

by heart

Conversations with
Martin Luther's
Small Catechism

Sampler

A new Small Catechism course
available this August

R. Guy Erwin

Mary Jane Haemig

Ken Sundet Jones

Martin J. Lohrmann

Derek R. Nelson

Kirsi I. Stjerna

Timothy J. Wengert

Hans Wiersma

Engage your congregation in an in-depth study of Martin Luther's Small Catechism this fall

Dear partners in ministry,

We are pleased to introduce to you a new adult study on Luther's Small Catechism. **By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism** is an in-depth exploration of this treasured summary of the Christian faith, designed for group discussion and for personal enrichment.

We couldn't agree more with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton when she says, "Studying the Small Catechism together will give us a common language with which to talk about faith, engage scripture, and make sense of our lives in the 21st century."

The course centerpiece is a richly illustrated book that will delight and inform adult readers. The book is complemented by a facilitator guide and short, interest-piquing videos to jump-start discussion.

What you will see in this sampler is an actual excerpt from the book chapter that explores the Ten Commandments, related session material from the facilitator guide, and other highlights about the course.

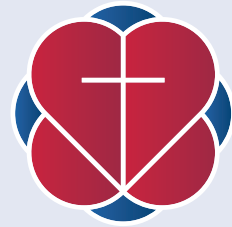
By Heart combines the reliable Lutheran grounding you expect from Augsburg Fortress with creative Sparkhouse curriculum design. Contributions from top-shelf Fortress Press authors enhance the mix. We've brought the best of each of our publishing units to bear on this important initiative to support Lutheran faith communities in your mission, as together we seek to propel a continuing reformation in this Reformation anniversary year and for years to come.

For those in your communities who are about to be introduced to the Small Catechism, and for those who know it well already, we hope the Spirit will use this course to ignite—and reignite—in them the irrepressible spark generated still today by Luther's poetic and resonant words.

Together with you by grace,

Beth A. Lewis

President and CEO, Augsburg Fortress Publishers
Augsburg Fortress | Fortress Press | Sparkhouse



by heart

Sampler Contents

- 3 By Heart: Course Introduction
- 6 By Heart: Facilitator Guide Sample
- 10 By Heart: Book Sample
- 21 By Heart: Course DVD Preview
- 22 Reformation 500: Additional Resources

Ordering
information
on page 9

Together
by **Grace** 

By Heart Course Introduction

By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism

Purpose of This Course

Like the Small Catechism itself, this course aims to create faith. It is for adults who have never encountered the Small Catechism, and it is for adults who studied and memorized it as adolescents or teens. It is for those who assume that the original document requires no further explication and that we should simply pick it up and start reading (or memorizing). It is also for those who find scripture to be an inaccessible forest of words, the Creed and Lord's Prayer to be rote exercise, the sacraments to be obscure rituals, and Martin Luther and his innovations to be largely irrelevant.

For those who are about to be introduced to the Small Catechism, and for those who know it well already, we hope the Spirit will use this course to ignite—and reignite—in them the irrepressible spark that Luther's poetic and resonant words uniquely do still today.

So, the purpose of this course is to create space, at least, for conversations with Luther's Small Catechism. Your job as a group facilitator is not to master the content as a body of information, or to drive your group to do so, but simply to help make introductions between your group and the delightful and freeing revelations waiting to be discovered within its pages.

Suggested Session Sequence

Each session is built on the following sequence, which has a certain pedagogical logic to it but need not be strictly adhered to.

1. **Recite** together the relevant section of the Small Catechism, the one you'll be dealing with that session.
2. **Watch** the video.
3. **Engage** in discussion (facilitated by you and supported by your Facilitator materials).
4. **Recite** next session's section of the Small Catechism as a group.

Simply follow the sequence of instructions in each session's material. During the discussion time, you may wish to use the three sections of questions to help your group zero in on points you find particularly helpful. The discussion section is broken into three parts: *Scripture and Tradition*, *Luther's Explanations*, and *Luther's Story*, always in that order. There are more questions posed in each section than you can cover adequately in an hour, so choose the juiciest ones for your group's needs.

Some Notes on Group Facilitation

Individual adults bring with them fully-formed worldviews, with tons of subjective life experience against which they test the validity and usefulness of new concepts. Assembling these individuals together creates an altogether new dynamic. A few things to keep in mind:

1. The point of this course is *conversations*, which should be allowed to roam quite freely. You will have your own sense of when it has roamed too freely and should be brought back to the subject.
2. The conversations should not become debates over trivia or minutiae that avoid the realm of the personal or of belief. If this happens, you should feel free to pose a question (either from this Facilitator Guide or your own thoughts) that redirects the conversation.
3. On the other hand, some adults access their feelings and beliefs through fixed points, like facts. In other words, they work up to the more difficult task of sharing in public thoughts they normally keep to themselves by extrapolating from “interesting facts.”
4. It can help more reserved participants immensely when the facilitator offers a personal anecdote as an ice-breaker or illustration of a point. Feel free to be as much a participant as you are a facilitator. This course is for you, too.
5. There is no requirement to push through all the discussion questions or to complete anything! A sense of urgency to do so will likely inhibit conversation and diminish the overall experience. Rich conversation is the goal. Relax into it and see where the Spirit leads.

Purposes of Each Course Component

By Heart Book. The centerpiece of the course is the book. It provides you with way more content than you could hope to cover in any given session, which is good because the purpose of the course is not to master information but to engage in productive, meaningful, and useful conversations. The book should serve your group as a starting point and as an engagement point for group discussion. Since adults often wish to engage new material in their own way and at their own pace, the book also serves as a comprehensive treatment of Luther’s Small Catechism as an historical, confessional document.

