

# Praying Luther's Small Catechism

The Pattern of Sound Words

*John T. Pless*

*For the Rev. Dr. Norman E. Nagel on the occasion of his 90th birthday.*



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# Table of Contents

Abbreviations .....	iv
Foreword.....	v
Preface.....	viii
Chapter 1: Praying the Catechism .....	1
Chapter 2: The Ten Commandments: An Agenda for Christian Prayer .....	15
Chapter 3: The Apostles' Creed: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Prayer .....	35
Chapter 4: The Lord's Prayer: Prayer Under the Pressure of the Cross .....	51
Chapter 5: Holy Baptism: Calling On the Name Given Us.....	79
Chapter 6: Confession, Absolution, the Office of the Keys: Absolution Opens Lips for Prayer .....	95
Chapter 7: The Sacrament of the Altar: The Promise From Which Prayer Flows .....	109
Chapter 8: Give Us Our Daily Bread: Morning, Evening, and Mealtime .....	119
Chapter 9: Table of Duties: Prayer in Our Callings .....	127
Appendices	
1. The Catechism as the Handbook for the Vocation of the Laity in Worship and Prayer.....	141
2. Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers as Reflections of the Our Father .....	160
3. The Psalms Organized According to the Lord's Prayer .....	161
4. Preparation for Confession and Absolution According to the Ten Commandments.....	164
Bibliography.....	170

# Abbreviations

AE	Luther's Works; American Edition
FC	Formula of Concord
FC Ep	Epitome of the Formula of Concord
K-W	<i>The Book of Concord</i> ; edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert
LC	Large Catechism
LSB	<i>Lutheran Service Book</i>
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism
SD	Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

# Foreword

In the Lutheran Church, Luther's catechisms became formative for Christian instruction. Over the centuries, the Small Catechism in particular has been taught and learned by heart in confirmation classes around the world. In this way, not only education in pivotal articles of Christian faith took place but also the mind-sets of Lutheran congregants have been shaped over generations. Moreover, Lutheran piety has been coined in such a manner that Lutherans may be recognized and distinguished by the way they talk about God, venerate their Savior, Jesus Christ, as their Lord, and show how they are guided by the Holy Spirit. John Pless deserves to be given credit for having rediscovered and now for highlighting Luther's idea of *praying* the catechism.

The inner structure of Luther's catechisms is guided by the idea of God's solemn and sacred self-communication. This leitmotif steers the explanation of the Ten Commandments, as the First Commandment is focused on God's promise: "I, I myself will give you what you need and help you out of every danger." To this promise, God's claim corresponds: "Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else."<sup>1</sup> In the First Article of the Creed, Luther states "The Father has given to us himself with all creation . . . apart from the fact that he has also showered us with inexpressible eternal blessings through his Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the Second Article, we learn how God "has given himself completely to us, withholding nothing."<sup>3</sup> So the Creed helps "us do what the Ten Commandments require of us."<sup>4</sup> The petitions in Lord's Prayer, correspondingly, request nothing else but the fulfillment of what is commanded in the Decalogue;<sup>5</sup> moreover, "God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Sacraments are regarded as "a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps,"<sup>7</sup> or "all the treasures he brought from heaven for us," "placed at everyone's door, yes upon the table."<sup>8</sup>

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1 LC I 4; K-W 387.

2 LC II 24; K-W 433.

3 LC II 26; K-W 434.

4 LC II 2; K-W 431.

5 K-W 440ff.

6 LC III 22; K-W 443.

7 LC IV 37; K-W 461.

8 LC V 66, 35; K-W 473, 470.

For the Lutheran Church—and even beyond—Luther became instrumental with his catechisms in presenting the Christian community with an introduction to a life guided by God.<sup>9</sup> He points out that Holy Baptism is God's salutary self-communication, which brings to us "God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts"<sup>10</sup> He views the Sacrament of the Altar, as "this great . . . treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians," providing the new human being with constant fortification in his battle against Satan, death, and sin.<sup>11</sup> The Lord's Prayer invokes God's irrefutable willingness for mercy in just such a battle, a battle that becomes inevitable for a Christian. It is precisely when a Christian partakes in God's self-giving and self-revelation, that a Christian takes on his enemies in the battle of the Gospel for the Gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Luther can be perceived as being the one who construes the Credo for us, thereby gratefully accepting "what God does for us and gives to us"<sup>13</sup> and the implementation thereof in the reality of Christ's liberation act, since Christ "has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there."<sup>14</sup> It is Luther who substantiates the identity of Christianity and Church as being trinitarian, and who identifies the Christocentric aspect as being a distinctive feature of Christendom and Christianity, compared to all other forms of religiosity (and a-religiosity) that are not based on Christ or inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

