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Luther on Learning

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In the 1960s there was still a lively interest in Luther as a teacher. Scholars were speaking of the contribution of Luther's catechisms to contemporary religious education. Ivar Asheim, in his book *Glaube und Erziehung bei Luther* (Luther: Faith and Education), published in 1961, could say with conviction that the wish to relate the basic tenets of the Reformation was still the primary thrust of Lutheran pedagogy.¹ Today this interest in Luther and his approach to Christian instruction has subsided. Even the flurry of Luther studies published during the Luther commemorations of the early 1980s produced no new insights in the area of learning. The 450th anniversary of the publication of Luther's catechisms was all but ignored; the question of their continuing relevance barely mentioned.

The life of Luther provides an excellent opportunity for dealing with the works of the Reformer at various stages in his development and relating them to the basic questions of the Christian life, yet Luther is mentioned only marginally in most European curriculum resources. In North America Luther fares somewhat better, but remains primarily a historic figure. The *Small Catechism* is still used, but seldom as a basic text. It has over the years lost its impact, primarily because of its antiquated images, and has most often become but one of several items in a 3-year (shorter or longer) programmed process. The *Large Catechism* is almost unknown.

Stories of Confirmation instruction and the way it was once practiced in recent generations and in North America, abound. Many pastors and older persons are quick to tell how mechanically the Catechism was used in their day. Rote memory drills were common. Recitation periods sometimes ended only when

an assigned passage could be repeated perfectly. Failures often called for hand-strappings with a piece of horse harness.

Sorry to say, much of what many experienced as Christian education can be attributed to Luther. But that isn't as strange as one might think. Luther was influenced by the pedagogical tradition of his time as well as by his own theological convictions.

John Westerhoff III put it this way in an address given at Luther- Northwestern Seminary on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of Luther's Catechisms:

Theologically only God could transform a person's heart. Still, pedagogically a fundamental change in human nature could be accomplished if doctrine was impressed or imprinted upon the human mind thereby redirecting human impulses. The indoctrination of the young was justified by Luther's understanding of human nature. Similarly the nature of saving knowledge as particular doctrine necessitated an authoritarian pedagogy which eliminated spontaneity, initiative, and subjective judgment.

Lutheran education thus embraced habituation as the only promising method to effect that personality change upon which the evangelical reform depended. The reformers had great faith in the instrumental power of Luther's catechisms. Repetition and memorization were the best means, the catechism a necessary and helpful conditioning instrument for shaping the habits of thought and, thereby, the whole person.

Reformation pedagogy intended to revive the evangelical catechetical and catechesis of the early church. Yet, it was not until Luther's time that a catechism became a self-contained book encompassing the main points of Christian doctrine in a rudimentary form suitable for instructing pastors and people in that knowledge which was necessary for salvation. Mere memorization of the catechism was considered beneficial; repeating the contents aloud was believed to release intrinsic power. At last a way to guard and propagate orthodoxy seemed possible. Is it any wonder, then, that Luther went so far as to suggest that food should be refused to those who refused to learn the basic documents of the faith contained in the Catechism.²

Overcoming this strict educational philosophy and its parallel overly rigid methodology has taken years of effort. It has been a continuing struggle for those of us who are the heirs of Luther to move from the 16th century to our own, from indoctrination to learning, from "knowing the catechism" to "living faithfully", from the "doctrine of salvation" to "being saved".

Another American scholar, Gerald Strauss, in an intriguing study called *Luther's House of Learning*, makes the distinction between the education approaches that prevailed in Luther's time and ours even clearer:

Far from setting out to prepare the child to exercise independent judgment, encouraging in him [sic] flexible attitudes, training his mind to assimilate the greatest possible number of experiences while convincing him that his personality is complex, the reformers attempted by means of rigid discipline, to subdue those traits that promoted in the adult person assertiveness, curiosity, and the restless search for new satisfaction. They saw the greatest danger to man's soul in this tendency to relate all experiences to himself and to take his own senses as the measure of all things. This model Christian was essentially a passive being prepared to acquire rather than struggle, distrustful of his own inclinations and reluctant to act on them, ready to yield where his personal wishes collide with approved norms, unsure of his private judgment, hesitant to proceed where no one guided him, certain only of his weakness as a creature and of the mortal peril of his condition as a sinner.³

We have come a long way since Luther with respect to learning theory. If what is happening in many of our churches is any indication, we still have a long way to go. However, lest we write off Luther completely I, for one, hope that we can recapture Luther's positive insights into learning, even if they need reshaping to fit our current needs. We cannot afford "to throw the baby out with the bathwater". After all, Luther was not only one of the first Protestant educators; his deliberate, systematic and sustained efforts to influence a total population and shape the personalities of a new generation were among history's most successful.