Video. The videos do not offer a summary of their corresponding chapter in *By Heart* and cannot be used as a substitute. In other words, you can’t just watch the movie to get out of reading the book. They function as introductions of the Small Catechism portion you’ll engage with in conversation during a given session, but they don’t cover it in any way approaching exhaustively; they pique interest to stimulate better conversations.

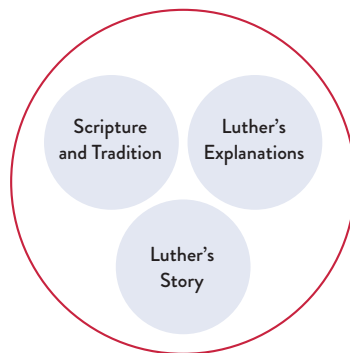
Facilitator Guide. The material in your hands functions as a simple agenda to navigate through the seven sessions as a group. You know your group best. Adjust the agenda as needed based on the interests, questions, and background of group members.

Recitation of the Small Catechism. We’re including this here as a “course component” because of both its pedagogical and spiritual value. The purpose of recitation is to allow the text come to life in the company of the group, to get the words themselves out there in a sensorial way so the group can relate to them directly. Also, the Small Catechism was written to be recited aloud. *Es klingelt!* (It rings!) For those who choose to learn it by heart there is no more effective way than to listen to your own voice as you say the words again and again. While memorization is not a goal of this course, some grasp of the words as recitative will, we hope, produce better conversations.

The Three Focuses in *By Heart*

As a group facilitator, it will be helpful for you to know the content structure of the book and the course. We've built the entire thing around the three kinds of source material that we see as essential to a meaningful experience of Luther's Small Catechism:

- Scripture and tradition. For example, the Ten Commandments as cited in Exodus 20 or the Apostles' Creed as we have it from Christian tradition.
- Luther's explanations of the scripture or doctrine from Christian tradition.
- The "backstory" of Luther's own life and times, the fertile soil of the Reformation itself.



The reason we've taken this approach is because to remove any one of the three would cause the thing to collapse for most people. Without the scripture and our tradition there is no source material; without Luther's explanations of the parts there is no Small Catechism to recite and learn "by heart," and without Luther's own story and the events that gave rise to his insights there is no handle by which to grasp the thing and make it one's own.

"For You" Focus

Though not actually a fourth content focus, there is another feature of this course that needs explaining. You will notice in *By Heart* that the writers address the reader in the second person. This is to keep faith with both the everyday, ground-level language that Luther uses in the explanations *and* to embody the declarative nature of the gospel which he strove to encode in that language. The gospel of Jesus Christ isn't an abstraction offered up for the universe idly to consider. It is a real thing given *for you*. Faith is not a property of some material substance, like a mineral or a magnetic field, something to be mined or constructed or arranged. It is a free gift of God *for you* that cannot be obtained by your own efforts. By adhering to the "for-you-ness" of the gospel in the design of this course we hope to do some justice to Luther's intentions in the Small Catechism.

Recitation Methods

Group recitation is likely familiar to your group from corporate worship, but it's possible the words of the Small Catechism are new, or at least somewhat unfamiliar. There are a few ways to approach making them more familiar.

1. **Read together.** Simply ask everyone to turn to the start of the relevant section and start reading. Read until you reach the end of that section.
2. **Read responsively.** As facilitator, you may wish to recite certain lines and ask your group to respond, in unison, with the following lines. When reciting the Small Catechism section on the Ten Commandments, for example, a call-and-response format might be appropriate and pleasing in which you recite the commandment and the group recites the explanation.
3. **Read in turn.** Ask individuals to read certain portions in sequence, moving around a circle, until the section is completed. This works particularly well in smaller groups where each person can recite multiple lines.

By Heart Facilitator Guide Sample

Session 2: The Ten Commandments

Key Points

Below are key points related to the Small Catechism section on the Ten Commandments. These are covered and supported in the *By Heart* book, and are printed here to help you guide the conversation in your group. We recommend you read through them before you begin and use them as needed as touchpoints for the conversation.

- God uses two kinds of messages, or “words,” *law* and *gospel*, to end the old person and create the new person of faith.
- The explanation to each of the commandments includes the words, “We are to fear and love God, so that. . .” What’s crucial is the space *between* fear and love. That’s where God’s word does its work. The law kills, and the gospel raises up.
- Each commandment includes a *boundary* and a *blessing*. The boundary says no to the old sinner in us, limiting and restricting us from unfaith and ill treatment of our neighbors and the creation. The blessing frees us to engage fully, first with God our creator, and then with the world around us with the fruits of the Spirit.
- The story of Luther’s life as a friar and his theological breakthrough function as a perfect example of how the movement from fear to love of God happens. Luther’s *Anfechtungen* (religious crisis) as a result of the law’s demands made him fertile ground for the planting of the gospel. This is true of you, as well.

Gathering

Welcome participants. Facilitate introductions as needed. Offer a prayer.

Recite

Suggested recitation format: **Read responsively.**

Turn to the appendix, and recite the Ten Commandments with their explanations. As facilitator, you might recite the First Commandment and then ask, “What is this? Or What does this mean?” Then have the group recite, together, the corresponding explanation. Use this call-and-response pattern for each commandment.

Watch

Watch the Ten Commandments video from the *By Heart* DVD.

Engage

Use these three sections of questions to help you prepare for the group discussion. There are more questions posed in each section than you can cover adequately in a single session, so choose a few that seem particularly useful for your group.

Scripture and Tradition

1. Turn to page 4 in the chapter. The first few lines include the following: “God had established a relationship with the Israelites. The Commandments undergirded their relationship with their Creator and with their fellow creatures by providing both boundaries and blessings. If we read further in the story (both in the Bible and in human history), we’ll see that the Commandments didn’t make the Israelites or us more moral or more pious.”

Question: If the Commandments (the law) simply “undergird” our relationships, but don’t move us further up the righteousness ladder, why do we need them?

