

by heart

Conversations with
Martin Luther's Small Catechism

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Introduction

For all the variations later generations made to Martin Luther's Small Catechism, the core texts always included the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, and Lord's Prayer. Along with the chief parts that were often found in late medieval catechisms, Luther also provided explanations of the sacraments, a table of scripture passages for the household (showing biblical warrants for various vocations), prayers, and liturgical orders for baptisms and weddings. Each of these builds on what Luther lays out as the foundations of faith. This book, *By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, regards Luther's words as already being so clear and profound that nothing more need be added. But understanding the theology and history behind the words can be helpful. Knowing how the Small Catechism reflects Luther's own life and thought can open up its proclamation of the gospel so that you can see how it seeks to surround your own life with the same freeing word.

Every section of the Small Catechism has the same goal at its core: getting God's work in Christ to penetrate deep inside your heart. As you will see in the story of how the Small Catechism came to be, Luther saw firsthand how far removed the gospel was from his people's experience. So he set about crafting a proclamation of that word by which the Holy Spirit would create faith in sixteenth-century readers, in believers since 1529, and in you. Luther's explanations of the articles of



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder as he appeared at the time he wrote the Small Catechism in 1529.

the Apostles' Creed all begin with "I believe" and end with a declaration of that faith: "This is most certainly true." He compares the Lord's Prayer to our coming to God like children who trust a loving parent. In his explanations of baptism and the sacrament of the altar, he tells us that the sacraments give gifts that enable faith to happen and strengthen that faith. Faith shows up in Luther's explanation of the first commandment: "We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things." Faith hovers all through his explanations as we learn and take the catechism to heart. Faith is the hinge that moves us all from sin and unfaith to faith and righteousness as God's word creates a clean heart and right spirit within us. This is the center of what we could call the catechism's "by-heartedness."

Behind the Small Catechism lies Luther's own experience. He knew what it was to move daily from sin to faith, from fear to love of God, from life under the law to true freedom in Christ. Many of the great theologians of prior centuries created vast theological systems. They often used the logic and tools of ancient philosophy to come to some conclusions about theology. In his massive work *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas tried to answer every possible question connected to faith, God, and the Bible. At the same time, many medieval writers were also producing catechisms and prayer books to help the faithful. Luther took the situation of his people to heart and avoided complicated systems or simple explanations aimed at increasing a believer's meritorious works. More than most, he knew that faith doesn't happen as a result of finely wrought systems addressed to hypothetical people. Faith is given "by heart" when God's word comes to real people.

Luther's good friend Lucas Cranach had arrived in Wittenberg several years before Luther took up his post at the university. Cranach was the court artist to Frederick the Wise. Not only was he a fine producer of paintings, but he was on occasion the town mayor and owned an apothecary shop. Cranach's workshop was just off the Wittenberg town square, where he employed a full complement of workers. Cranach's staff learned the master's style and often carried out the carving and engraving of woodcuts and etchings for use as illustrations (including those in the first editions of the catechism) in the publishing industry, which had slowly developed since Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1398–1468) perfected movable type in the 1450s. When the pages of the catechism were pulled from the local printing presses and the ink dried, Luther handed over more than those individual sheets on which the various



Self-portrait of Lucas Cranach the Elder from 1550.



1

The Story of the Small Catechism

Introduction

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Martin Luther might have been thinking something along those lines when he looked back on the year 1529, the year he wrote the Small Catechism. Luther certainly lived in interesting times—thanks, in part, to Luther. It was a time of rediscovery of God’s unconditional mercy and the old ways of human merit; it was an age of excitement about the gospel and complete ignorance of the basics of Christianity. And Martin Luther was in the middle of it all.

Thanks to Luther’s writings and teachings, the Bible was being interpreted in a new way, inspiring many to faith in Jesus. More and more pastors were being trained by Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg and influenced by their writings. These pastors held pastoral calls to congregations throughout Germany and beyond. The reform of the church was happening, really happening! The best of times!

At the same time, Luther had been informed—and eventually found out for himself—that a large portion of Germany’s churchgoers had very little idea of the essential teachings of Christianity. They knew almost nothing about the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Ten Commandments, not to mention the rest of the Bible. The everyday Christian didn’t know squat. The worst of times!