Two themes dear to Luther seem particularly relevant to the church and its learning ministry in our times: 1) the Christian community as a learning community, and 2) the *Small Catechism* as a spiritual guide.

The Christian Community as a Learning Community

One of Luther's most significant insights for educational ministry is that Christians are always "becoming", they never "become". He is quick to criticize those who all too quickly assert that they have learned everything there is to know about the faith. In his introduction to the *Large Catechism* Luther confesses:

As for myself, let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher—yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning, and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly.⁴

Learning, for Luther, is the normal and necessary response of those who believe in the ongoing instruction of God. It places them in the company of the prophets and saints who throughout their lifetimes remained students. This lifelong learning process is in fact a Christian's victory over the devil, for the devil can be "taught to death". So it is imperative that Christians be admonished "to continue with reading, learning, thinking and reflecting."

In this connection the little rhyme with which Luther concludes the "Table of Duties",⁵ in one of the most neglected parts of the *Small Catechism* is particularly instructive:

*Ein jeder lern sein Lektion,
so wird es wohl im Hause stohn.*

(Where each one learns his duties well;
the household will in wholeness dwell.)⁶

The thought expressed is diametrically opposed to medievalism. There are not two standards, a higher and a lower, one consisting in the renunciation of things earthly and the other in their use. There is but one standard that is the same for all, and there is but one sphere in which that standard is to be applied, namely, in one's daily vocation. A simple little ditty, but in it four aspects of the church's educational task, as Luther sees it, become apparent.

1) *Learning is the common duty of everyone in the Christian community.* Each one, "*Ein jeder*", is a learner. Luther, unlike many of his contemporaries, was not driven totally by a passion for enlightenment even though it is apparent that he was influenced by the humanism of the Enlightenment, and its quest for learning. Rather, as numerous passages from his preface to the *Large Catechism* demonstrate, learning for Luther is primarily a spiritual duty which no believer can avoid. Where the willingness to learn fails, persons invariably fall prey to

presumption and self-sufficiency. In other words, they become isolated from others, self-centered, and we might add, incapable of dialogue. The Christian desire to learn is an indispensable prerequisite for ecumenical dialogue, as well as for conversing with unbelievers. Without it there can be no understanding. Only learners are capable witnesses; and since all Christians are commissioned to be witnesses, they are compelled to become learners.

Luther's personal recognition and strong affirmation of the need to keep on learning throughout one's lifetime is not at odds with his emphasis on striving for a mature faith. Maturity does not mean one has learned all there is to know about some article of faith or that one "knows enough". Rather, mature Christians are those who can express their faith effectively and are capable of assuming personal responsibility as believers in their congregations and in their communities. Christian education is an essential ingredient of Christian community. The welfare of God's world is at stake. No one is exempted. Even those who are appointed teachers cannot assume they have nothing to learn. The reign of God has no place for know-it-alls. All remain students of God's Word as long as they live. All need one another, and one another's insights, in order to keep alive a sense of the holiness of human life in a world threatened by destruction and despair.

2) *Learning in the Christian Community is a shared duty.* "Ein jeder lern sein Lektion." Each one learns his or her lesson. Persons' tasks vary. Children naturally have different capacities than do adults; "common people" are not called upon to do the work of scholars. Theologians, says Luther, ought to learn Hebrew and Greek, whereas it is enough for parish pastors to know Latin.