2. The next paragraph, still on page 4, refers to Galatians 3:6 in which the apostle Paul “remembered that Abraham had trusted God and that God reckoned his belief as righteousness.”

Question: Describe what would happen if, when stopped by the police for speeding, you claimed, “That’s all well and good, officer, but God has already reckoned my faith to me as righteousness even without my obeying the law. You may go back to surveilling those who still strive for righteousness by following the rules and doing good deeds.”

3. Turn to page 8 and read (silently or as a group) the paragraph that begins near the top of the page (“We have only to look . . .”). This passage discusses part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), in which Jesus pushes the demands of the law to their furthest point, leaving his listeners to ask: Who can possibly live this perfect life? That’s where we begin to see the promise of the gospel, the promise of a new, changed life and world.

Question: Many of us struggle with perfection. We might demand it of ourselves or expect it in the lives of our family, friends, or co-workers. And yet, none of us is perfect. How does the “fear” of perfectionism control our lives? How can we better live in the freedom of God’s grace and mercy?

Luther’s Explanations

1. On page 4, find the section “Fear and Love: What the Commandments Are For.” For many people, Luther’s understanding of the Commandments—including how we should interact with and understand them in our daily lives—will be surprising. He presents the Commandments as a vital, living thing. The Commandments are not a way for us to move from sinfulness to morality, but instead a way for *God to move us* from unfaith to faith.

Question: Where in your life do you sense God moving you from unfaith to faith? Does this movement seem to line up with a particular commandment (or commandments)? What do those two terms (*faith* and *unfaith*) mean in our modern lives? Are there better words?

2. In his Large Catechism, Luther says, “Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.” Turn to page 10 and read the paragraph in the middle of the page (“When we think about what we most trust . . .”).

Question: What do you most fear losing? How do you react to Luther saying that the thing you most fear losing is really your God?

3. Luther's explanations of the Second through the Tenth Commandments begin with the words "We are to fear and love God, so that . . ." Take a moment to review what follows "so that" in these explanations (you can find the explanations in the shaded gray boxes throughout the chapter, or in the appendix.

Question: Which "so thats" resonate most with you today? Why?

Luther's Story

1. Turn to page 7 and read the paragraph that begins, "On February 18, 1546, . . ." Luther's oft-quoted words, "We are beggars. This is true" was a theological claim born out of real world experiences with the alms-beggars in Wittenberg. In these two sentences, we have the essentials of our situation before God. We come with empty hands, hoping for mercy.

Question: It is hard to ask for help. It may be even harder to ask for mercy, as "mercy" assumes that we are at fault for previous actions. Tell about a time when you needed mercy from someone, or when you offered mercy to another person. How did the giving or receiving of mercy affect your relationship with the other person?

2. Late-medieval life was no picnic. It required endless toil and back-breaking work within a deeply uncertain world where death lurked around every corner. Luther believed the church added to this pressure by requiring observance of seemingly endless feast days and other religious responsibilities. Your salvation seemed to depend on what you did to earn it. Turn to page 14 and read the second paragraph. ("The result of all the requirements . . .").

Question: From the time we are children, we're told to take responsibility for our actions. As adults, we're praised for being self-starters. Brainstorm a list of ways in which you are responsible. Then brainstorm a list of ways in which you are dependent. Is it possible to be responsible and dependent at the same time?

3. Luther lost his 13-year-old daughter Magdalena, rendering him incapacitated with grief. Even though Luther knew that death is a part of life, his daughter's death was a reminder that life is utterly precious. The Commandments keep us from being trapped by the nothingness of sin and death, planting us right between the now-familiar words *fear* and *love*. Turn to page 22 and read the middle paragraph ("Ever since Eden . . .").

Question: For Luther, life stems from God's will to create and is held in God's hand. As a result, we live an existence that is never static. We are constantly opened to change and transformation. How do we live as new creations?

Recite

Suggested recitation format: **Read responsively.**

Turn to the appendix, and recite the Three Articles of the Apostles' Creed with their explanations. As facilitator, you might recite the First Article and then ask, "What is this? Or What does this mean?" Then have the group recite, together, the corresponding explanation. Use this call-and-response pattern for each article.

Closing

Announce next meeting date, place, time, and *By Heart* chapter to be discussed. Close with a prayer.



By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism

Quantity pricing:

\$14.99 (1-5) | \$12.99 (6-20) | \$10.99 (21+)

978-1-5064-3148-2

By Heart Course DVD

\$24.99

978-1-5064-3150-5

By Heart Facilitator Guide

\$19.99

978-1-5064-3149-9

By Heart Course Starter Pack

\$49.99

978-1-5064-3801-6

Pre-order today!
augsborgfortress.org/byheart or 800.328.4648

By Heart Book Sample

Chapter 2: The Ten Commandments

We know the Commandments from the family story of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. God had worked overtime to free them from bondage in Egypt. To be enslaved was no light matter and meant more than just being forced to make bricks for Pharaoh's building projects. It meant having your body taken from you to be used as a tool for another's advancement and being subjected to an arbitrary system in which your life was not your own. But when God chose their ancestors Sarah and Abraham, they were given a new life based on God's word and election. To put the Israelites in slavery was to act counter to God's will, so God called Moses and used the various plagues to move Pharaoh to free this chosen tribe. To see to the preservation of their lives in the wilderness, God gave the Commandments to provide order, safety, and security. This is why,

Numbering the Commandments

There is more than one numbering system in use for the Ten Commandments.

The numbering question is already difficult when you look at the Commandments in Exodus 20. Try counting them and you'll find way more than ten. But boiling everything down to ten works well when you have ten fingers.

Some numbering systems arrive at ten by keeping "no other gods" and "graven images" separate and combining the two about coveting. Luther follows the pattern set by Saint Augustine and the Roman church's usage.