It is Luther who is able to discern Law and Gospel as being God's immanent manner of speaking and acting<sup>16</sup> in which the gradient from the "extrinsic"—or even "alien"—to the "actual"—rather, "proper"—work of God proceeds in such a way<sup>17</sup> that the Church must never be found wanting in proclaiming the declaration of forgiveness and the salvation in Christ, seeing that it is a matter of "comforting and consoling" those who are frightened and "fainthearted."<sup>18</sup>

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9 Cf. Werner Klän, "Anleitung zu einem Gott-gelenkten Leben. Die innere Systematic der Katechismen Luthers," *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 29 (2005): 18–35.

10 LC IV 42; K-W 461.

11 K-W 470ff.

12 K-W 448ff.; 451.

13 LC II 67; K-W 440.

14 LC II 31; K-W 434.

15 K-W 440.

16 Cf. the citations from Luther's exegesis of Luke 5:1–11 in the summer homily of 1544, in FC SD V 12; K-W 583ff.

17 K-W 585 ff.

18 FC SD V 12; K-W 584.

It is Luther who places the Gospel in its forms of implementation—proclamation, Baptism, Eucharist, and confessional penitence as the “third sacrament”<sup>19</sup>—at the center of an encompassing Christian understanding of a worship service.<sup>20</sup> It is Luther who, by the differentiation of the two realms,<sup>21</sup> the release of secularism from clerical paternalism, as well as the theological facilitation of the differentiation between “penultimate” and “ultimate,” thereby paves the way for the separation of church and state—yet without ever having relinquished God’s reign of power over all ages, nations, people, and spheres of life.<sup>22</sup>

It is Luther who, by the end of his Large Catechism, urged the Christian community of solidarity to bear in mind that we “must all help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight against the devil,”<sup>23</sup> meaning the elementary and fundamental day-to-day life of a Christian existence. Indeed, all five parts of Luther’s catechisms, linked to one another by the principle of God’s self-donation willing to communicate His salvation to all humankind, are meant to be effective as an introduction to fundamental consummations of Christian life, even on a “daily” basis.<sup>24</sup>

With this perspective in mind, praying the catechism serves as an exemplary piece of Christian piety and a strong impulse to formatting Christian life in the light of the Gospel as rediscovered in the Lutheran Reformation. The catechism must be taught in the Church, on all accounts. It ought to be learned, definitely, although—or even because—we observe that in many a Western country the ability of memorizing texts is in decline. The catechism has to be preached, as it comprises the sound doctrine of the Church. Therefore, it may be meditated on as well. But first and foremost the catechism is meant to be *prayed*, as a daily exercise, as Luther wished it to be. John Pless, in his comprehensive analysis, directs our attention to exercising and cultivating our Christian existence on a daily basis by advising us—along the lines of Luther’s catechetical instruction—to engage in the lifelong practice of being a Christian.

Werner Klän

Oberursel/Germany

Reformation Day 2015

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19 K-W 465.

20 K-W 319.

21 K-W 470ff.

22 K-W 389, 451.

23 LC V 87; K-W 476.

24 K-W 431, 444, 466, 469.

# Preface

Edmund Schlink spoke of modernity as that time when dogmatics had become largely a playground for the subjective originality of speculative piety, a period in which Christians generally forgot how to pray through their catechism. Schlink's words call us back to something that ought to characterize Lutherans. Namely, both pastors and laypeople should remember how to "pray through their catechism," for it tutors us in what Paul calls the "pattern of sound words," locating us within the economy of God's giving and our receiving. The Small Catechism guides us into the heart of the Holy Scriptures, for it is, as the Formula of Concord would come to call it, "a Bible of the Laity, in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation."<sup>25</sup> The apostle Paul charges Timothy to "follow the pattern of the sound words . . . in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:13). The Small Catechism is such a pattern. Hence the title of this book— *Praying Luther's Small Catechism: The Pattern of Sound Words*.