For we need not only learned doctors and masters in the Scriptures, but also ordinary pastors, who may teach the Gospel and catechism to the young and ignorant, baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, etc. If they are not capable of contending with heretics, it does not matter. In a good building, we need both large and small timber.⁷

In three years women and children can learn more from good German books than the Papacy, with all of its educational institutions, has learned in twenty years.⁸ Of course Luther's polemic doesn't really do justice to medieval education. Still he uncovers its decisive weakness: it was accessible only to the

privileged classes. The public generally benefited very little from the insights of scholarship. That also held true for theology. The Medieval world knew few theologians who possessed and cultivated skills to communicate often complex concepts in a simple way, an art which Luther prized so highly. Luther loved dialogue and he knew how to engage in it effectively and publicly; witness his theological debates, particularly his discussion with Erasmus concerning the "Bondage of the Will". He never retreated to an academic closet. Despite the seriousness with which he assumed his tasks as a theological professor, he was always ready to meet with the town council of Wittenberg, or preach in the city church. It was not his intention to replace the distinction between clergy and laity with a new distinction between educated theologians and uneducated commoners.

That each person is admonished to learn his or her own lesson does not establish a new hierarchy. Rather, it reflects the multiplicity of gifts and tasks within every community. Gifts should be wedded to opportunities. Not all can, or need to, learn everything, but that which each one learns ought to serve all of the others.

We have already underscored the necessity of learning for witness. But the predominant model used by the church for the education of its people as witnesses has remained academic. Instead of taking the opportunity to develop new congregational structures and processes for witness we have simply assumed the approaches of formal theological education. As a result, content often remains impersonal and strategies become word-bound. The more successful we are at developing strategies that focus on persons and their specific capacities and lifestyles, the better the various ministries within a congregation will complement each other for the benefit of the entire community. To encourage each person to learn her or his own lesson is to assure that each person will achieve some clarity about what his or her talents are and the possibilities for employing them. I, for one, consider helping Christians discover and develop their God-given talents, and matching them with specific ministries, to be one of the most important steps we can take toward congregational renewal. Congregations can no longer continue to depend upon hired or called "professionals". At baptism every Christian is "ordained" to serve. The less one

knows about one's "own lesson", the more the mission of the church becomes dependent upon the "duty" of the pastor.

3) *For Luther, learning is biblically mandated.* Christians need God's Word as much as they need daily bread. "Time and paper would fail me if I were to recount all the blessings that flow from God's Word,"⁹ says Luther. And of the Catechism he emphasizes that "everything contained in Scripture is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms."¹⁰ From the Bible a Christian learns what is important for life. Familiarity with the Word of God strengthens persons facing temptation. According to Luther, it is the most effective "incense" against the devil a Christian has. This being the case it becomes quite evident that learning isn't merely the gaining of knowledge on the rational level. The whole person is involved in warding off "the daily incessant attacks and ambushes of the devil with his thousand arts." And it is only the power of God's Word which "burns the devil and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help."¹¹

We may well ask if Christian education today is truly biblical. The question is not whether the lessons in a given curriculum are based on biblical texts or expound biblical themes. It is the orientation of the learning process itself that is central. Teachers ought not be compelled to deal with as many Bible texts as possible. Their real mandate is to accompany people on their faith journeys, and this calls for a focus on the Gospel.

Far too often teachers become so dependent upon the teaching resources they are provided with that they overlook the natural opportunities they have to work with biblical texts. Strange and new activities are not always as able to captivate the attention of learners as is an interesting and thorough treatment of the biblical story itself. Lengthy introductions and colourful activities often tend to disperse rather than focus attention. A teacher who spends more time helping students construct the houses of Jericho than in dealing with the story of Zacchaeus, is like a broadjumper who expends all of his energy on the approach. Not that methods or techniques are unimportant. There is a strong correlation between learning and doing. Handicrafts are indispensable. But when too much time and effort are spent on introducing learners to a topic, the topic itself may not receive the attention required. It would be an illusion to think that by constructing the houses of Jericho

students were already “playing” with the basic message of the text. “Doing” may be fun; but is it always more fun than listening to a story? Positive learning experiences—whether they be activities, stories, projects or simple conversations—are not enough in and of themselves. The point is whether or not they provide help for Christian living. The greater the distance between the pedagogical method and the biblical message, the less the probability that students will learn anything for their lives as Christians. Of course nothing much is accomplished by simply telling a Bible story either. Fantasy and creativity are essential to the learning process whether one begins with Bible texts or with life situations.