Moses and the burning bush. God the Father is handing Moses the two tablets with the Ten Commandments. Woodcut by Hans Sebald Beham. Printed by Hieronymous Andreae. Nuremberg, 1527.



The Ten Commandments by the contemporary Chinese artist, He Qi.

for the Israelites, the Ten Commandments begin with the words: “I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

Most of all, God had established a relationship with the Israelites. The Commandments undergirded their relationship with their Creator and with their fellow creatures by providing both boundaries and blessings. If we read further in the story (both in the Bible and in human history), we’ll see that the Commandments didn’t make the Israelites or us more moral or more pious. If the Catechism gives us the basics so we can know God “by heart,” it’s clear from the story that the Commandments have never actually changed anyone’s heart. At best, they’ve only ever told people how immoral, impious, and unfaithful they are.

Saint Paul knew that our salvation never came from obeying God’s law. In Galatians 3:6 he looked back to his Jewish ancestor Abraham for evidence. In Genesis 15, God made a raft of promises to the old patriarch, (and presumably to his wife Sarah): even though old and childless they’d have a child, God would give them a promised land, and they’d wind up with descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Paul remembered that Abraham had trusted God and that God reckoned his belief as righteousness. *Reckoning* is the same thing as doing basic accounting. It adds up assets and debits to find the bottom line. God didn’t bring any of Abraham’s deeds for good or ill into the reckoning. Instead, the only things that mattered were his faith and trust. By being righteous Abraham was in good with God, and nothing else was required. From the very start of God’s relationship with Abraham, with his descendants (including Jesus, the disciples, and Paul), and with Christians who were adopted into the family’s promises, the law and Commandments were never part of the salvation equation. They weren’t a checklist for our exit interview from this life or for a promotion to higher heavenly calling after it.

Fear and Love: What the Commandments Are For

Although they were written in stone, for Luther the Commandments weren’t written in stone. Instead of simply sitting there in Moses’ arms as a set of rules to present to the Israelites, the Commandments are instead a vital and active thing. They go beyond merely judging you or giving you guidelines for successful living (although they do that, too). By beginning each of his explanations with the words, “We are to fear and love God, so that . . .”, Luther presented the Commandments as a description of how God moves us toward God’s will. No longer were they about moving Christians from sinfulness to morality or piety. Now they were the essence of how God moves sinners from unfaith to faith.

Those who follow Luther’s thinking often use the phrase *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinful). It’s a quick and easy way to talk about how Christians are always simultaneously saint and sinner. In his explanations of the Commandments Luther tends to both sides of our identity. For Luther, progress in Christian living doesn’t move forward or up. Instead it goes deeper. Christian life means coming to understand more and more the presence of two people inside you. In *Freedom of a Christian* (1520)¹ Luther talks about the two selves that live inside you: the old outer person of the flesh (the sinner) and the new

¹ Martin Luther, “Freedom of a Christian” (1520), tr. by Timothy J. Wengert, in *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform*, Volume 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 496ff.

inner person of the spirit (the saint). The old you must necessarily fear God and divine judgment. But the new person of faith is so wedded to Christ that that one trusts and honors God. Until your dying day your identity always involves both these people. When you're finally laid to rest and there's no more power for the old sinner in you to try to wield, then all that's left will be the faith received according to the Holy Spirit's desire.

In between the words *fear* and *love* in Luther's explanations lies a life-changing—nay, life-giving—space where the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith. That space holds all of eternity because that's where God's gospel promise in the Word, that is, in Jesus, takes up its claim on you. Luther says we are to fear and love God, because God's Word is operative here. And it has two parts: commands and promises. God speaks in these two modes in order to deal with both you. "Fear and love" parallels the outer and inner person in you. God's commands produce fear in the old sinner, and the gospel promise spoken in the midst of that fear creates the new person of faith.

The fulfillment of a command always depends on the action of the person being commanded. But because we're so captive to our own will (we call that condition Sin—capital S—rather than sins, which are all the bad things we do as a result of Sin, we stand judged by God and subject to God's wrath and condemnation. In today's church, we often say that sinners will go to heaven. While it is commendable and comes from our desire to be good and kind to others and emphasize God's mercy, it is not very biblical. Luther had a ready supply of vivid words to talk about us sinners. On more than one occasion he called himself a stinking pile of *Mist*—a mild translation of it would be "manure," but you can come up with a better translation. Unless you live in farming or ranching country, you may not have experienced a walk through the barnyard or past the pig sty. The scent of cow pies and hog flop isn't something to be distilled and delicately dabbed on your wrists. For Luther, the stench of Sin is too awful, and God won't have it stinking up the divine throne room.

When Luther says we should fear God, it's simply a basic description of what it's like to stand before God. When Moses was allowed to look at God's back side, he came down the mountain

People often wonder why Luther says we're to "fear" God. In the summary explanation to the commandments, he reminds us to "fear God's wrath," that is, God's righteous judgment. Thus, for Luther, God demands both respect (awe) for God's power as Creator and dismay at our sin as creatures.



Ambigram tattoo: saint/sinner.

The Three Powers of Faith

In *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther describes three powers of faith, that is, the things that the Spirit has the power to produce when faith is given.

First, because the gospel declares Christ to be the sole agent of your salvation, trusting the gospel frees you from the law. No one can ever demand that you do good works to please God.

Second, faith produces in you a desire to honor God. Where before, like Adam and Eve in the garden, the old sinner in you doesn't trust God, now faith begins to see that when God makes a promise—like God does in Christ—God always follows through.

Third, faith functions like a pastor officiating at a marriage between you and Christ. When faith happens, you get everything that Christ your bridegroom brings to the relationship: grace, life, and salvation (and by extension Christ's own name and his place at the right hand of God). And what does Christ get out of the deal? Just your sin, death, and damnation. If that's so, then Christ becomes the most sinful person who ever lived.