I have come to appreciate what Oswald Bayer calls "catechetical systematics" as an approach for doing Lutheran theology. This book was conceived and crafted with Bayer's description in mind. The catechism provides both the categories and contours of our theology. Even as the catechism functioned as a handbook of doctrine, so it also served as prayer book in the Reformation. Luther was of the conviction that the catechism could be prayed. This book that you now hold in your hands might be thought of as an exercise in prayed dogmatics. I have benefited greatly from the recently translated five-volume study of Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms*. By publishing Peters's work, Concordia Publishing House has given the English-speaking Lutheran world a genuine treasure. Without Peters's careful research, this present volume could not have been written.

*Praying Luther's Small Catechism* moves sequentially through the Six Chief Parts of the Small Catechism as well as the Daily Prayers and Table of Duties. Each section begins with material from the Small Catechism followed by a prayer developed out of the catechetical material. Subsequent commentary on the doctrine of the passage reflects on how this teaching shapes our praying. The book is aimed at pastors who regularly preach and teach from the catechism, but it is also intended for laypeople, especially parents, as Luther saw the head of the household as the primary catechist for the family. There are always more treasures

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25 FC Ep Summary 5; K-W 487.

to be discovered in the catechism, so whether the readers are veteran teachers of the Church or those who have only a passing acquaintance with Luther's little jewel, it is hoped that readers will be drawn into a deeper and lasting appreciation of this handbook for doctrine, vocation, and prayer. It is especially desired that your own praying of the catechism will be enlivened and enlarged.

While I alone bear the responsibilities for the inadequacies of this volume, many have contributed to it, perhaps without even knowing that they were doing so. I first learned the catechism from my own parents, John and Betty Pless. Pastor Eldon Roeber, who baptized and confirmed me at Mount Zion Lutheran Church in Conover, North Carolina, had been a student of J. Michel Reu at Wartburg Seminary and taught me the catechism with persuasiveness and clarity. Time spent with Norman Nagel at the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University deepened my understanding of the theology of the catechism and its use for prayer and pastoral care. Peter Bender, at that time a pastor in Boone, Iowa, attended a continuing education class on the catechism with Dr. Kenneth F. Korby at Flathead Lake in Montana in August 1988 from which we thankfully would never recover. Pastor Bender remains a catechist without equal, and I am grateful for his friendship, fraternity in office, and his ongoing insights into the catechism. Theological conversation partners of long standing on all things Lutheran and catechetical—since 1983 when we were all living in the Twin Cities—are Robert Kolb and James Nestingen. Not to be overlooked are the students who have taken my course in catechetics both here at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and also at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Pretoria, South Africa, as well as pastors in various conferences both in the United States and abroad. Thanks are also due to Julia Hipkins, our faculty secretary, who graciously helped me with technical matters in preparing the manuscript for publication. Books are never the product of an individual but are the accumulation of learning from those who have gone before us in the faith and those who walk alongside us in this earthly pilgrimage. Thanks be to God for them all.

John T. Pless  
Ascension Day 2015



## Praying the Catechism

“A Christian without prayer is just as impossible  
as a living person without a pulse.”

We are accustomed to thinking in terms of studying the Small Catechism or learning it by heart, but rarely do we hear Martin Luther’s language of praying the catechism.<sup>2</sup> The catechism functioned, for Luther, as a book of prayer. To be sure, the catechism is a handbook of Christian doctrine, laying out both the evangelical contours and biblical content of the faith, but it is more than a textbook. It is a prayer book. This can be seen from the path that Luther traveled in producing the catechism, as well as in the ways the catechism was used after its publication in 1529. Albrecht Peters captures Luther’s intention:

Praying the catechism is not merely for children and the simple; it is no less the duty and the joy of the mature Christian. Because the triune God Himself is the true teacher of the basic mysteries of the faith, all Christians are His pupils. Prayerful meditation on those central texts of our Christian faith draws our inner man into the dynamic of the Spirit of God. These texts and the light of faith breaking forth from them pull us out of evil thoughts, still the diffuse

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1 Luther, cited by Albrecht Peters, *Lord’s Prayer*, trans. Daniel Thies, Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms 3 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 29.

2 Kenneth F. Korby observes that “the *Small Catechism* (1529), intended to be prayed, made a lasting impression on evangelical prayer. In that catechism, in addition to prayer instruction by means of the exposition of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father . . . Luther gave simple instructions for family prayer that became a kind of ‘house’ ” (“Prayer: Pre-Reformation to the Present,” in *Christians at Prayer*, ed. John Gallen, S.J. [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977], 123).

unrest of our hearts, and form a sturdy protective barrier against demonic temptations.<sup>3</sup>

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Prayer learns how to listen to the Word of the Lord and out of that listening to speak to Him. In so doing, prayer is the Christian's engagement in battle against Satan. There is no neutrality here; either one is aligned with the triune God or with the devil.

