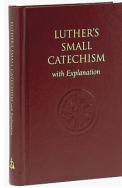


Reformation Reflections

In a world where we demand “new,” “fresh,” and “different,” there is a cornerstone of the Lutheran Church that turns 488 years old this year. That cornerstone is Luther’s Small Catechism.



As Luther looked around in the early 1500s, he found himself part of a church where the Gospel was not preached, where the bishops, priests, and monks were concerned only for themselves and their own wellbeing, and where the word of God was not being taught. Because schools were uncommon at that time, many parishes were filled with uneducated members, and nothing of the Word of God was taught, much less to the young people.

The extent of Christian education was limited to a booklet published by the Roman Catholic Church which contained the alphabet, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and a number of prayers, including idolatrous prayers and adorations of the saints. These booklets were provided to the parents in order to teach their children, although in many cases the parents themselves could not read either. There was no follow up or reinforcement by the priests, much less instructions in the basic Christian faith for the young people of the church.

Luther began his corrective work in church education, using material from sermons prepared in 1516 and 1517. Covering the Lord’s Supper and the Ten Commandments, he added

a section on the Apostles’ Creed, and published the *Confessional Mirror for the Common People*. In these three parts, explained Luther, are contained the essentials of Christian knowledge, for those who are unable to read the whole Bible.

Due to the miserable state of affairs he saw while visiting churches in Saxony the previous year, Luther began preparing what would become his “Small Catechism” in January of 1529. Initially, it was a series of posters that displayed the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments along with their explanations. Designed to be hung in the classroom, and soon joined by two more “posters,” one with the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and one covering Confession and Absolution, these formed the framework for Luther’s small catechism in booklet form. Adding a preface, prayers for morning and evening and meals, a table of duties, and a marriage formula (later removed), the catechism was prepared and made available for home use, **“As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.”**



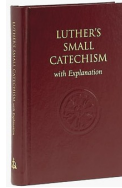
While preparing the Small Catechism, Luther also wrote the Large Catechism. The Small Catechism was written for home and school use; the Large Catechism was written **“especially to all pastors and preachers that they should daily exercise themselves in the Catechism.”**

The Large Catechism was prepared both for the clergy and for the “hausfater” (literally “house father”) as a source of expanded teaching on the Small Catechism.

Luther also campaigned for Lutheran schools in which the Small Catechism was used as a primer for teaching reading. This was due largely to the lack of education for “common children,” as the prevalent schools were classical Latin schools for the well-to-do. The need for good education, good Christian education, was addressed by Luther in his campaigns for the use of the Small and Large Catechisms, in home, school, and church, and in literacy so that everyone had access not only to the Catechism, but to the entirety of God’s Word. His achievements in these areas are still in use today in the area of parish education, both in Sunday Schools, Catechism classes, and Lutheran Schools.

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