The Small Catechism

By MARTIN LUTHER

In Contemporary English with Lutheran Book of Worship Texts

Catechism
Letter From the Editors

"W e are to fear and love God," was the refrain for several weeks as I pounded Luther's Small Catechism into my already overloaded seminarian mind. It was my first attempt at memorizing The Small Catechism. After spacing out my own confirmation experience as an adolescent, my assumption was this exercise would not connect to anything I did outside the seminary.

It is easy to think this way about catechism, particularly when catechumens are often tested over their knowledge of the material and the material is only utilized in church situations. However, to think of catechism only as an intellectual exercise is to miss the point of catechism: it is something meant to be embodied in everyday life, whether that is in the classroom, the church, or the streets.

After finishing my confessional class, I have been pleased to discover The Small Catechism still echoes in my everyday situations. It is our hope, as the Concord staff, that the articles contained in this issue will help you all, the readers, reflect on how catechism is embodied in everyday life. We hope that they will give you pause to consider what you have written on your hearts and minds when where your catechesis (Lutheran or otherwise) moves you to act. "We are to fear, love, and trust God above anything else."

-Josh Feala
Layout Editor
Confessional Heritage in the UCC

Tom Liddle
M.Div Student

The United Church of Christ came into existence in 1957, a union of the Evangelical & Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church. Those two denominations were in turn rooted in German Reformed, Pietist, and Lutheran traditions as well as Puritan Congregationalism. As such, the UCC has a rich confessional heritage which dates to the earliest creeds of the church.

The Preamble to the Constitution defines the faith of the UCC. It states in part:

"The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers..."

The Preamble expresses the ecumenical spirit of the UCC which is something I value greatly. As a denomination which represents numerous confessional and ecclesiastical traditions, we celebrate confessional statements, catechisms and creeds as testimonies to faith rather than tests of faith.

Statement of Faith: The Statement of Faith was adopted in 1959. The Statement is not meant to replace earlier creeds, but was occasioned by the formation of the UCC. I like that the Statement is narrative in character. It is formed around seven declarations which proclaim the acts of God in history as the basis of confession, the center of which is God's act in Jesus Christ. Each declaration is theologically rich, but its language is simple — it is that of testimony:

"We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen."

The Statement is more an act of worship than a doctrinal formulation. And although the Statement is narrative in form, the declarations are in the present tense which reflects our conviction that God's work does not belong to a closed past but is ongoing through the power of the Holy Spirit and the witness of the church.

ATTENTION STUDENT GROUPS!
We want you to have the freedom to speak. If the student group(s) that you participate in are interested in this opportunity, please contact our staff at concord@luthersemin.edu. We appreciate your voice and your willingness to share it with the rest of us!
We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. My home congregation uses this phrase. We still use the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness from the LBW most Sundays. Prior to seminary I was unaware of the fact that we are behind the times. I had never even opened a copy of the ELW. As I've become more familiar with the ELW and its contents I've discovered a word is missing.

The words we use matter. Exchanging one for another can change the meaning of a sentence. The ELW removed the word “bondage” and replaced it with “captive” in the confession. This may seem like a small matter since these words are similar enough and more or less mean the same thing. Why bother wasting ink over them?

I prefer using bondage instead of captive in confession. Certainly my preference is due in small part to the fact that it is what I have always known. Yet the term bondage is more truthful than captive. To say we are captive to sin is to say we are prisoners of sin. To say we are in bondage to sin is to say we are slaves to sin. There is a world of difference between enslavement and imprisonment. One is inherently worse than the other. If given the choice between the two I'd venture that most would opt for imprisonment. I know I would. The conditions are less harsh. Perhaps this is why bondage was replaced by captive.

Sin does more than hold us captive; it enslaves us. Sin both restrains and compels. Sin restrains us and keeps us from God. Sin compels us to act for ourselves and not for the glory of God. Let’s acknowledge the truth. We are slaves to sin and cannot free ourselves.
Table Prayers and Ravens

Dr. Steven Paulson
Professor of Systematic Theology

Already this spring, despite the lateness of the melt, I have a sturdy Black Hills Spruce with a nest full of screaming raven chicks who create a ruckus like you never heard. I confess here and now that I thought of killing them and prayed for the Cooper Hawk to arrive so that I didn't have to do it. They are all beaks struggling to get attention, and cry terribly that at any moment they are going to die unless mother bird comes with more worms. Despite their being part of nature and all, they are obnoxious pests, and I know they will grow into large and threatening birds of the kind Edgar Allen Poe wrote about. They eat my preferred bluebirds and sit watching me from across the street waiting for me to die by the roadside and turn into carrion. But I have learned that God has given them a Word because he perversely delights in making the ungodly righteous. The Word is in the 147th Psalm, which is tucked away so only someone like Rolf Jacobson or a good monk would know about it, unless like me you learned this in the Small Catechism's Thanksgiving Prayer: "He gives food to all flesh. He gives food to the cattle and to the young ravens that cry to him." There you have it. God tells me to take their evil stares and bad wishes for my earthly life, and learn that he delights to give the raven chicks their bread—while they are making such plaintive cries.