Allegory of Law and Gospel by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1529. This is a perfect illustration of the movement from fear to love. On the left, death, the devil and the law (Moses holding the two tablets) drive the Old Adam to hell, with Christ above coming in judgment. On the right, the New Adam is being covered with the crucified Christ's blood (i.e., righteousness) and blessed by the resurrected Christ, while John the Baptist points to the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." In the background the angel is appearing to the shepherds with "good news" (gospel).

so physically changed that he spooked the Israelites and had to wear a veil over his head the rest of his life. Imagine what it would be like to come into the almighty, perfect, and eternal goodness of God at the judgment seat. It's not a pretty sight and not one you can easily don a veil to deal with. Luther said this seat is "for those who are still secure and proud and will neither acknowledge nor confess their sin."² In the Lord's Prayer we ask for God's will to be done, and the Commandments provide a pretty clear window that we can look through to see what that will look like. But more important is how the Commandments also function as a mirror. To paraphrase Hamlet, they tell us exactly how rotten things in Denmark are.

The law shows we don't have "understanding or strength"³ to do God's will. We don't act rightly. We neglect our neighbors. We don't tend to God's word. We're blithe in our care for the creation. But what's worse, we don't *believe* rightly either, and that's what really gets us into trouble at God's judgment seat. We keep thinking that Newtonian physics functions well in our relationship with God. We assume that, just because every action causes an equal and opposite reaction, our good works can cause God to bring a judgment of grace and mercy. But the Commandments force us to do what the Fourth Step in Alcoholics Anonymous calls "a fearless and searching moral inventory." They demand our honesty about our relationships with

² "Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life," LW 51:278. ³ *Book of Concord*, 355.

God and with our neighbors. The law judges us and brings the hammer down on both our claims of freedom before God (free will) and on the possibility of our doing anything to gain a right relation with God (i.e., salvation). Luther's declaration that we must completely despair of ourselves to obtain Christ's mercy arose from his own experience.

On February 18, 1546, Luther died in Eisleben, the same city he was born in over six decades before. The people with him were careful to record the entire process, noting his confession of faith and his dependence solely on Christ's mercy. After he died, among his things they found a scrap of paper on which he'd written, "We are beggars. This is true." He'd once written a piece about establishing a community chest in Wittenberg to deal with the nuisance of alms-beggars in the city. He saw people on a regular basis who had absolutely nothing and whose only hope was to depend on the largesse of strangers. That was what lay behind Luther's last written words. In two pithy sentences, Luther had summed up the essence of our situation before God. We can only come with empty hands, hoping against hope for mercy, yet knowing full well that a judging God could never look kindly on our sin.



Martin Luther in Death by Lucas Cranach the Younger, after Lukas Furtenagel

We have only to look to Christ's own words to see how deep this despair of our abilities must run. In the Beatitudes, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents life's disasters and losses as the place where God most dearly wants to be found. Then, as if he knows how little stock we'll place in that promise, he goes on to destroy the illusion that our successes can mean anything. Jesus pushes the demands of the law to their furthest point: "You have heard it said . . . But I say to you."⁴ Each step of the way, Jesus makes it more and more difficult to imagine ever being able to live so perfectly that we could gain God's good pleasure. Eventually Jesus' listeners sink into despair and ask who could possibly do this. Jesus responds that no one can—except God. That's where Luther pulls us with the single word "fear." Like blind Bartimaeus at the side of the road, we must cry out ever more loudly, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁵

⁴ Matthew 5:21-48. For Luther's exposition, see LW 21. ⁵ Mark 10:46ff.

When the Commandments work on us, they “reveal individuals to themselves. Through the commands they know their inability to do good, and they despair of their own powers.”⁶ Now comes the promise of the gospel that draws us out of fear and out of our life as old, empty-hearted sinners cast east of Eden, wondering how to get back home again. If the Commandments show us how little we can or want to do to heed God’s will, God’s promising word takes a different tack. Unlike demands which require some action on your part for their fulfillment, promises make declarations that depend solely on the one making the promise. If someone promises you a delicious box of donuts will be delivered to you on Monday, it doesn’t require you to go to the local bakery, shell out some cash, and deliver them yourself. A promise is a true promise only if its promiser delivers the goods. The gospel is just this sort of true promise, because it is fulfilled, not as with the old covenant which human beings broke⁷ with their faithless actions, but by God who takes on the entire burden apart from anything we could do. God makes this promise in the person of Jesus Christ, particularly in his sufferings and the cross.⁸ There on a barren hill outside the holy city of Jerusalem, as far as you could spiritually move from the holiness of God’s temple, God takes on all the work and leaves you to enjoy Christ’s benefits. (You’ll hear all about that in Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed in the next chapter.)

When the gospel is bestowed, the proclaimed promise of what God-in-the-flesh has done for you creates faith. Article V of the Augsburg Confession, the document the reformers presented to the Holy Roman Emperor to summarize their teaching and preaching, puts it this way:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe.⁹

If that’s true, then the difference between fear and love in Luther’s explanations of the Commandments is the difference between Christ not being preached and the gospel not being declared, on the one hand, and Christ given and divine mercy being declared on the other.

How come faith is not a work we do? Many North American Christians confuse “deciding for Jesus” or “commitment to God” for faith, thus making faith into our own work. Such a definition is still law (“You must believe, or else!”) and leaves a person trusting themselves and their decisions, not God. One helpful way to picture faith is as “falling in love.” God in Christ promises mercy (unmerited love) to us. Upon hearing that gracious word, we fall in love—not as a decision we undertake but as a work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Just as we don’t imagine “falling in love” to be a decision we make (then it wouldn’t be “falling”), so faith is a relationship into which we are swept up through the promises of the “Lover of our souls,” Jesus Christ.