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Such praying is serious business; it is not mindless meditation or wordless impulses to connect with a higher spiritual power. Prayer learns how to listen to the Word of the Lord and out of that listening to speak to Him. In so doing, prayer is the Christian's engagement in battle against Satan. There is no neutrality here; either one is aligned with the triune God or with the devil.<sup>4</sup>

Positively, to pray the catechism is to learn how to speak to God the Father in the name of the Son through the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith in the Gospel. It is based on God's command and promise. Negatively, this same prayer is directed against the devil as he would pull us away from the Father through distrust of the Son, causing us to doubt the promises of the Gospel. For Luther, prayer involves spiritual warfare, and the catechism is weaponry for this battle, both defensively and offensively.

The power of the catechism is the power of the Word of God which, it carries. Peters continues:

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Thus, for the reformer, the catechism, this instruction for children, this "laymen's bible," "does not only stand at the beginning of the way into Scripture but also at its end. It does not only function as an opening key but also as a gathering repository." Day by day Luther has placed all his theological insights and spiritual experiences into the earthen vessels of these simple formulae. These simple words "in which the Word of God became nourishing food and protecting shelter for generations" are not too difficult for the young pupil, yet they contain abyssal mysteries into which the mature Christian sinks. The catechism is accessible

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3 Albrecht Peters, *Ten Commandments*, trans. Holger Sonntag, Commentary on Luther's Catechisms 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 33.

4 Note the observation of Peters: "Studying and praying the catechism takes place on the battlefield between God and anti-god; there is no neutrality here. Nobody stands for himself here" (Peters, *Ten Commandments*, 31).

to the beginner learning the ABCs and goes infinitely beyond the insight of the wisest. This property it shares with God's revelation.<sup>5</sup>

As early as July 1516, Luther preached on the catechism. By 1522, the practice had been established in Wittenberg of preaching on the catechism four times each year. The catechism sermons Luther preached from November 30 to December 18, 1528, are laden with vocabulary he will use just weeks later in the Small Catechism.<sup>6</sup> Luther's catechisms (both the Small and the Large) were born in the pulpit. Heinrich Bornkamm describes the birth:

*The Large Catechism* is one of Luther's greatest artistic achievements. From this initial work a second sprang forth, *The Small Catechism*. While the mastery of the larger work lies in the wealth and liveliness of its articulating the faith, the beauty of the smaller work lies in the precision with which it made matters of faith luminous and memorable. Without the preparatory condensation of the catechetical sermons into *The Large Catechism*, there would have been no crystallization of the entire substance into *The Small Catechism*.<sup>7</sup>

Not only were the catechisms derived from preaching, they would serve the hearers in providing a hermeneutical framework to understand the sermon and thus help them respond to God's Word in prayer.

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5 Peters, *Ten Commandments*, 35 (none of the quotations in this passage could be located definitively in Luther's writings). More than ten years after preparing the Small Catechism, Luther expresses the importance of the catechism and prayer in *On the Councils and the Church*, where he delineates seven marks of the Church: "Sixth, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God. Where you see and hear the Lord's Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present" (AE 41:164).

6 See *Ten Sermons on the Catechism*, AE 51:135–93.

7 Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521–1530*, ed. Karin Bornkamm, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 601. Also note Reinhard Slenczka: "The catechisms of Luther emerged from a series of sermons, and this might serve as a reminder that they are actual proclamation and catechization. They are, therefore, not to be put back on the shelf like a common book. In the preface to the Small Catechism we find two observations that are foundational for pastoral care. On the one hand, Luther states that every member of the congregation—not only the children—needs to know this basic knowledge of the Christian faith, that is, needs to memorize it. Having memorized the text, then they can begin to integrate and apply it to their life. Luther's thrust is that the language of the faith must be learned first and must be memorized. To use more than one form will confuse things" ("Luther's Care of Souls for Our Times," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 1 [January 2003]: 42).

