

Module 303: Luther's Small Catechism

The Small Catechism of Martin Luther. Translated by Robert E. Smith, 1994. Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited for the web by Dan Graves.

“The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household.”

Module Introduction

The Small Catechism is also known as *Luther's Little Instruction Book*. Luther wrote it in 1529 as a guide for fathers in teaching the main points of the gospel to their children and servants. He had noticed that while the Protestant gospel had been preached for ten years, there had been such confusion in Germany between Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed teaching that religious education in the family home was in a sorry state. *The Small Catechism* was written to fill the gap.

It was to be one of Luther's most influential works, because, while it does not have the theological depth of his more famous writings, it was learned by generations of German children who would never read his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* or *The Freedom of a Christian*. It has been described as 'one of the noblest monuments of the Reformation' (Williston Walker *A History of the Christian Church*).

In the first three sections, Luther unpacks the teaching of three essential Christian texts: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. (We omit the Ten Commandments, but Luther explains that they all expound one basic point.)

In the second half Luther looks at the three sacraments: baptism, confession and communion. Notice which parts of the catechism are simply Christian beliefs and which are distinctly Lutheran ones.

II. THE CREED

The Creed: The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household

I. The First Article: On Creation “I believe in God the

Almighty Father, Creator of Heaven and Earth.”

Q. What does this mean?

A. I believe that God created me, along with all creatures. He gave to me body and soul, eyes, ears and all the other parts of my body, my mind and all my senses and preserves them as well. He gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and land, wife and children, fields, animals and all I own. Every day He abundantly provides everything I need to nourish this body and life. He protects me against all danger, shields and defends me from all evil. He does all this because of His pure, fatherly and divine goodness and His mercy, not because I've earned it or deserved it. For all of this, I must thank Him, praise Him, serve Him and obey Him. Yes, this is true!

II. The Second Article: On Redemption “And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, descended to Hell, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended to Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God the Almighty Father. From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.”

Q. What does this mean?

A. I believe that Jesus Christ is truly God, born of the Father in eternity and also truly man, born of the Virgin Mary. He is my Lord! He redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, bought and won me from all sins, death and the authority of the Devil. It did not cost Him gold or silver, but His holy, precious blood, His innocent body - His death! Because of this, I am His very own, will live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him righteously, innocently and blessedly forever, just as He is risen from death, lives and reigns forever. Yes, this is true.

III. The Third Article: On Becoming Holy “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the community of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and an everlasting life. Amen.”

Q. What does this mean?

A. I believe that I cannot come to my Lord Jesus Christ by my own intelligence or power. But the Holy Spirit calls me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as He calls, gathers together, enlightens and makes holy the whole Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus in the one, true faith. In this Church, He generously forgives each day every sin committed by me and by every believer. On the last day, He will raise me and all the dead from the grave. He will give eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. Yes, this is true!

III. THE LORD’S PRAYER

The *Our Father*, The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household

I. Introduction “Our Father, Who is in Heaven.”

Q. What does this mean?

A. In this introduction, God invites us to believe that He is our real Father and we are His real children, so that we will pray with trust and complete confidence, in the same way beloved children approach their beloved Father with their requests.

II. The First Request “May Your name be holy.”

Q. What does this mean?

A. Of course, God's name is holy in and of itself, but by this request, we pray that He will make it holy among us, too.

Q. How does this take place?

A. When God's Word is taught clearly and purely, and when we live holy lives as God's children based upon it. Help us, Heavenly Father, to do this! But anyone who teaches and lives by something other than God's Word defiles God's name among us. Protect us from this, Heavenly Father!

III. The Second Request "Your Kingdom come."

Q. What does this mean?

A. Truly God's Kingdom comes by itself, without our prayer. But we pray in this request that it come to us as well.

Q. How does this happen?

A. When the Heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that we believe His holy Word by His grace and live godly lives here in this age and there in eternal life.

IV. The Third Request "May Your will be accomplished, as it is Heaven, so may it be on Earth."

Q. What does this mean?

A. Truly, God's good and gracious will is accomplished without our prayer. But we pray in this request that it be accomplished among us as well.

Q. How does this happen?

A. When God destroys and interferes with every evil will and all evil advice, which will not allow God's Kingdom to come, such as the Devil's will, the world's will and will of our bodily desires. It also happens when God strengthens us by faith and by His Word and keeps us living by them faithfully until

the end of our lives. This is His will, good and full of grace.

V. The Fourth Request "Give us our daily bread today."

Q. What does this mean?

A. Truly, God gives daily bread to evil people, even without our prayer. But we pray in this request that He will help us realize this and receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.

Q. What does "Daily Bread" mean?

A. Everything that nourishes our body and meets its needs, such as: Food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, yard, fields, cattle, money, possessions, a devout spouse, devout children, devout employees, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors and other things like these.

VI. The Fifth Request "And forgive our guilt, as we forgive those guilty of sinning against us."

Q. What does this mean?

A. We pray in this request that our Heavenly Father will neither pay attention to our sins nor refuse requests such as these because of our sins and because we are neither worthy nor deserve the things for which we pray. Yet He wants to give them all to us by His grace, because many times each day we sin and truly deserve only punishment. Because God does this, we will, of course, want to forgive from our hearts and willingly do good to those who sin against us.