⁶ Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” 494. ⁷ See Jeremiah 31:31ff. ⁸ Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 20. ⁹ *Book of Concord*, 40

In the space between fear and love, the gospel must be proclaimed, so that the promise can create faith in you. And now where you once feared God you can instead love God and begin to live according to God's will. The Augsburg Confession (Article VI) calls this "the new obedience" where we "yield good fruit and good works."¹⁰

God's Judgment Seat and Mercy Seat

What Luther presented in the two words *fear* and *love* in his explanations of the Commandments he did in a different way in his "Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life" (1532). He talked about the difference between the judgment seat and mercy seat of God: ¹¹

I say that, if we are ever to stand before God with a right and uncolored faith, we must come to the point where we learn clearly to distinguish and separate between ourselves, our life, and Christ the mercy seat. But he who will not do this, but immediately runs headlong to the judgment seat, will find it all right and get a good knock on the head. I have been there myself and was so burnt that I was glad I was able to come to the mercy seat. And now I am compelled to say: Even though I may have lived a good life before men, let everything I have done or failed to do remain there under the judgment seat as God sees fit, but, as for me, I know of no other comfort, help, or counsel for my salvation except that Christ is my mercy seat, who did no sin or evil and both died and rose again for me, and now sits at the right hand of the Father and takes me to himself under his shadow and protection, so that I need have no doubt that through him I am safe before God from all wrath and terror. Thus faith remains pure and unalloyed, because then it makes no pretensions and seeks no glory or comfort save in the Lord Christ alone."¹²

In his explanations of the Commandments, Luther held up God's law to yank us from our stance before God's judgment seat and point us to Jesus, God's mercy seat in the flesh. Only then, when we face our beggarliness, can we stop seeing through a glass dimly. We see our Creator as slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We see our neighbors no longer as competition or threat, but as gift. We see the creation itself not as something to be exploited but as a gift to be cared for and used for good. And we see our good works not as evidence in proving our case for salvation to God but as an opportunity to serve others and discipline the old sinner in us. Luther never had a problem with Christians doing good works or with us striving to keep God's law and Commandments. What he had a problem with was our attempting to use our impotent attempts to keep the law as something we can bring before God's judgment seat. Luther had had his fill of that in his attempts to live a blameless life. The Catechism's look at the Commandments, though, reveals that when we're drawn out of our failures to turn to Christ, who presides at the mercy seat, in faith we can look at the Commandments and see them not just as boundaries but as blessings. In faith, the Holy Spirit transforms fear into love of God that is equal in depth to the awareness of our sin.

¹⁰ *Book of Concord*, 40. ¹¹ Romans 14:10; Exodus 25:17. In the Old Testament, the mercy seat was commanded by God along with the many other instructions for building the tabernacle in the wilderness. Technically, it was the golden lid placed on the Ark of the Covenant. Following Paul, Luther used the language to talk about what you'll get in a judgment rendered by the revealed God in Christ Jesus. ¹² LW 51:282.

The First Commandment

♥ You shall have no other gods.

What is this? or What does this mean?

We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.

In Jeremiah 31, God says, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” Perhaps the simplest (and most difficult) thing to say about God is that God is an *electing* God: God *chooses* to be our God. That’s 180 degrees from how it normally works with gods. Usually we’re the ones to choose the god who seems most appropriate to us, the one that will serve our needs and produce our most desired outcome. Human history is rife with the names of other gods: Baal and Astarte; Zeus, Mercury, and Poseidon; Thor, Odin, and Fjörgyn; Shiva, Ganesh, and Kali, among many, many others. For Luther, your chosen god is that thing or being in which you place your ultimate trust.

When we think about what we most trust, it’s easy to be pious and say, “Of course I trust God.” But Luther wouldn’t have stood for such a slick move. He took seriously the way we actually live. So, a better question is, “What do you most fear losing?” There we can see how variable our day-to-day pantheon of gods really is, for what we trust to bring in our desired future is constantly changing. If you think you trust God to secure your future, then wait until you lose something as inconsequential as your TV remote. It’s worse when it’s your car keys or your phone. At that moment, nothing else can possibly provide your desired future than the missing thing. And that thing becomes your immediate god, the idol you trust to make it through your days, or at least through that moment.

It’s not just spiritual beings in exalted places that can be gods. All kinds of other things can take the divine throne in our hearts. In the monastery, Luther’s typical monastic vows like chastity and obedience could become idolatrous. And the life of a monk required him to intentionally purge himself of them. It’s no different for us as we face our gods of control, status, or power.



Worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32). In the printings of the Small Catechism during Luther’s lifetime, each commandment, article of the creed, petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and sacrament was accompanied by a woodcut and (from 1536) references to the Bible story on which each picture was based.

But the big idol Luther discovered he'd clung to was himself—he'd become his own god. We talk about what happened to our first parents in the Garden of Eden as the Fall. And we interpret the Fall as our move *away from* God and into disobedience, dissolution, and all kinds of nasty stuff that's best covered by fig leaves. But the serpent's temptation wasn't to eat forbidden fruit. The serpent's move was to draw Adam and Eve into unbelief and mistrust. Instead of becoming less godly by being in thrall to their fleshly desires, they put themselves in God's place. Suspecting that God was reserving some knowledge of good and evil that they ought to possess, they ate of the tree's fruit to establish their own rule and might, their own claim to create and sustain their own futures.

In this light, there's not a single person without a god, even the most fervent atheist. So the question of whether God exists is beside the point. If we all have gods floating in and out of our days, it's more important to ask whether your god is a gracious one. Is your god of the moment truly able to provide for you the life and future you desire? The God of the First Commandment declares that only this one can do it. The Commandment kicks you out of the holy heavenly seat and pushes you away from spirituality and back to the flesh-and-bone stuff of human existence. God is the Creator. And you're not.