Luther provided documents designed to replace the “confessional manuals” of the Medieval Church. Included in this category were short tracts on the Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and especially on penance. Composed for laypeople, these tracts were aimed at assisting evangelical Christians in making a salutary confession of their sins in repentance wrought by the Law and then in laying hold of the forgiveness of sins delivered in the words of the absolution. These early pastoral texts would be building blocks as Luther moved to provide a concise form of Christian teaching geared toward repentance, faith, and holy living.

The appearance of the *Personal Prayer Book* in 1522 certainly was one of the building blocks Luther would use in the construction of the Small Catechism; in fact, William Russell calls it a “proto-catechism.”<sup>8</sup> In this attempt to build an evangelical piety among those who adhered to the Reformation, Luther was offering a catechetical alternative to the popular “personal prayer books,” which he considered to be laden with “un-Christian tomfoolery about prayers to God and his saints.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, Luther stated his intent “to offer this simple Christian form of prayer and mirror for recognizing sin, based on the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments.”<sup>10</sup>

The Decalogue, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer became the backbone of Luther’s *Personal Prayer Book*. Luther gives examples of how each commandment is broken and kept. Each article of the Apostles’ Creed is explained in a concise narrative. The individual petitions of the Lord’s Prayer become the basis for prayers that Luther constructs to unpack their meaning. The language as well as conceptual themes used by Luther in the *Personal Prayer Book* will resurface seven years later in both the Small and Large Catechisms.

One should not overlook Luther’s hymns as a source for the language and imagery that would be expressed in the Small Catechism. In 1523–24, Luther would write several hymns, including hymns on the Ten Commandments (“These Are the Holy Ten Commands,” *LSB* 581), the Apostles’ Creed (“We All Believe in One True God,” *LSB* 954), Confession (“From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee,” *LSB* 607), and the Lord’s Supper (“Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior,” *LSB* 627). Four of Luther’s “catechism hymns” predate the appearance of the Small Catechism itself. Only the hymns on the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father, Who from Heaven Above,” *LSB* 766) and Baptism (“To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord,” *LSB*

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8 William Russell, *Praying for Reform: Martin Luther, Prayer, and the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 25.

9 *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), AE 43:11.

10 *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), AE 43:12.

406) come after the publication of the Small Catechism. It is significant that in the four catechism hymns that predate the Small Catechism, Luther is using these core catechetical texts to tutor Christians in prayer using words and phrases that will be crafted into the explanations included in the Small Catechism a few years later.<sup>11</sup>

The Small Catechism was born amid the pressures of the 1520s. After Luther's excommunication in 1520 and the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther would be faced with a series of critical events, including the debate with Erasmus on the enslavement of the will in 1524–26, the eruption of the Peasants' War in 1524, and ongoing doctrinal struggles against his Roman opponents and various sectarians who thought that his reforms were incomplete at best and heretical at worst. Luther had long recognized the need to bring the evangelical faith into the daily lives of ordinary people, as can be seen from his pastoral tracts and his liturgical reforms. In the preface to his German Mass of 1526, he contends that this liturgy “needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism.”<sup>12</sup> Here the reformer argues that such a catechism is necessary so that “the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith.”<sup>13</sup> Luther then provides some examples as to how this catechization might function and what it might look like in a question-and-answer format. Luther recognized that such catechization would be a necessary compass for the liturgical service as it oriented worshipers to faith in God's promise and love for the neighbor.

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Luther had long recognized the need to bring the evangelical faith into the daily lives of ordinary people.

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The 1526 order of service would also include catechetical components such as the paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer and the exhortation to communicants prior

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11 For an extensive and rich treatment of these hymns, see Robin Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). On the use of these catechism hymns as a means of transmission of Christian doctrine, see Christopher Boyd Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9–11, 91–94, and Christopher Boyd Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer,” in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture, 1550–1675*, ed. Robert Kolb (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 205–58. In this later piece, Brown notes: “One of the most prominent manifestations of Lutheran confidence in the hymns as vehicles for the Word of God was the development and use of a cycle of hymns based on the parts of the Catechism. Beginning with the 1529 Wittenberg hymnal, nearly all Lutheran hymnals for general use identified a section as *Katechismuslieder*. In the Large Catechism Luther recommended that pastors teach these hymns to the children as soon as they had learned the basic texts of the Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, and the dominical institution of the sacraments” (216).

12 *German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), AE 53:64.

