and Large Catechisms were written out of a place of frustration. In 1528, Luther went out to visit the congregations of Saxony in order to understand their spiritual health. He later wrote to a friend, "Mercy! Dear God, what misery I beheld!" Needless to say, Luther was very unhappy with the state of spiritual health in Saxony during his day.

He additionally wrote in the Introduction to the Small Catechism, "The common person, especially in the villages, has no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine. And unfortunately, many pastors are completely unable and unqualified to teach... Yet, everyone says they are Christians, have been baptized, and receive the holy Sacraments, even though they cannot even recite the Lord's Prayer or the Creed or the Ten Commandments. They live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs... O bishops! What answer will you ever give to Christ for having so shamefully neglected the people and never for a moment fulfilled your office?"

- *Question:*
- *What would Luther be frustrated with today if he visited churches in our area?*



A Revised Sermon Series

Thankfully, back in 1516, Luther had already started preaching on the basics of the Christian faith with a series on the 10 Commandments. He followed this up the next year with a series on the Lord's Prayer. These sermons he then had turned into a document with the Creed that he had published for the sake of his parishioners.

Now, over 10 years later, he saw the necessity to dust off his old sermon notes again and rewrite them with additions as catechisms. He tested his new material by preaching catechetical sermons in May, September, and December of 1528. In April of 1529, he published the Large Catechism, following the next month with the shorter Small Catechism. Each of the catechism used the same outline of six chief parts: 10 Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Confession, Lord's Supper.

- *Question:*
- *Why do you think Luther chose these 6 items? Which would you substitute out? What would you sub in?*



The Genre of Catechisms

In writing a catechism, Luther was not doing something new. Rather, Luther was using a well known genre and hoping to improve upon it. The Didache, a Christian writing from the 1st century was the first catechetical writing. A catechism is a document that seeks to teach the basics of Christian faith, explaining Scriptural items.

The word “catechism” itself has at its root, the word for “echo,” and the teachings of a catechism were often drilled in back and forth quizzes between teachers and students with a question and answer format.

Catechisms existed before Luther, but they were often local publications or even just letters that were used as teaching aides. Luther certainly popularized the format as protestants of all sorts (and Roman Catholics too!) took on the format after Luther’s catechisms.

- *Question:*
- *What do you think made Luther’s catechisms so popular?*



Audiences

The first (Large) Catechism was written like a book of sermons or sermon instruction. This makes sense knowing how Luther wrote his catechism. Its audience was preachers and the heads of household. These two groups of men were to study deeply in order that they might teach the Small Catechism. It was essentially a “teacher’s guide”. He did not initially title this work as a “catechism” because it didn’t fit the genre’s “question and answer” format.

The second (Small) Catechism was written in the question and answer format and was meant to spark discussion between the teacher (normally the head of household) and the student.

- *Question:*
- *Thinking about the “head of household” today, what would you include in the Large Catechism?*



Explanations

As early as the beginning of the 1600's, copies of Luther's Small Catechism with further explanatory material could be found circulating in Germany. The first of these was written by a Lutheran pastor named Johan Konrad Dietrich. Dietrich's explanations were apparently very helpful to a very young pastor named CFW Walther who would go on to be the first president of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

For this reason, essentially every individually published LCMS catechism has appeared with explanatory material. The current catechism lists just over 400 additional explanations (written in the catechetical genre's question and answer format) all following Luther's original format. Explanations tend to undergo regular revisions, the latest having been published in 2017, the one before that in 1991, and the one before that in 1986, with a long gap between that one and the 1943 edition.

These explanations are always considered to be additional material and are not included in copies of the Book of Concord.

- *Question:*
- *What is the purpose of a catechism? How do explanations of this sort help further or deter that purpose?*



Why in the Book of Concord?

The Book of Concord was completely assembled as such in 1580, partially in response to growing questions about what documents outside of the Augsburg Confession and Apology formed the canon of Lutheran theology. The theologians who assembled and edited that volume, Jakob Andrae and Martin Chemnitz, chose to include Luther's Large and Small catechisms as a part of the Book of Concord despite these documents being different. The catechisms are largely teaching tools, not polemics against the Roman Catholic church's theology like most of the other items in the Book of Concord.

Question:

What do you think? Would you include the catechisms in the BoC? Why or why not?



Next Time - The Formula of Concord

Next week we hope to finish our tour of the Book of Concord with the Formula of Concord.