Luther was not a biblicist. “Whoever is to teach others, especially out of the Holy Scriptures, and rightly to understand this book, must first have observed and learned to know the world.” “One knife cuts better than another, and so it is that a person who understands the languages and arts, can speak and teach best.”¹²

4) *Finally, for Luther, learning is a practical matter.* Its intent is new behaviour, a new way of conducting one’s life. In this insight Luther is fully in agreement with contemporary pedagogical goals. For him, all learning serves the “welfare and improvement” of society.

The welfare of a city does not consist alone in great treasures, firm walls, beautiful houses, and munitions of war; indeed, where all these are found, and reckless fools come into power, the city sustains the greater injury. But the highest welfare, safety, and power of a city consists in able, learned, wise, upright, cultivated citizens, who can secure, preserve and utilize every treasure and advantage.¹³

Where students know the Scriptures and “hear the history and maxims of the world, and see how things went with each city, kingdom, prince, man and woman,” they will in a short time “comprehend as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels, undertakings, successes, and failures, of the whole world” and from this knowledge they will learn to “regulate their views and order their course of life in the fear of God, having become wise in judging and what is to be sought and what avoided in this outward life, and capable of advising and directing others.”¹⁴

Merely bringing up children to be young gentlemen and ladies is not sufficient. New circumstances demand new approaches. “The world has changed, and things go differently.”

Textbooks on Latin grammar and commentaries on philosophy are not enough. "The devil much prefers blockheads and drones" but our greatest need today is "to aid and benefit mankind with accomplished citizens."¹⁵

Luther never developed his own pedagogy; he didn't see this as his task. He took his practical suggestions from the educational theories and approaches of his times. Most of it is dated. Those who criticize the pedagogy of Luther's time as inappropriate and unacceptable in today's world are correct. But Luther himself was not always a strict adherent to current methods. By nature an innovator, he was quick to recognize and affirm the value of his own experiences as a father and as an educator. Occasionally what he says has a remarkably modern ring to it despite the inflexibility which generally characterizes his pedagogical instructions.¹⁶

In the *Large Catechism* Luther suggests that learning should be made pleasant to children. "Since we are preaching to children, we must also prattle with them." And on another occasion, Luther not only acknowledges but encourages play as a stimulus for learning. After commending an interesting device (two little bags with pockets) for impressing the meaning of faith and love, he says, "Let no one think himself too wise, and disdain such child's play." Moreover Luther finds validity for this approach in the incarnation.

When Christ wished to teach men, he became a man. If we are to teach children, we must become children. Would to God we had more of this child's play! We should then see in a short time a great treasure of Christian people, souls rich in the Scripture and in the knowledge of God.¹⁷

When one realizes that Luther did not become a father until he was 40, and that previous to that time he had been a monk living in a monastery far removed from family life and children, the understanding he has for children and young people is surprising. Luther does not see them as objects but as persons, even as partners whose help he needs. In his *Table Talk*, for example, he maintains that without the presence of children he would never have been able to overcome his "*anfechtungen*" (spiritual attacks). "I have often need, in my tribulations, to talk even with a child, in order to expel such thoughts as the devil possesses me with; and this teaches me not to boast as if of myself I were able to help myself."¹⁸ When Luther writes

about his "deep interest in behalf of the poor, wretched, and neglected youth," he is not thinking about pedagogical programs; he is passionately calling for parents to take action on their behalf, to become involved in their growth and development. It is not enough to provide "alone for the bodies of our children." "We must be aroused and incited to the duty of educating our children and of considering their highest interests." "Were we would give a florin to defend ourselves against the Turks, we should give a hundred florins to protect us against ignorance, even if only one boy could be taught to be a truly Christian man; for the good such a man can accomplish is beyond all computation."¹⁹ That children are daily born and grow up with none "who feel an interest in them" is the work of the devil, the arch-enemy of all learning. The salvation and welfare of the individual as well as the preservation and maintenance of society are at stake. To neglect learning is to "let the devil become god and lord" and the world become a "suburb of hell".