13 *German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), AE 53:64.

to the consecration. In the paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, Luther catechizes the congregation in how to pray by unpacking each petition so that it might be understood and rightly prayed. Words and phrases from this liturgical paraphrase will find their way into the third chief part of the Small Catechism. Likewise, in the exhortation to communicants, Luther seeks to set the benefits of Christ's redemption before those who will come to receive Christ's body and blood so that they appropriate the Sacrament not as a sacrificial action of the priest but as the new testament of the forgiveness of sins. Again, motifs present in this liturgical admonition will work their way into the sixth chief part of the catechism.

Luther's own catechisms may be seen as a response to Pastor Nicholas Hausmann's 1524 plea that Luther prepare a catechism for use in the instruction of the "common folk." The controversy between Johann Agricola and Philip Melancthon on the place of the Law in the Christian life accentuated the need for a pattern of instruction that would distinguish God's Law from His promises, repentance from faith. Ultimately it was Luther's own participation in the Saxon Visitation of 1528 that prompted him to complete the catechisms as a remedy to the maladies diagnosed in the visits.<sup>14</sup> The impact of the Saxon Visitation is seen in Luther's preface to the Small Catechism:

The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version. Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the Saxon Visitation and its relationship to the formation of the catechisms, see "The Visitation and the Catechisms: Diagnosis and Remedy," in John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross—A Study of Luther's Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 29–41.

<sup>15</sup> SC Preface 1–3; K-W 347–48.

Recognizing the severity of the conditions of these early Lutheran congregations, Luther believed that a pattern of catechetical instruction for both preachers and hearers of God's Word was a necessity.

Luther saw the catechism as a book to be used in home and congregation. According to Charles Arand, "while Luther addressed the catechisms to pastors, he still envisioned the head of the household as the primary teacher."<sup>16</sup> James Nestingen observes: "The *Small Catechism*, in chart and pamphlet form, quickly became one of the most important documents of the Lutheran Reformation. It moved the village altar into the family kitchen, literally bringing instruction in the faith home to the intimacies of family life."<sup>17</sup> The careful literary craftsmanship evidenced in Luther's nuanced phrases and his repetition of key words would make the catechism a useful tool for reinforcing the evangelical message that the laity were hearing from Saxon pulpits as God's Word echoed in ordinary households.

The catechism provided a basic summary of Christian doctrine along with a template for teaching. Luther's pattern for catechesis is outlined in the Preface to the Small Catechism: (a) Avoid changes or variations in the text. (b) After people have learned the text, teach them to understand it. (c) Once people have been taught the shorter catechism, take up the longer catechism.<sup>18</sup> Here Luther demonstrated the way in which the catechism could be learned as the pattern of sound words and stable foundation for the Christian's existence.

Luther intended the Small Catechism to be a handbook for Christian doctrine, a prayer book, and a book for the ongoing Christian life. The theological structure of the Small Catechism is geared to the proper distinction of Law and Gospel. Luther departs from the traditional, medieval ordering of the chief parts as Lord's Prayer, Creed, and Ten Commandments. He explains his rationale for the sequencing of the Decalogue, Creed, and Our Father:

Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself a sinful and wicked person. The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine—grace—which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's

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16 Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 95.

17 James A. Nestingen, *Martin Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 76.

18 SC Preface 7–8; K-W 348–49.

Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfillment of God's commandments everything will be given him. In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible.<sup>19</sup>

The ordering of the catechetical core as Decalogue, Apostles' Creed, and Lord's Prayer was a conscious move on Luther's part. The command (Decalogue) and the creed (promise) leads to prayer (Lord's Prayer). Herbert Girgensohn captures the significance of Luther's sequencing of the first three parts:

Law, gospel, and prayer are the chief elements of the Christian faith according to the Scriptures. Luther calls the law and the gospel the "arguments," that is, the fundamentals necessary for an understanding of the Scriptures; they represent the real content of the Scriptures. The law and the gospel constitute the first two parts of the Catechism. Only one who knows the law and the gospel knows how to speak of God rightly, knows what God intends to say in the Scriptures. Then comes prayer as the third part. Prayer is the expression of the new situation and attitude of man in the presence of God, the attitude of the man who has allowed the law and the gospel to be addressed to him and accepted them in faith.<sup>20</sup>

God addresses human beings in Law and Gospel, working repentance and faith. In prayer, believers now address God, calling Him "Father" and imploring Him for all that He has promised. According to Peters, Luther "sets this intensive praying of the catechism against the despising of God's Word."<sup>21</sup>

Peters describes four dimensions of the Small Catechism for Christian teaching, praying, and living:

(1) The catechism, as "a brief summary and digest" of the Bible, strives to comprehend its central content. It desires to summarize and lay out in simple terms the statements of the biblical witness of the revelation of God the Father through Jesus Christ, the Son, in the Holy Spirit that are decisive for salvation. (2) The catechism enunciates the spiritual core of Scripture not as an insight gained by a spiritually gifted individual, but by means of those texts that

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19 *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), AE 43:4.