In a way, the story of the Small Catechism is a tale of two situations. The first situation had to do with the need to get the reforming churches on the same page, doctrinally speaking. The second situation had to do

Sunday is a big deal because it marks the end of your time in the catechumenate, the conclusion of three years of intense learning! Here is how the *Apostolic Tradition* describes it:

The ones who are to be baptized shall fast on Friday. On Saturday, the bishop will assemble them and command them to kneel in prayer. Laying hands upon them, the bishop shall exorcise all evil spirits, making them flee away and never to return. Then the bishop will blow breath in their faces, seal their foreheads, ears, and noses [with the sign of the cross], and then raise them up. Next, they will spend that night in vigil, listening to reading and instruction. . . . At sunrise [on Easter morning] prayers will be said over the water. If there is plenty of water, let it stream through the baptismal basin or be poured into it from above. If water is scarce, then use whatever water you can find. The ones being baptized will remove their clothing. The young children will be baptized first. If they can answer for themselves, let them. If they cannot, let their parents or other relatives answer for them. Then baptize the men. Next, the women. Let them loosen their hair and put aside any jewelry that they were wearing. Don't let anyone take anything with them into the water.²

All of this was just the beginning of the baptismal rite. Prayers, scripture readings, and professions of faith would follow. Questions were posed and exhortations were made. Oil was used for anointing, the laying on of hands was used to bless and to bestow the Holy Spirit. And at the heart of it was the joining of the catechumens to the death and resurrection of Jesus, through the water, in



Baptisms at twenty-first-century Easter Vigils.



St. Augustine Baptizes the Catechumens by Girolama Genga, c. 1516.

2. *Apostolic Tradition*, sec. 21, author's translation, based on that of Burton Scott Easton in *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, ed. and trans. Burton Scott Easton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 44–45.



The need for acquisition doesn't stop when the hall closet, four bedrooms, and garage are full.

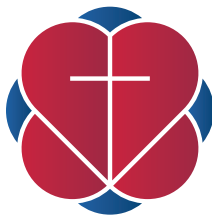
the garden to the first man and woman and requires them to care for it and use its fruits. Once in rebellion against God, humans continued using our opposable thumbs to grasp tools to work and grab whatever items could be pulled in to provide safety and security. The stuff around us and the means of getting it serve as a way of promoting and preserving life. The problem is that the need for acquisition doesn't stop when the hall closet, four bedrooms, and three-car garage are full. There's always more waiting to be had. For sinners, the business of getting and trading becomes a zero-sum game: the more someone else has, the less that's available for you.

Luther's explanation of the seventh commandment reveals his awareness of our life in two realms. In the heavenly realm where Christ is the only currency needed, there will be no trading or buying, because Christ is all in all. But in the realm of this world, we have to have stuff: shelter to protect us from the elements, clothes and shoes, the tools of our trade, cookware and utensils, and even something as intangible yet vital as an education. The commandment protects our goods and protects others from our desire to get their things in the easiest way possible, stealing. To steal is to take others' property without giving them a just and fair return on their goods. Luther gave a solid list of how we do it in his explanation. His economic objection to the sale of indulgences was that someone like the indulgence preacher Johann Tetzel sold something that purported to provide release from God's punishment but was a theological sham that provided the buyer nothing. It was no different from the practice of usury he regularly decried. Charging interest for lending someone money not only created an untrusting relationship between the parties, but also turned the lender into a parasite seeking something for nothing.

Luther's comments on the seventh commandment in the Large Catechism touch on this broader application: "In short, thievery is the most common craft and the largest guild on earth. If we look at the whole world in all its situations, it is nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves. This is why these people are also called armchair bandits [a nickname for usurers] and highway robbers. Far from being picklocks and sneak thieves who pilfer the cash box, they sit in their chairs and are known as great lords and honorable, upstanding citizens, while they rob and steal under the cloak of legality" (Ten Commandments, par. 228–29 [BC 417]).



Sign from Day 21 of Occupy Wall Street, October 6, 2011.



4

The Lord's Prayer

Praying in Luther's Time

The Ten Commandments tell us how we are to live in relation to God and our fellow humans. The Apostles' Creed confesses God's actions in creating, redeeming, and making us holy. But, as Luther writes in the Large Catechism, "we are in such a situation that no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, even though he or she has begun to believe."¹ Now we learn how to talk with this God—and we learn to know God as the God who hears prayer.

