

# THE ONLY CATECHISM THAT CAN BE PRAYED!

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There have been many catechisms written by many people throughout the Christian era, but none is as exquisite as Luther's *Small Catechism*. Brief, simple, yet deeply profound, summarizing the whole of the Christian faith in a few easily memorizable pages, it is one of Luther's crowning achievements. Most of us remember memorizing it in confirmation classes as young men and women, and having to recite portions of it on confirmation day. And so it holds a place of fondness in our hearts as a part of our early Christian education.

But did you know that Luther's *Small Catechism* was not simply written to instruct children, but to be a regular resource for Christians of all ages? Listen to what Dr. Luther said to those who thought the Catechism was only for children:

"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. These dainty, fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to become doctors above all doctors, to know all there is to be known. Well, this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the peoples' souls, yes, even God and his Word. They need not fear a fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need is to become children and begin learning their ABC's which they think they have outgrown long ago" (Large Catechism, Preface, 7-8; Tappert, p. 359).

If Luther, who wrote the *Small Catechism*, used it daily, and still couldn't master it, shouldn't it be a part of our daily lives as well? But how? Someone, I don't remember who, said that part of the genius of the *Small Catechism* is that it is the only catechism ever written that is capable of being prayed. One can simply open the Catechism and begin at any point and address the words to the Lord. For example, the first commandment says:

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. What does this mean? We should fear, love and trust in God above all things."

Here one may turn it into a simple prayer by saying something like:

"You command me to have no other gods before you, O Lord God. This means that you want me to fear, love and trust in You above all things. Forgive my failures in this regard, and help me to put You first."

Or you may meditate more deeply on a portion of the Catechism and pray something like this:

"You alone are God, O Lord, and beside You there is no other. Yet we sinners are wont to make our own gods and to worship the creatures rather than the creator. In this first commandment You address me personally, as well as all other people, and command that we worship You alone as God. We are to reverence You above all other things; love You above all other things; and trust You above all other things. You are to be our highest good. I rejoice that You want to be my God, and want me to be Your dear child. Yet I must acknowledge that I frequently fear, love and trust in other people, institutions, and material goods more than I do you. Thus I have broken this commandment and stand under its condemnation. But I am sorry for my sins in this regard and flee from them to Your Son Jesus Christ my Savior, and I ask you to forgive me for His sake. And, dear God, help me by Your Holy Spirit to walk in Your commandments and to put You first in my life, etc."

Luther was so delighted with the Catechism as a resource for worship and devotion, that he wrote a hymn for each of the six chief parts:

1. The Ten Commandments - Hymn 287, "That Man a Godly Life Might Live"

2. The Creed - Hymn 251, "We All Believe in One True God"
3. The Lord's Prayer - Hymn 458, "Our Father, Thou in Heaven Above"
4. Holy Baptism - Hymn LW-223, "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord"
5. The Office of the Keys and Confession - Hymn 329, "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee"
6. The Sacrament of the Altar - Hymn 313, "O Lord, We Praise Thee"

In 1535, Luther's barber, Peter, asked him for advice on how an ordinary working man could pray without being disturbed by worldly thoughts and occupations. Luther's answer came in the form of a brief little work entitled: "A Simple Way to Pray (to Peter the barber at Wittenberg)". The chief parts of the Catechism form the backbone of Luther's instructions.

The *Small Catechism* is such a valuable resource because, when it is used properly, it keeps before our mind's eye a brief summary and explanation of the teaching of the Scriptures. It helps us to examine ourselves in preparation to receiving Holy Communion. It helps us to order our prayers according to the will of God. It helps us to understand the Bible, and to answer peoples' questions. It helps us to tell others of Christ and salvation.

One of the weaknesses of Lutheranism in these closing days of the 20th century is that the teaching, learning, and using of the *Small Catechism* has been de-emphasized since the 1960's. The same modern theories of education that have destroyed our public schools, have also taken their toll in the church. Memorization has been very unpopular in the past few decades as we have experimented with "dynamic, meaningful curricula". The result? Almost no one under the age of 50 can recite the Catechism from memory, and children, who never have to memorize anything in public school, are nearly incapable of it when they get to confirmation class. And this is tragic, since Luther once said that no one should be admitted to Holy Communion who cannot recite the Catechism satisfactorily.

Recently, however, thanks be to God, many in our Synod have been rediscovering the value of the Catechism, and of proper catechetical instruction, not only for children, but all, young and old. Our beloved president, Dr. Barry has recently written a book entitled, [Catechesis in the Lutheran Congregation](#), in which he urges all of us to return to the proper use of Luther's *Small Catechism* and to serious lifelong catechesis in our life together as fellow Lutherans.

So, if you have put your catechism away for safe keeping, take it out and begin using it daily, especially when examining yourself in preparation for Holy Communion. If, for some reason, you don't have a copy, speak to Pastor and he will see that you get one. Those of you who have a catechism, have either the blue 1943 edition, or the blue 1991 edition. Please bear in mind that those books contain two separate documents in one cover. The first section, covering the first 35 or so pages, is the *Small Catechism* written by Luther. The second, longer section, is a series of more than 300 questions, answers, and Bible proof-texts that serve as an explanation of Luther's Catechism, written by synodical theologians. When we refer to Luther's *Small Catechism*, it is the first brief section that we are referring to, which is also available separately in pamphlet form.

Finally, the *Small Catechism* is not meant to be a replacement for, or supplement to the Bible. It is a faithful summary and explanation of the teaching of the Bible. Only the most learned Bible students can keep the whole Bible before their mind's eye, if even they can. But even a child can be thoroughly acquainted with the Catechism so that it serves to keep the teachings of the Scripture in his mind. This being done, we will be far less likely to be carried about by every wind of doctrine and every religious fad that comes along, and far more likely to stand firm in Christ and the grace of God.