20 Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 1:4.

21 Peters, *Ten Commandments*, 25.

have prevailed in Christendom and, at the same time, within the context of the history of interpretation of these decisive texts. This is how the reformer circumspectly makes his confession a part of the witness of the Western Church. . . . (3) The catechism looks at the concrete daily life of the simple members of the Church. It takes our calling and estate into consideration and understands both as the place in life God gave us in the coordinate system of natural/creaturely, societal/social, as well as historical/cultural, relations. In our daily life, we Christians should exercise and prove faith in love. The catechism desires to instruct for this purpose, not only as a doctrinal, confessional book but also as a book of prayer and comfort. (4) The catechism moves Scripture, the confession of the Church, and our daily life into the light of the Last Day. [The catechism should be viewed in light of] the beginning of Luther's 1522 *Invocavit Sermons* . . . : "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. . . . Therefore, every one for himself must know and be armed with the chief things that concern a Christian."<sup>22</sup>

The catechism contained the essential elements of the Christian faith. "For Luther, knowledge of the catechism is a mark of the Christian."<sup>23</sup>

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*By teaching the faith, the catechism also teaches us how to pray.*

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By teaching the faith, the catechism also teaches us how to pray. Not only does the catechism teach us how to pray, but it can be prayed. Luther demonstrated how the catechism is to be prayed in his celebrated 1535 letter, *A Simple Way to Pray*, addressed to Peter Beskendorf, the town barber in Wittenberg. Here Luther uses catechesis for the life of prayer, demonstrating that there is both discipline and freedom in the praying of the catechism.<sup>24</sup> Rather than

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22 Peters, *Ten Commandments*, 20. This can be seen in one of Luther's final letters to his wife, written on February 7, 1546, in which he consoles her amid her worries and anxiety: "Dear Katie: You should read the Gospel according to Saint John and the Small Catechism, of which you once said, 'Everything in this book has to do with me!' You are worrying in God's stead as if he were not almighty" (*Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955], 105–6).

23 Gerhard Bode, "Instruction of the Christian Faith by Lutherans after Luther," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture 1550–1675*, ed. Robert Kolb (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 164.

24 Note the observation of Martin Brecht: "Nowhere is the connection between order and freedom in Luther's practice of prayer so clearly demonstrated as in his advice for Master Peter" (*Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 14).

constraining and confining, the texts of the catechism serve to anchor the praying Christian in God's Word as the "breathing space of the Holy Spirit," to borrow language from Oswald Bayer, so that the believer is ushered into the expansive vistas of God's mercy and grace in Christ. Here the Christian is freed to confess and praise, to be taught by God and guided with His truth.<sup>25</sup>

Before coming to the catechetical texts, Luther provides Peter with some preliminary instruction on prayer. Recognizing that both the flesh and the devil incessantly attempt to derail the practice of prayer, Luther counsels the barber out of his own experience: "When I feel that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other tasks and thoughts (for the flesh and the devil always impede or obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself and word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do."<sup>26</sup> Luther sees this verbal meditation as kindling the heart for prayer.

A daily routine of prayer is recommended to Peter as a salutary discipline: "It is a good thing to let prayer be the first business of the morning and the last at night."<sup>27</sup> Establishing set times for prayer does not contradict the biblical dictum to pray without ceasing (Luke 11:9–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Psalm 1:1). Nor does the practice segregate prayer from daily life, as Luther asserts that prayer and work go hand in hand. For faith, work is prayer. For unbelief, work becomes the opposite of prayer, that is, it becomes cursing.