Because time in classes is short, I rarely get to teach on the prayer postils of the small catechism, but there they are, and they give you a great opportunity to learn what makes people truly happy—which is also to learn the very first psalm. The first psalm tells us that happiness is not in the planning of the wicked (which is to say meetings) it is to delight in what the Lord says. Now to delight in what the Lord says, you have to know what he says, and this is why we occupy ourselves with God's Word, talk about it, meditate upon it day and night—and yes, even memorize it, God forbid! We learn and meditate on this divine Word because unlike all the rest of the words it is not a cypher, it is God's power. Indeed, you have to be a little careful, since this Word is so powerful that it works like a flamethrower that burns the devil's house down—it is pyrotechnic and will finally make you all flame.

The word I have learned, and I now give you here, is used after you have eaten your bread. Then you fold your hands, and recite devoutly (believing): "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is gracious and his goodness endures forever." Here you finally discover the proper place for a Eucharistic prayer that so many are anxious to recite, which naturally comes after you eat your bread with the family. Then you recite this little Word about cows and ravens, so that you know that the tame and wild beasts—even the ones that look at you through that terrible black eye—receive their bread from him. In this Word you learn the last, greatest, hardest lesson of them all which is the lesson of creation; or, better yet, we learn what it means to be a creature with a Creator and just how delightful this is. It, and nothing else, makes you happy. Now the key word in this Psalm is גואל—He Gives! The catechism gives this Word to us, as a gift. No wonder he "takes no pleasure in the horse, nor is God impressed with your muscular quadriceps." Those powers in the world are misused for oppressing oppressed people like Pizarro and the Philistines did, and also trying to do everything for yourself by the power of your legs. Meanwhile, God delights in feeding the helpless, screeching raven chicks because he likes to give worms.

Then, after you have eaten whatever you have, this prayer exercises your faith so that you trust not only that God gives in general, but to you in particular. He has become my Lord, just as he does with the ravens. So in this way you can join in the Eucharist: "The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him and wait for his goodness." The prayer works when you have a full table, but is especially effective when you are waiting, hungry, and at the last when the ravens are soon to get their carrion. Perhaps then we should memorize even more of the Small Catechism than we already do, starting with our children at the table so they don't have to struggle meditating upon it when they come to seminary. This will actually make you happy while everything else fails to delight, even with ravens watching your every move.

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Tomb to Womb to Earth to Flesh

Rachel Ringlaben
MDiv Student

What is preaching and what does it do? As Christians we believe that the Gospel story – the Word – does something when it is preached: it cuts to the heart, it creates a response, it creates a communal identity wrapped up in the life of the Triune God and creates space for communities to invite God's dreams for their own stories to become reality in their individual and corporate lives.

Tomb to Womb to Earth to Flesh
by Rachel Ringlaben
(A Spoken-Word Sermon Based on Isaiah 60:1-6)
Landscape of crumbled castles and cisterns run dry, abandoned houses with half-finished weavings collapsed on looms lingering lullabies haunting empty cribs as ancient words dry up the soul

Crows that once glimmered with gems now tarnish in the dank cellars of cynicism Charred earth watered only by tears grey winds sweeping over tattered dreams of "what if" pupils grown wide -- acclimating to perpetual night
Here I am at home amongst limp feathers and stale ashes...
The grime of dried tears and darkness sticking to my bones more than southern home cookin' does to the ribs
Stars have long grown dim and dawn has become a faint memory
Barren night groans and howls in the cold darkness of dreams deferred...
A fluttering of eyelashes
Could it be?
A brightness that is deafening and painful --- too brilliant to describe
A myriad of colors restoring reality to the ancient skies of peace
Oranges and pinks, purples and yellows envelop the night and choke it out of existence.
My limbs stretch toward the heat
Arthritic tendons emerge more beautiful as Light caresses what I thought was the abandoned carcass of my spirit
My talons tap to the rhythm of drumming by sons who were carted off to war in their prime...

