

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Why are we even bothering with the Small Catechism? Are you asking yourself that question? It is okay if you are; truthfully it does seem odd. The Catechism is used when we teach the faith and that happens in confirmation. It is how our membership is set up...you aren't officially a member till you know the faith and we confirm that knowledge. We are all members, there is no need to pick up the catechism...right?

Justus Jonas was colleague of Luther at the University of Wittenberg. When asked about Luther's Small Catechism, he wrote: "The Catechism is a little book. It can be bought for less than six bucks, but six thousand worlds could not pay for it. **If the Lutheran Church had brought no other benefit into the world that that it made this Catechism known to the people, it would have done more than all the university and seminaries on the earth.**"¹ When Martin set out to write his Catechism, he intended this little book to be used by parents at home to teach the faith to their children. In those baptismal vows that parents make, we tell the parents (and sponsors) that they must put in the child's hand the scriptures and teach them the 10 commandments, the creed, and the Lord's prayer. While we do a good job at putting a Bible in the hands of parents to teach the faith, we don't really give them any help in teaching the other things they have been charged with, so that has to change and it will.

But what about your own development of faith? How many of you have picked up that book? I, for one, never realized how much I take that little red book for granted. I really only read it when I have to teach it in Confirmation and frankly, I have become so accustomed to teaching it, that I really have not pondered what was written nor have I thought about the significance of this little book.

And Luther's writing a Catechism was not all that crazy. There have been other Catechisms written, but Luther's was revolutionary and different. Luther ordered his differently. Deitrich Kold's Catechism is an example of this. Most catechisms focused on the Sacrament of penance and nothing more. Kold's catechism "Began with a discourse of what must be believed (twenty-two sections), moved to an explanation of how one must live (twenty-one sections) and then finally a guide of How to die (three sections). At the end of his catechism, Kold wrote "Every person who holds to [these lessons] can hope to reach heaven."² Where's the grace? Where's the exploration? Have I done enough?

Luther structured his catechism: Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer. The old order was: Creed, commandments, Lord's prayer. The old order said, "Here is what you must believe; now that you believe, here is what you must do; now that you feel guilty, here are the right words to pray"³ The "New order was the order of baptism: from death to resurrection, from terror to faith and comfort; from commandments to creed, that is from law to gospel."⁴ Baptism is all about dying to sin and rising in Christ. The movement from death to life is the movement from law to gospel. **"As soon as we disturb that order in our teaching, preaching, or parish life, we abandon the gospel itself and leave people on the edge of their beds wondering if they have done enough."**⁵ And who here could have thought a simple change in the order of the catechism could bring so much grace? Or maybe even a better question for tonight, who here sees the 10 commandments as anything but oppressive?

And oppressive not in the bad sense, but in the convicting sense. Like, the Ten Commandments identify how much we sin and we see a true image of our faults and failures, and why we need Jesus to make it all right. Law and gospel right? And for so many years, that is how I have read the commandments and even taught them. But in preparing for this series, I did some reading and realized that the commandments are not just about convicting us and oppressing us, but they are more so, a matter of Faith.

Just because we can't live out these 10 commandments doesn't mean we shouldn't try to follow them faithfully. It is good and holy work to place God first, respect the name of God, regard the Sabbath as holy, honor our parents, etc. Wengert says, "Faith drives us to call upon God, to listen to God's word, to

obey God's representatives, to love and care for our neighbor—whether in the person of our chief, our parents, our spouse or the poor." Or simply put, "they will know we are Christians by our love."

But not every commandment carried the same weight for Luther. Luther did see a hierarchy to the commandments. The first commandment was the most important. And by creating this hierarchy allowed Luther to make exceptions for parents and governments to break commandments further down the list. For example, Luther says a government has the right to break the fifth commandment - you shall not kill - in order to ensure good government and the protection of the people. Parents can break the seventh commandment - you shall not steal - if it means providing food for their families.

Luther also didn't believe in a strict adherence as some might argue. Keeping the Sabbath day was not so important because every day is made holy by God. However, keeping the Sabbath ensures that day labors and the least in our society are protected and given one day off a week to rest and recover. The second commandment also serves as a warning to pastors and preachers who preached only the law and legalism. People need a rest!

The 10 commandments are important but so is the rest of what is found in the catechism. The 10 commandments chief function "is not to show us an easy way to heaven, which (with a little hard work) we can reach, but to show us our sin—how infinitely far we are from heaven, God, and our neighbor (who is Christ in our midst!)."⁶ It's all about faith, remember that! And what do these commandments teach us? That we need Jesus! What did the temptation story teach us on Sunday. That we need Jesus because we can't say no. What did the story of Adam and Eve teach us? That we can't say no. **"The commandments—all of them—keep their rightful place in Christian theology only when they are in first place, as the word of death that drives us inexorably to our crucified and risen Lord Jesus."**⁷ If the commandments teach you nothing else, they should at least show you that you need Jesus.

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¹ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 2-3.

² Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 4-5.

³ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 6.

⁴ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 6.

⁵ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 7.

⁶ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 40.

⁷ Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) page 41.