The evil one tempts us not to pray:

Yet we must be careful not to break the habit of true prayer and imagine other works to be necessary which, after all, are nothing of the kind. Thus at the end we become lax and lazy, cool and listless toward prayer. The devil who besets us is not lazy or careless, and

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25 M. E. Schild notes: "The instructions to Master Peter reveal the great catechetical texts of Scripture and the Church as the basis of Luther's spirituality. They are basic for him, not simply because of the value set upon them by church tradition, but because they embody the very words and promises to which God stands committed. Already in 1519 in a sermon, *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession*, Luther stresses the two-edged point that Christian prayer is not self-help; on the contrary, it requires, results from, relies upon, and appeals to the divine promise which precedes it; it builds upon the faithfulness of a God who has promised to hear us, and is a direct expression of his trustworthiness" ("Praying the Catechism and Defrocking the Devil: Aspects of Luther's Spirituality," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 [August 1976]: 49).

26 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:193.

27 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:193.

our flesh is too ready and eager to sin and is disinclined to the spirit of prayer.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, Luther sees it necessary to help Peter and other Christians learn how to pray according to God’s command and promise.

Luther gives a “model prayer” that serves as a preface to the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer includes a confession of unworthiness on account of sin. It then moves to ground the prayer in the command and promise of God, echoing the language of the Small Catechism even as it implores the Father in the name of Jesus and in communion with “all thy saints and Christians on earth.”<sup>29</sup>

Each petition is used as a foundation and platform for praying. Luther shows Peter how to unpack each petition for supplication and intercession while providing model prayers as well as pastoral instruction along the way. For example, see under the Fifth Petition Luther’s parenthetical admonition concerning the person unable to forgive his neighbor.<sup>30</sup>

Faith is essential for prayer. The great word of prayer is “Amen.” It is the word of faith that binds us together with all Christians:

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say “yes” to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, “Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.” That is what Amen means.<sup>31</sup>

Praying the Lord’s Prayer does not bind us to “words or syllables” but focuses attention on the thoughts comprehended therein.

It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas in one petition that I forgo the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under

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28 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:194.

29 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:194–95.

30 See *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:197.

31 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:198.

no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.<sup>32</sup>

For Luther, there is no need to rush through the Lord's Prayer. One can be drawn into the depth of its richness as it encompasses all things for which the Christian is authorized to pray.

There is no need to rush through the Lord's Prayer. That the Lord's Prayer may be prayed at such a leisurely pace does not mean that it is prayed mindlessly. Just as a barber has to pay attention to how he uses his razor, so must the Christian attend to his prayers with "concentration and singleness of heart."<sup>33</sup> Therefore Luther concludes:

This in short is the way I use the Lord's Prayer when I pray it. To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it. What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! . . . In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (as are the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use.<sup>34</sup>

Along with the Lord's Prayer, Luther teaches Peter how to pray the Decalogue, offering a fourfold template for praying the Ten Commandments:

I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession, and fourth, a prayer.<sup>35</sup>

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32 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:198.

33 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:199.

34 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:200.

35 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:200.

Luther then provides model prayers. For example, with the First Commandment, Luther sees these four parts: (1) Instruction—God teaches and expects us to have faith in no one or nothing other than God Himself. (2) Thanksgiving—God is our God. He has provided us with all that we are and all that we have. (3) Confession—we acknowledge our “countless acts of idolatry” and our ingratitude. (4) Prayer—we petition God to preserve us from unbelief and ingratitude.<sup>36</sup> According to this pattern of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer, Luther says we see the Ten Commandments “in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book.”<sup>37</sup>

The Apostles’ Creed is also suggested as a text to kindle prayer using the same template: “If you have more time, or the inclination, you may treat the Creed in the same manner and make it into a garland of four strands.”<sup>38</sup> Luther then shows how this is to be done with each article of the Creed.

When it comes to prayer, sometimes less is more. Peter is cautioned to beware of attempting too much: “Take care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit.”<sup>39</sup> Luther did not want to overburden the laity with ponderous exercises that would discourage perseverance and singleness of heart in prayer. The texts of the catechism offer both depth and simplicity, providing the Christian with space for reflection and meditation.

Luther’s reformatory work prior to the publication of the Small Catechism in 1529 was reshaping not only a deformed doctrine but malpractices in Christian praying. As we see from his tract for Peter the barber, the catechism would become not only a primer for prayer but a text that could be prayed. Thus more than three centuries later, Wilhelm Löhe would conclude that “no catechism in the world but this can be prayed.”<sup>40</sup> The words of a late Reformation hymn become our prayer as well:

**Lord, help us ever to retain  
The Catechism’s doctrine plain  
As Luther taught the Word of truth  
In simple style to tender youth. (LSB 865:1)**

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36 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:200–201.

37 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:209.

38 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:209.

39 *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43:209.

40 Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. and ed. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 171.