VII. The Sixth Request "And lead us not into temptation."

Q. What does this mean?

A. God tempts no one, of course, but we pray in this request

that God will protect us and save us, so that the Devil, the world, and our bodily desires will neither deceive us nor seduce us into heresy, despair or other serious shame or vice, and so that we will win and be victorious in the end, even if they attack us.

VIII. The Seventh Request "But set us free from the Evil One."

Q. What does this mean?

A. We pray in this request, as a summary, that our Father in Heaven will save us from every kind of evil that threatens body, soul, property and honor. We pray that when at last our final hour has come, He will grant us a blessed death, and, in His grace, bring us to Himself from this valley of tears.

IX. "Amen."

Q. What does this mean?

A. That I should be certain that such prayers are acceptable to the Father in Heaven and will be granted, that He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and that He promises to answer us. Amen. Amen. This means: Yes, yes it will happen this way.

IV. HOLY BAPTISM

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism: The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household

I. Q. What is Baptism?

A. Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water contained within God's command and united with God's Word.

Q. Which Word of God is this?

A. The one which our Lord Christ spoke in the last chapter of Matthew: Go into all the world, teaching all heathen nations, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

II.

Q. What does Baptism give? What good is it?

A. It gives the forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the Devil, gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, just as God's words and promises declare.

Q. What are these words and promises of God?

A. Our Lord Christ spoke one of them in the last chapter of Mark: Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be damned.

III.

Q. How can water do such great things?

A. Water doesn't make these things happen, of course. It is God's Word, which is with and in the water. Because, without God's Word, the water is plain water and not baptism. But with God's Word it is a Baptism, a grace-filled water of life, a bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul said to Titus in the third chapter: Through this bath of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that we, justified by the same grace are made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying.

IV. Q. What is the meaning of such a water Baptism?

A. It means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, in turn, a new person daily come forth and rise

from death again. He will live forever before God in righteousness and purity.

Q. Where is this written?

A. St. Paul says to the Romans in chapter six: We are buried with Christ through Baptism into death, so that, in the same way Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, thus also must we walk in a new life.

V. CONFESSION

How One Should Teach the Uneducated to Confess

I. Q. What is confession?

First, a person admits his sin

Second, a person receives absolution or forgiveness from the confessor, as if from God Himself, without doubting it, but believing firmly that his sins are forgiven by God in Heaven through it.

II. Q. Which sins should people confess?

A. When speaking to God, we should plead guilty to all sins, even those we don't know about, just as we do in the "Our Father," but when speaking to the confessor, only the sins we know about, which we know about and feel in our hearts.

Q. Which are these?

A. Consider here your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father? A mother? A son? A daughter? A husband? A wife? A servant? Are you disobedient, unfaithful or lazy? Have you hurt anyone with your words or actions? Have you stolen, neglected your duty, let things go or injured someone?

VI. THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

The Simple Way a Father Should Present it to His Household

I. Q. What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

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

II. Q. Where is that written?

A. The holy apostles Matthew, Mark and Luke and St. Paul write this: Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the night on which He was betrayed, took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to His disciples and said: "Take! Eat! This is My body, which is given for you. Do this to remember Me!" In the same way He also took the cup after supper, gave thanks, gave it to them, and said: "Take and drink from it, all of you! This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you to forgive sins. This do, as often as you drink it, to remember Me!"

III. Q. What good does this eating and drinking do?

A. These words tell us: "Given for you" and "Shed for you to forgive sins." Namely, that the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us through these words in the sacrament. Because, where sins are forgiven, there is life and salvation as well.

IV. Q. How can physical eating and drinking do such great things?

A. Of course, eating and drinking do not do these things. These words, written here, do them: "given for you" and "shed for you to forgive sins." These words, along with physical eating and drinking are the important part of the sacrament. Anyone who believes these words has what they say and what they record, namely, the forgiveness of sins.

V. Q. Who, then, receives such a sacrament in a worthy way?

A. Of course, fasting and other physical preparations are excellent disciplines for the body. But anyone who believes these words, "Given for you," and "Shed for you to forgive sins," is really worthy and well prepared. But whoever doubts or does not believe these words is not worthy and is unprepared, because the words, "for you" demand a heart that fully believes.

Discussion Starters:

Apostle's Creed: In the creed Luther focuses not just on what we believe but on what difference it should make to our daily lives. What difference does it make to believe in God as creator? What difference does it make to believe in Jesus as savior? What difference does the Holy Spirit make in our lives?

The Lord's Prayer: Luther seems to say that each of the things we pray for in the Lord's Prayer will happen without our prayers. Why then should we bother saying the prayer?

Baptism: What according to Luther does baptism achieve? Do you agree with his account? From what he says here alone, would you be able to work out whether Luther believed in infant baptism or not?

Confession: What is the reason for confessing one's sins? What does it accomplish? Do you agree with Luther about the importance of this practice?

Communion: What is communion, according to Luther, and what does it achieve? Do you agree with his account?

Which of these five sections do you think would be the most controversial?

If you had to put together a similar six-part starter pack for training young Christians, would you choose the same six subjects? If not, which ones would you go for?

Bible Verses

Prayer: Luke 11:1-13 Baptism: 1 Peter 3:18-22, Romans 6:1-5 Confession: James 5:13-20 Communion: 1 Corinthians: 11:23-32; John 6:48-58