prrrum... prrum... prrum...
My heart begins to beat to the singing of ancient songs escaping from lips of the daughters who were carried away.
See! They return with their wet-nurses, wiping snot from their noses as they guide the ancient melody with their conductor's hands.
I trace the outline of camels' humps bringing news from the East as they chuckle to one another with hope.
I see it.
The silhouettes of the forgotten forging together a different horizon that causes my heart to plunge into new depths of pounding...
Could it be?
I breathe.
I breathe...
in and out the foreign scent of anticipation the salty air of the sea burning the hairs inside my nostrils.
Could it be?
And then...
I feel it – the Breath of Life surging through these hollow bones adorned with plumage - ashes scattering in the balmy breeze
I stretch and stumble toward the radiant rays of Welcome that exhale the scent of frankincense - these old wings reach out into the abyss of goldenness I stretch and emerge from this suffocating cocoon.
In true Stravinsky fashion I am birthed from dirt to rise toward dawn leaving behind the ash heap of yesterday's defeat.
Gone the filth, gone the sleep, gone the despair.
I am one with light --- free and flapping with all my might, only to find the One who created Light soaring at my side.
My lungs are filled with sky as I flap and squawk and roar and laugh I cannot keep this song inside --- "Arise! Arise!"
My beak breaks open as I sing out to those dragging their stories

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And gone
Drop your sack cloths and open your hands to the Rising Son
who is gleaming and birthing a new story into your barren wombs,
your broken hearts, your deafened ears, your blinded eyes --- Arise!
Drop your drums of war and cannons of complacency
Let loose your snot rags of shame
Let go of your molded bread, your sour wine and open your arms to the Horizon of Healing.
Drop your bandages that cover your scars of endless searching
and run!

Run with delight.
Run in sync with the stinky camels whose hooves gallop in the sand to a new song
- a new dawn.
Run and feel the warmth of His gaze
fill your bones with fire that will not be quenched.
Run as you are led to fertile ground where you are free to roar, sing, laugh, play.

Let your ankles swell from dancing
Let your belly be full from banquet
For the time has come where tears that watered the earth shall sprout into seedlings of "what could be"
Lift up your voices
in melodies all too foreign and familiar
that echo the coming of One who is to breathe birth into our bones
Your time has come
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
As the Flame flickers and illuminates your features, so you reflect the very glory of Light Himself.
And those whose tongues lift up songs in new languages will see this
and attribute it to this Rising Dawn...
Could it be?
Gone the shadows? gone the fear? gone the dry bones? gone the despair?
...and a little Child shall lead them...

Rachel Ringlaben is the recipient of this year’s Graduate Preaching Fellowship. Congratulations, Rachel!
Below you will find information about the fellowship.

ABOUT THE FELLOWSHIP
A fellowship for a year of overseas study will be awarded to a Luther Seminary M.Div. senior who intends to enter parish ministry and who is committed to the proclamation of the gospel for the sake of the church and God’s mission in the world. The purpose of the fellowship is to improve one’s preaching through study and experience abroad.
The Graduate Preaching Fellowship offers a unique opportunity in another culture for reflection on and greater skill in the art of preaching in preparation for parish ministry. The student should be connected to an academic institution but does not need to be enrolled for credit or work towards a degree.
The primary intent of the award is to afford the student freedom for the study of preaching and time for other experiences related to preaching and worship. The insights and experiences gained by association with other cultures will broaden one’s understanding of preaching in the whole of Christ’s Church and will contribute significantly to one’s preaching in a congregational setting.
The generous award, given by an anonymous donor, will be based on preaching skills, academic performance, the quality of the application, and the thoroughness of the proposal. The recipient of the award will be expected to submit quarterly reports to the seminary that will be passed on to the donor organization.

Information is from the Luther Seminary Website:
http://www.luthersem.edu/gpf/
Simple Lessons

Dr. Dirk Lange
Associate Professor of Worship

Every day, at table, my sister and I would sit and wait for our mother to say the blessing over the food. My father happily entrusted this task to my mother who was more steeled than any of us in the words of Scripture, the catechism, and particularly in the hymns of Paul Gerhardt. Her prayers were of course in German. So my sister and I were exercised not only in faith through prayer but in language as well, in God’s language in fact (despite what my dear Norwegian sweater-wearing friends might wish to think).

Of course at the time, we did not know that she was using Scripture, the catechism, or Gerhardt. We just heard the melodic words.

The surprise for anyone who joined us at table was not the blessing at the beginning, it was the thanksgiving at the end. We would all join hands and my mother would say, “Danket dem Herrn denn er ist freundlich und seine Güte währet ewiglich...” Words I can still hear, recite, sense, taste, touch, even today, though my father is long deceased and my mother’s hands are now old and crippled with arthritis. “O give thanks to the Lord, for God is gracious and God’s goodness endures forever.”

Only years later did I understand that she was teaching us the catechism throughout our childhood. My mother was teaching us a simple lesson: thanksgiving is at the heart of life. As the prayer at the table tells us, all these things are given to us by God out of God’s bountiful goodness. God is the good giver. God even gives us the words of our thanksgiving, the words of the psalms. And when we can’t give thanks, God will send even the ravens to feed us (like Elijah)! God’s self raises thanksgiving up within us.