But if God will not allow you to function as your own earthly god, you're also not left hanging. By choosing to be God *for you*, with the same word that first brought the creation into being, God declares that all of what God has is now yours. With God's promise you've now begun to live in the New Jerusalem, the city of God with its tree planted by the water.¹³ The promise here is the same as was given in the Garden of Eden: Get busy enjoying the gifts God has set before you. Open your eyes to the God who wears them all as a mask and see how gracious and merciful a god you have. You'll see exactly how the God of the First Commandment chooses to reveal God's own self in the stuff of life when you encounter Luther's explanations of the Apostles' Creed in the next chapter. Luther couldn't separate the God of this Commandment from the person of Jesus who in the Lord's supper declares that in his crucified flesh he himself is *for you*.



Adam and Eve by Lucas Cranach the Elder, c. 1528.



The New Jerusalem by Lucas Cranach the Elder

¹³ Revelation 21–22.

The Second Commandment

- ♥ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

What is this? or What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

In the world of the ancient Israelites, a name had power. Old Testament names tell you something about the people who bear them. Jacob's name means "cheater." The prophet Hosea was told to name his children Lo-ruhammah and Lo-ammi, or "Not Pitied" and "Not My People" to reflect God's attitude toward the Israelites' faithlessness. Then there's Isaiah's kid Mahershalal-hashbaz, whose name means "Quick! Go grab some plunder!" Old Testament names tell you about a person's character, because names give you a person's essence. Luther himself changed his name for a time to reflect his new understanding. It was common for people in the Humanist movement, who looked to the ancient Greeks and Romans as the source of the greatest human learning, to give themselves a Greek or Latin version of their name. Luther's colleague Philip Melanchthon's birth name was Schwarzerdt, or "black earth," but the name we know him by is so much more fitting for an influential guy like him. The name Luther took on was Eleutherius. That's the Greek word for freedom, and it's a way even Luther's name could preach the gospel by reminding others of their freedom in Christ.¹⁴ It's kind of shorthand for what Paul says in Galatians: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."¹⁵

Speaking from the burning bush God reluctantly gave Moses the divine name, but it was something the old prophet needed to be careful handling. To speak God's name was blasphemy, because by being given the holy name you had been given a piece of God's being. It's wrong to curl your tongue around God's name, and for doing it you could be subjected to a good stoning. But in his



Blasphemy of Shelomith's son (Lev. 24:10-16).



Engraving of Philip Melanchthon by Albrecht Dürer, 1526.

¹⁴ If you look at Luther's name on various documents he signed, you'll discover that the spelling wasn't standardized. (It was Luther's translation of the Bible more than anything else that brought about spelling standards in German.) His father's name is spelled Ludder. And you can find Luther using that or Ludher. Luther's first name comes because he was baptized the day after his birth in Eisleben on the feast day of Saint Martin. ¹⁵ Galatians 5:1.

explanation of this Commandment Luther has no fear of speaking God's name. Because God chooses to be your God in creating you, God opens the access door. God's name is holy, but not so holy that you can't use it. The problem is not speaking God's name, but instead what you're attempting to accomplish with it.

Luther heard God's name being bandied about in everyday Wittenberg life. The big blasphemers were easy to spot, but usually the misuse of God's name came in more subtle ways. In the Large Catechism, he told about God's name being used to seal business deals or to commit perjury before a judge. He even pointed to how people might enter into a secret marriage by pledging their troth on God's name. Worst of all, though, was the matter of false preachers. These pastors claimed to know the truth about God and announced it in Jesus' name, but Luther could see that they had totally missed the point of the gospel and were really offering up spiritual job descriptions, demands for fervent mystical experiences, and feel-good bromides akin to those who speak a so-called "prosperity gospel" today.¹⁶ In each instance those taking God's name in vain aimed at something they thought was good, but in reality they had assumed sovereignty over God and used God's name as window dressing to make their worldly dealings holy.

Luther's explanation goes beyond restricting places that God's name should be off limits. Now he declared what God's name is good for: prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Where faith happens, a forgiven sinner has simply to reach out to God. God's name becomes the useful thing it's given to be: a handle to grab hold of God. It's only when the word changes you from the old outer person of the flesh to the new inner person of the Spirit that God's name will begin to rest easily on your lips. As he said in the Large Catechism,

One must urge and encourage children again and again to honor God's name and to keep it constantly upon their lips in all circumstances and experiences, for the proper way to honor God's name is to look to it for all consolation and therefore to call upon it. Thus, ...first the heart honors God by faith and then the lips by confession.¹⁷

The best way to become a person who regards God's name as sacred is to make a habit of commending yourself to God and asking for God's protection each day. That way, when illness, tragedy, or disaster arise, or when joyful events and treasured experiences occur, you'll be quick to cry out to God for help or to give thanks.

In his years in the monastery, Luther's life was shaped by a regular pattern of prayer. You could hear standardized prayer from the Roman Breviary fall trippingly off monkish tongues day and night, at the various worship services throughout the day, and before and after meals. Thus, the habit of prayer virtually became part of Luther's own genetic structure, and God's name had become enmeshed with the Reformer's very being.¹⁸ He had come to know prayer as a direct line by which creatures can stay connected to their Creator. The Commandment holds that connection as so vital that prayer becomes not just something you do but something you are. It protects the blessing of your relationship with God by making sure God's saving word and the words of your own heart remain tightly bound together.