Often religious educators, including pastors and lay leaders, are accused of giving too much attention to the cognitive level of learning, at the expense of the affective and volitional domains, and rightly so. But they cannot call on Luther for support. Luther never lost sight of the whole person. For him, learning embraced all of life and intentionally led to the mature expression of faith.

The *Small Catechism* as a Spiritual Guide

To teach the Bible is to equip persons for witness and service. But what about the *Small Catechism*'s place in the learning process? Is it still a viable resource? It may represent a faithful striving of Luther to educate the people of his time, but is it a faithful response to the contemporary demands of the church's educational ministry? Or should it be retained merely as a confessional document and retired from practical use?

The word "catechism" has, over the last years, taken on a negative connotation. Pastors as well as parents have become skeptical of its usefulness as a learning tool. Theologians are quick to remind us that it says little about "justification by grace, through faith", the heart of Lutheranism. Critics point

to its outmoded language. Obviously Luther's thought forms and metaphors have their roots in the agrarian milieu of the middle ages. Who today, for example, thinks of "daily bread" in relationship to "fields", "cattle", "manservants" or "maid-servants"? Luther wanted the *Small Catechism* to be a simple "key to the Bible", and it actually became just that during his lifetime. But it does not take long before one realizes that in our day Luther's explanations themselves require explaining. Over the decades his carefully crafted "key to Scripture" has become a "lock" for which teachers have had to fashion their own new keys. Would it not be better then, to set what has become a lock aside and take a fresh direct route to the biblical message? Perhaps! But there is still much in the *Small Catechism* that has not been eroded by time or altered by social change; much that still deserves applause for its literary simplicity and its theological emphasis.

Several recent European attempts to relate the *Small Catechism* to contemporary needs have indicated that its rehabilitation may yet be possible, if not as a textbook, then as a spiritual guide.

Karl Witt has developed a "liturgical approach" which he describes in a booklet called *Confirmation Instruction* (Göttingen 1959). In his view the *Small Catechism* is used more appropriately as a prayer book than as a textbook. The statements and explanations of the catechism are not analyzed and interpreted during the study session. Instead they appear in prayer form at the conclusion of each session, along with related Bible passages. A step in the same direction was taken by the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America in 1963 when the *Small Catechism* was published in prayer form. However, this recasting of the texts was intended merely to supplement rather than replace the *Small Catechism* as a textbook, and never received widespread usage.

Wolfgang Grünberg, in an article that appeared in the journal *Pastoral Theologie*, No. 70 (1981), interprets the *Small Catechism* as an aid to "Learning with the Rhythm of Life". In this approach the catechism is part of a resource provided to parents as "an elementary primer for family worship". In contrast to Witt's approach, Grünberg attempts to integrate and relate liturgical and pedagogical elements.

Shortly before Grünberg's work appeared, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) issued a new *Evangelischer Gemeindekatechismus* (Evangelical Congregational Catechism) under the leadership of Horst Reller, Hermann Müller and Martin Voigt (Gütersloh, 1979). This new adult catechism was seen, not as a replacement for Luther's *Small Catechism*, but as "an explanation of the *Small Catechism* for people of our time." Wherever applicable, quotations from the *Small Catechism* are included in the margins, and the last major section of the book, entitled, "This Book and Luther's *Small Catechism*", is devoted entirely to relating everything that has been said throughout the new catechism to Luther's *Small Catechism*. Even more remarkable, however, is the explicit reference to spirituality.

The preface by Dr. Gerhard Heintze, Landesbischof, opens with this quote from the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, November 23 to December 10, 1976: "We long for a new spirituality to permeate our planning, thinking, and action"; it goes on to affirm that the new adult catechism is a response to this widespread yearning for spiritual experience and practice. Moreover, in the section on "This Book and Luther's *Small Catechism*", the authors point out that they have intentionally included a short segment, "For Contemplation", at the conclusion of each exposition of the catechism in order to enable the "meditational appropriation" of Luther's statements. Nor is this some sort of innovation. "Luther also considered the *Small Catechism* both as an informative textbook and as a handbook for prayer and meditation. Baptized Christian youth were to make the formulations their own through repetitive use." Indeed, "As a meditational handbook and spiritual guide the *Small Catechism* is filled with as yet unexplored vitality."²⁰

An English adaptation of the *Evangelischer Gemeindekatechismus* called *Evangelical Catechism: Christian Faith in the World Today*, was published in 1982 by Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis. Regrettably, this so-called "American Edition" contains none of the references to Luther's *Small Catechism* included in the German original. The only recognizable element of spirituality retained is the section titled, "For Reflection", which concludes each chapter; it consists of six items: a passage from Scripture, three contemporary quotations, a hymn, and a prayer.²¹ Truncated as it is, this attempt

at providing a modern adult catechism is the best presently available.