Luther placed the Lord's Prayer third in his catechism. After hearing the words that God speaks to us, words of command and promise, words that tell us how God wants us to live and what God does for us, we are now offered the opportunity to respond. We might even say we are encouraged to "talk back" to God. Our words come in response to God's words to us. The catechism reflects the idea that God is in conversation with us, speaking to us and wanting to hear from us. Have you ever thought of the Christian faith as a conversation? Have you ever considered that God urgently wants to hear from you, especially in your need? So urgently that God commands you to pray? Have you ever realized that God's desire for relationship with you

Medieval catechisms often used the ordering of Creed, Lord's Prayer, Ten Commandments. In this way of thinking, the Creed represented "mere faith" (a knowledge of facts) that was insufficient for salvation. Such faith needed to be formed by works of love into saving faith. The Lord's Prayer became a way for people to ask for help in this process. Luther rejected this whole approach. He believed that faith—not simply a knowledge of facts but rather trust in God's saving work in Jesus Christ—was sufficient for salvation.

1. Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, par. 2 (BC 440).

Where is this written?

- ♥ St. Paul says in Romans 6, “We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”²⁵

When explaining the meaning of baptism, Luther applies his doctrine of justification. First, because sin curves us selfishly in on ourselves and away from God, every single one of us needs to be reborn, receiving a new heart that loves God and our neighbor. Second, this rebirth is possible because of Christ’s death, resurrection, and promise “for” us. This rebirth—even if it is mostly invisible in its fullness during this life—is generated “for real.” Quoting Paul in his letter to the Romans, Luther names baptism as the moment when your old self actually dies with Christ and a new self rises with Christ. In this dying and rising you are transformed by God’s grace-filled water and God’s word. The change is simultaneously complete



Fourth-century gravestone depicting a girl’s baptism.

In the Large Catechism, Luther reflects more deeply on this aspect of baptism. “These two parts, being dipped under the water and emerging from it, point to the power and effect of baptism, which is nothing else than the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new creature, both of which must continue in us our whole life long. Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth” (Baptism, par. 65 [BC 465]).



Infant baptism by immersion.



Adult baptism by immersion in York, England.

25. Romans 6:1-4.

Small matters of great significance

We modern folk are inheritors of many customs and traditions, the origins of which we may barely recognize. A simple disagreement between Eastern and Western Christians about whether the eucharistic bread should be leavened like normal bread (the Eastern Orthodox view) or unleavened like the bread of Passover (the Western Catholic view) led to firm patterns of variance. Many of our churches today still use flat, round, unleavened wafers, which we call “hosts” or communion bread. These developed in the West as a way to make holy communion simpler, more distinctive, and more beautiful—the smooth, round perfection of a wafer seemed preferable to the crumbly, uneven torn hunks of ordinary bread. And wafers kept better from one service to another, as the custom of reserving the leftover bread for later use developed over time.

What kind of bread we use may seem trivial now but was very important once, since Lutherans were for centuries part of the Western, Roman church. It was important again specifically to Lutherans in the first centuries after the Reformation—because using wafers for communion was a way of distinguishing essentially conservative Lutherans from Calvinists and other, more radical Protestants who denied or questioned Christ’s real presence. Those Christians wanted to renormalize the eucharist back into more of a communal meal, which they believed called for normal, everyday bread and not the special white wafers—among many other simplifications then opposed by Lutherans.

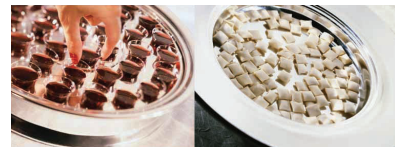
Particularly in the Western, Roman church that was the spiritual home of Martin Luther, very complex ideas developed about how the sacramental bread and wine should be handled. These came through an intensification of the idea of Jesus being physically, materially present in the bread and wine—and particularly in the bread, as the more lasting, tangible element. Wine was by its nature harder to objectify, and tended to be entirely consumed during the ritual—eventually becoming reserved to the priest only; the unleavened bread of the eucharist could be kept for later use, and in its “keeping” took on a sacredness of its own apart from the actual worship service in which it had been blessed.



Greek Orthodox communion table.



Roman Catholic Mass being celebrated in Nazareth.



Wine served in individual cups and communion bread.



Elements in one ELCA congregation.

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