¹⁶ Large Catechism, *Book of Concord*, 393. ¹⁷ Large Catechism, *Book of Concord*, 395. ¹⁸ We may think that Luther would have abandoned all Roman rites and prayers, but he regarded this kind of praying so highly that he adapted them and included them in the Small Catechism.
Image sources: p. 10, (left) British Museum, courtesy Art Resource, NY; (right) heqiart.com; p. 13, Schloss Friedenstein Museum, Gotha, Germany, courtesy Art Resource NY; p. 14, 18 (top), Wikimedia Commons; p. 17, 19 (top), Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1905; p. 18 (bottom), courtesy Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University; p. 19 (bottom), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

By Heart Course DVD

Each session of the course is enhanced by a short, lively, animated video that helps participants quickly to engage in the session's topic and to identify their curiosities about it. Since each chapter in the *By Heart* book contains more information than any group can cover in a single meeting, the videos provide a quick and fun way to focus the group's attention toward the material in the book. The videos are crafted to create curiosity and inspire the participants and the facilitator into a conversation that explores the material by digging deeply into their experiences, discussing Martin Luther's Small Catechism with a trusted group of friends.



View a sample from the Course DVD at augsburgfortress.org/byheart

Additional resources to mark and observe the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation



A compelling graphic novel that tells the story of Martin Luther through the eyes of his children.



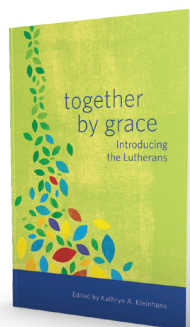
Papa Luther: A Graphic Novel

Daniel D. Maurer, writer
Caitlin Like, illustrator

\$7.99 *Quantity pricing available* | 978-1-5064-0639-8

The exciting story of Martin Luther, told through the eyes of his children Hans and Magda. This colorful, 88-page “comic book” is geared especially toward children ages 8 to 13, but will intrigue all ages. A leader guide is available for download for use with groups.

An engaging study for adults about Lutheran faith, going back 500 years and pointing to the future.



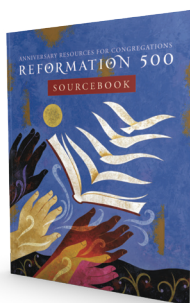
Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans

Kathryn A. Kleinhans, editor

\$12.00 *Quantity pricing available* | 978-1-5064-0638-1

Who are the Lutherans, and what are they all about, both historically and around the world today? Some of our most gifted pastors, scholars, and writers offer a glimpse at Lutheran faith, worship and mission. A leader guide is available for download to facilitate group study.

How will your community observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation?



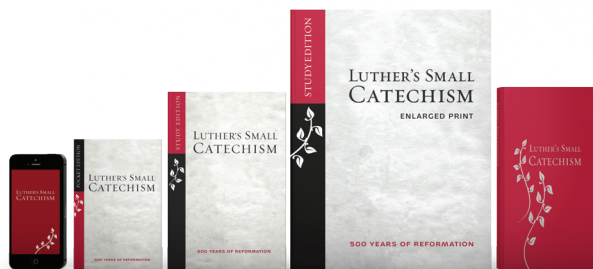
Reformation 500 Sourcebook: Anniversary Resources for Congregations

\$29.00 | 978-1-5064-0637-4

As congregations plan the ways they will mark the Reformation’s 500th anniversary, this *Reformation 500 Sourcebook* is an essential guide. The Sourcebook content is gathered into three main sections that focus on the areas of worship, education, and service. Within these covers you will find a treasury of ideas for planning worship services, education events, music festivals, service projects, and connections with other Christians. A CD-ROM of reproducible, customizable content is also included.

Resources to help you and your congregation further study and treasure Luther's Small Catechism.

Martin Luther's Small Catechism (multiple editions available)



Anniversary Pocket Edition

\$5.99 (5 per package)

Quantity pricing available

978-1-5064-1598-7

Anniversary Study Edition

\$6.99

Quantity pricing available

978-1-5064-1599-4

Enlarged Anniversary Study Edition

\$7.99

978-1-5064-3144-4

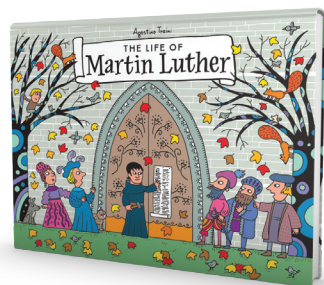
Gift Edition

\$14.99

978-0-8066-5603-8

Luther's Small Catechism provides a framework for communicating faith from generation to generation. The Small Catechism is now available in a Study Edition, Enlarged Study Edition, Pocket Edition 5-pack, Gift Edition, and an app. Order the copy that best fits your needs and respond to the invitation from Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton to "open, rediscover, and be renewed by this treasure" as we observe 500 years of Reformation.

The story of Martin Luther jumps right off the page in this beautiful and sturdy pop-up book.



The Life of Martin Luther: A Pop-Up Book

Agostino Traini, illustrator

\$19.99 | 978-1-5064-2192-6

The story of Martin Luther and his role in sparking the Protestant Reformation is given an interactive retelling in this beautiful and sturdy pop-up book. From Luther's decision to become a monk to his 95 theses, history jumps off the page through the vibrant, colorful illustrations of renowned artist and paper engineer Agostino Traini. Full of surprising details, this book will have kids coming back again and again to learn about this fascinating chapter in the history of the Christian faith. *The Life of Martin Luther* is an excellent gift.

Freed & Renewed in Christ



elca500.org

This website lifts up the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Reformation observances and facilitates connections among ELCA partners, networks, and expressions. Find news and resources, explore upcoming events, and share your ideas and activities.



Experience the Small Catechism in a New Way

A new 7-session course to encourage engagement with the Small Catechism

Announcing *By Heart*, an in-depth exploration of the Small Catechism. Designed to be used in group discussions, as an adult study, and for personal enrichment. This rich guide will generate meaningful conversations about the biblical and historical context of the Small Catechism, its link to the church's faith, and its connections to Luther's life and your life today.



Contributors:

R. Guy Erwin · Mary Jane Haemig · Ken Sunder Jones · Martin J. Lohrmann
Derek R. Nelson · Kirsi I. Stjerna · Timothy J. Wengert · Hans Wiersma



Ordering information on page 9