

LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM
WITH
AFRICAN DESCENT REFLECTIONS

Augsburg Fortress
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AFRICAN DESCENT REFLECTIONS

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About the artist: Norman Lewis was an American painter, scholar, and teacher associated with abstract expressionism. An African American, he used representational strategies to focus on Black urban life and his community's struggles.

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In memory of
THE REV. DR. JAMES KENNETH ECHOLS
1951–2018



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INTRODUCTION

In 1529, twelve years after Martin Luther posted his 95 *Theses* in the city of Wittenberg, Germany, he published a handbook for the household with the subtitle *The Small Catechism of Martin Luther*. Luther intended the Small Catechism to be a gracious gift to the baptized people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. He presented central articles of the Christian faith and encouraged heads of households to share them with and teach them to their families. Included in this handbook were sections on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar, all of which were grounded in the Holy Scriptures.

Since the publication of the Small Catechism, it has played a central role in the education of Lutherans in particular from the cradle to the grave. It has been prominently taught in Sunday school and confirmation classes as well as new-member classes. The Small Catechism, along with the Large Catechism, is among the documents included in *The Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2000), and it is recognized as a seminal document of the Lutheran Reformation.

Luther's methodology in the Small Catechism was clear and concise. Following a presentation of each article of faith, he asked and answered a critical question: "What is this?" or "What does this mean?" Luther's answers were contextual, taking into account his historical, cultural, and social settings, and they continue for many to be meaningful and relevant for Christian faith and life today.

In connection with the observance of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation events initiated by the 95 *Theses*,

a distinguished group of African descent Lutheran theologians gathered in 2014 at the offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to explore and reflect on Luther's Small Catechism. While continuing to affirm the gift of the Small Catechism in the life of the church, they recognized that the meaning of these explanations of Christian faith could and should be broadened to address the historical, cultural, and linguistic experience of Lutherans of African descent, both on the African continent and in the diaspora.

This edition of Luther's Small Catechism, therefore, not only presents a version of the Small Catechism widely used among Lutherans in North America today, but also includes African descent reflections on each of the catechism sections. These brief commentaries represent the various opinions of the individual contributors and are not intended to present a singular point of view within the diversity of those of African descent. They are intended, however, to offer additional context, language, and illumination from the experiences of African descent people, both past and present, so that answers to the questions "What is this?" and "What does this mean?" will be enriched.

This project may serve as an invitation to other readers of the Small Catechism to take up similar reflection and contextualization, representing their own various historical, contemporary, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. To God be the glory!

—Dr. James Echols



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THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

1. WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR?

It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.

WHERE IS THIS WRITTEN?

The holy evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and St. Paul write thus:

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant* in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

*Covenant means "promise."

Reflection

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

“I am because we are.” This *Ubuntu*¹⁷ understanding grounds the life of people of African descent in the diaspora and may well be used to articulate what God gives and we receive when partaking of the sacrament of the altar. Without the community, there is no I. Without the body of Christ—that is, the community—eucharist doesn’t happen.

St. Augustine (354–430 CE), African patriarch of late antiquity, taught regarding the sacrament, “Receive what you are, and be what you receive, the body of Christ.” Accordingly, Christ is present in bread and wine, the eucharistic elements, as well as in the eucharistic community. What we receive is echoed in the “Amen,” by which we add our assent to the truth of Christ’s presence—in, with, and under these forms—conveying Christ.

Luther spoke of the benefits received as we share this holy and precious gift of God as “forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation.” For many years in western and northern hemispherical contexts the weight of sacramental interpretation has been primarily focused on forgiveness of sin, to the almost complete neglect of the other beneficial attributes God bestows on us as we receive the gifts born of God’s self-giving. *Inculturation* is the term used among liturgical theologians to describe a dynamic process whereby a people incorporate the symbolic and sacramental life of the Christian gospel in a manner that befits their culture or context. This usage has been deemed theological, in contrast with the sociological individual understanding of *enculturation*.¹⁸ A reflexive *Ubuntu* theology of holy communion, the sacrament of the altar, permits us to live out “inculturated” patterns of celebrating eucharistic presence in light of the new vision given us by Jesus Christ, who shares with us his life, death, resurrection, and ascension in eschatological context.