We say good things (blessings) over these gifts that God gives and we give thanks to God who is the source of all good things (eucharistia). Talking, meditating, singing (yes, it’s part of the list), and did not my esteemed colleague mention memorizing (?) God’s Word drives the devil away and opens the gates of trust.

Confitemini Domino, quoniam bonus... (Psalms 106, 136, 147; see also ELW 528).

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The Other Side of Silence

John Telyea
M.Div. Student

One day after service at Bread of Life Church for the Deaf, an elderly woman approached me and asked if I would pray for her. I said of course I would, but asked if we could both pray for her during the following week. When I asked her this question she looked at me with a confused and startled look on her face and said, "No." When I asked her why not, she responded, "Because God doesn't know ASL (American Sign Language). God only understands English, so you pray.

I wish this was the only heart-wrenching story I could share about working with the deaf community, but it is not. Countless times I have heard stories where deaf people have been brought in front of churches and prayed over so that the devil would leave them, or that if they only repented of their sins (or parents' sins), then God would forgive them, and they would hear.

Experiences like these have taught the deaf community to stay out of church. Only 1% of deaf people attend church on a regular basis, and only 7% have ever seen scripture in ASL. Out of 10,008 congregations in the ELCA only seven of those are deaf congregations (0.00069%). There are zero programs at ELCA seminaries that provide classes interpreted for deaf students to pursue their vocation in ministry and zero programs at ELCA seminaries to train hearing pastors who feel called to deaf ministry.

There are multiple stories in the Bible where God (or Jesus) heals the deaf (e.g., Isaiah 35:5 and Mark 7:31-37). We see in scripture that deafness is a disease to be defeated and healed, not embraced.

We must look at what hearing meant in the Bible and how that differs from today. To hear in the Bible was to be a part of a community. To be a part of a community meant to speak and hear their language. If you didn't know a community's language, or were not able to speak it, you quickly became an outsider. Thus, to be in the community of Christ required hearing; therefore, faith came through hearing. The Apostle Paul writes (in Romans 10:17), "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." Luther even writes in the 5th Article of the Augsburg Confession (Of the Ministry) that God gives faith to those that "hear" through the Word and Sacraments.

Hearing has meant different things for different people throughout the ages. For the first generation of Christians it meant writing down the stories of Christ for future generations. For Martin Luther hearing meant translating the Bible into German, so the laity could read it. For the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church it meant changing the language of the Mass from Latin into the common spoken language.

So what does it mean for us today? For the church today it means to hear, but more importantly, to listen in new ways. It means listening with open minds and hearts as we hear the stories of the communities on the fringes in their language, not ours! It means facing the challenges of working with people of different languages. But, most importantly, it means believing that God works through all languages—not only spoken languages—to reveal God's abundant love for all people.

Contribute art, photos, and graphics; keep blank space filled.

Email concord@luthersem.edu

Luther Seminary 9
Artist's interpretation of a typical day in Lutheran Confessional writings with Professors Dirk Lange and Steven Paulson.

Layout Editors Josh Feala and Peter Clark need your article and artistic submissions to prevent further brainstorming that might lead to photos such as these.

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God of mercy and love, we rejoice that you hear all people and their prayers. Continue to remind those who do not feel this way, and let them know that you understand all languages, both spoken and unspoken. God of grace, be with all communities who have been oppressed and rejected because they hear differently. Give church leaders the strength and power to listen to their words and fight for equality. God of grace, we thank you for Beth Lockard, the Director of Deaf Ministry in the ELCA. Continue to work through her that all deaf people may know the message of Jesus Christ through American Sign Language or another sign language. God of peace, we ask for your blessing of the seven ELCA deaf congregations. Money is short, and resources even shorter, but we know that you provide. Continue to guide these churches that they may do your will and spread the Gospel of Christ throughout the world.
Ask Luther
Casey Sugden
M.Div. Student
What is your favorite Work of Martin Luther? Why?

Mariel Vinge: Freedom of a Christian, Martin Luther is a badass.

Jeff Brown: Depends what kind of mood I'm in. But mostly the Small Catechism.

Carrie Smisek: Freedom of a Christian. I like the idea that we are in bondage to each other but free at the same time.

Chris Brademeyer: Luther's Galatians commentary. Though I may end up liking the Genesis one, but I haven't finished it yet.

Natalia Terfa: The Preface to the New Testament. It is the lens through which Luther wanted people to read the Gospels and epistles.

Scott Smith: The Freedom of a Christian. It is how I became a Lutheran.

John Ask: The Freedom of a Christian - it radically impacted the way I understand Christianity and it changed my life.