Stimulated by my work in translating the *Evangelischer Gemeindekatechismus*, I begin exploring Luther's spirituality looking for evidence of its expression in his catechisms. The most significant insights into how Luther went about meditating come from a well-known booklet he sent to his good friend and barber, Peter Beskendorf, in 1535, entitled, "A simple Way to Pray". In 1985, I wrote an article on "Praying the Catechism" in which I summarize this booklet as follows:

There are five distinct steps. The first is preparation, a warming of the heart by a recitation to oneself of the Ten Commandments, some words of Christ and the Lord's Prayer, all set in the context of the times. "Prayer," says Luther, "calls for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer." "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." This kindling of "a flame in the heart" is then followed by a fourfold meditation on the particular items one may choose "depending upon mood and feeling." Luther speaks of it as "fashioning a garland of four strands": instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petition. So then, freeing himself "as much as possible from distractions," he meditates on each item, according to these four categories: What ought I learn? For what should I be thankful? What should I confess? and, For what ought I to pray? Then after praying he ceases.²²

Given this model I determined to practice it in my own prayer life using various passages of Scripture and segments of the *Small Catechism*. At the same time I set out to explore the catechisms for signs that might indicate they were intended to be more than textbooks on Christian doctrine. The evidence was overwhelming.

In version after version, over a period of some 13 years of intense pastoral work with "*pueris et rudibus*", children and common people, Luther reduced and simplified the complexities of faith until he was convinced that anyone could easily retain them in mind and heart. In the shorter preface to the *Large Catechism*, he says the catechism should be impressed upon persons "not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories."²³ In other words, the catechisms were designed to be repeated and internalized—to be memorized or "learned by heart" in the fullest sense of

this expression, that is, with one's whole being. Already in "A Short Explanation of the Ten Commandments", a poster prepared in 1518, Luther declares, "Enough has been written in books, but it hasn't been written in the heart."

One can't help but note Luther's insistence that the catechism is intended to be used regularly, that is, as a daily discipline by adults as well as children. "Nothing," he says, "is so effectual against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy oneself with the Word of God, talk about it, and meditate on it....For this reason alone you should eagerly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism, even if the only blessing and benefit you obtain from it is to rout the devil and evil thoughts."²⁴

At another point in the same preface, Luther is even more explicit about his intended use of the catechism as a source book for spiritual formation, that is, as a meditational and dialogical resource for relating faith and life. "It is highly profitable and fruitful to read the catechism and make it the subject of meditation and conversation. In such reading, conversation and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and fervor."²⁵

The content of the catechism, viewed from this perspective, takes on new vitality. Today we speak much of "centering".

The act of centering, of excluding all things in order to be open to the one thing that is essential, and its relationship to action is built into almost every part of the catechism. Each of Luther's explanations to the commandments begins with the words, "We should fear and love God." "We are," he says, "called first to fix our whole heart and confidence in God alone to embrace him and cling to him." And the goal of this centering always follows: "so that." So that, we do not take God's name surreptitiously, or "despise or anger our parents," or "hurt our neighbour in any way," etc.

Luther never asked the familiar catechetical question we attributed to him—"What does this mean?" (*Was bedeutet das?*) His question was, "What is this?" (*Was ist das?*) The difference is significant. To ask "what does this mean?" is to direct attention to the cognitive realm, but the catechetical spirituality envisioned by Luther was essentially holistic. It placed the whole person, the affective (feeling) and the conative (doing) domain as well as the cognitive (thinking) in direct relationship with the reality of God and [God's] will for all of life. It was under the influence of rationalism that Luther's more meditational approach was eventually supplanted by

instructional methodologies that focused on understanding and intellectual comprehension. On the American scene the translation—or rather mistranslation—“What does this mean?” made a subtle contribution to that shift.

To ask what a reality is, is to ask about it as a whole, to seek to “know” it in the biblical sense, and so be able to “name it.” To ask what any work of God is, is to ask about the impact it has on my life. What difference does it make? How do I appropriate it or incorporate it into my life?

It is interesting to note that the Evangelical Church of Germany has restored Luther’s original question—“What is this?”—to its catechetical resources.²⁶

What of Luther’s approach to Christian education? Does his *Small Catechism* still have a place in the future of catechetical instruction? The answer to both questions is a qualified yes. Yes, provided we are aware of the limitations of medieval pedagogy and recognize Luther’s own unique educational innovations. Yes, provided we see the *Small Catechism* primarily as a handbook of meditation and spiritual guidance for adults and not merely as a compendium of basic Christian teachings or a “key to Scripture” for 14-year-olds. We must be willing to divest ourselves of that which hinders rather than helps our ministry of learning, but we must also be committed to underscoring those themes that seem particularly relevant. It is not our duty to be faithful to Luther, but rather, to be as faithful as Luther was to the Gospel.

Notes

- ¹ Ivar Asheim, *Glaube und Erziehung bei Luther* (Heidelberg, 1961).
- ² John H. Westerhoff III, “Catechetics, Catechesis, and Luther’s Catechisms.” An unpublished address given at Luther-Northwestern Seminary on the occasion of the 450th Anniversary of Luther’s Catechisms (Minneapolis, 1970).
- ³ Gerald Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 136.
- ⁴ “Martin Luther’s Preface to The Large Catechism,” *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert (ed.) (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959) 359.
- ⁵ Ibid., “The Small Catechism (IX) Table of Duties,” 354–356.
- ⁶ I have chosen to use my own translation. The translation in *The Book of Concord* edited by Theodore G. Tappert (p. 356) reads as follows:

Let each his lesson learn with care,
And all the household well will fare.

- 7 F.V.N. Painter, "Martin Luther's Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School," *Luther on Education* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989) 235.
- 8 Ibid. 236.
- 9 "Martin Luther's Preface to The Large Catechism," *The Book of Concord*, 360.
- 10 Ibid. 363.
- 11 Ibid. 360.
- 12 F.V.N. Painter, *Luther on Education*, 148.
- 13 Ibid., "Luther's Letter to the Mayors and Aldermen of All the Cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools," 180-181.
- 14 Ibid. 197.
- 15 Ibid. 200.
- 16 On learning languages Luther says: "Everyone learns... languages much better from talking at home, at the market, or in the church, than from books." On history: "Histories... are wonderfully useful in understanding and regulating the course of the world, and in disclosing the marvelous works of God." On nature: "We are at the dawn of a new era, for we are beginning to recover the knowledge of the eternal world that we had lost through the fall of Adam. We now observe creatures properly,... Erasmus is indifferent,... and looks upon eternal objects as cows look upon a new gate." On music and physical fitness: "These two exercises and pastimes please me best, namely music and gymnastics, of which the first drives away all care and melancholy from the heart, and the latter produces elasticity of the body and preserves the health." Statements of Luther quoted in F.V.N. Painter, *Luther on Education*, 158-166.
- 17 Ibid. 155.
- 18 Thomas S. Kepler, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1952) 289.
- 19 F.V.N. Painter, "Luther's Letter to the Mayors and Aldermen of All the Cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools," *Luther on Education*, 173.
- 20 Horst Reller, Hermann Müller, Martin Voigt (eds.), *Evangelischer Gemeinde catechismus* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus/Gerd Mohn, 1979).
- 21 *Evangelical Catechism: Christian Faith in the World Today*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982).
- 22 Lawrence W. Denef, "Praying the Catechism," *Lutheran Forum* (Advent 1985) 18.
- 23 "Preface to The Large Catechism," *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed., (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 364.
- 24 Ibid. 359, 360.
- 25 Ibid. 359.
- 26 Lawrence W. Denef, "Praying the Catechism," 19.