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An Image of Luther for Today: The Catechetical Luther

MARY JANE HAEMIG

Reflection on the past nearly always reflects the concerns of the present. As Lutherans and others approach the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, persons and events of the past will be appropriated in all sorts of ways for contemporary purposes. It will be assumed that Luther is “usable.” We can anticipate that some appropriations of him will strike us as appropriate, others as inappropriate, even painful. We cannot avoid them, so we must ask what image of Luther would be most appropriate and helpful for the church today? After a brief survey of historical images, I will suggest that the catechetical Luther offers much direction for our current situation.

WHICH LUTHER? IMAGES OF LUTHER THROUGH THE YEARS

Most Lutherans and many Protestants carry and use mental images of Martin Luther. Unsurprisingly, these are often shaped as much by the later context as by Luther himself. Images vary widely in scope and tone: hero of the faith, rediscoverer of the Bible, reformer of worship, champion of liberty, forerunner of religious toleration, fighter against papal tyranny, intolerant oppressor of those

Lutherans and other Protestants live with Martin Luther as a part of their heritage. Images of him are unavoidable. The image of Luther as catechist offers example and spur. His tireless efforts to teach the Christian faith to all people, not just the academic and learned, should guide us today. The message embodied in his catechisms offers to us purpose, reconciliation, consolation, and hope.

who differed from him, nasty polemicist, brilliant academic. The last five hundred years have produced a multitude of images.

In the sixteenth century, three images of the reformer—prophet, teacher, and hero—were common. As Robert Kolb has noted:

First, ... the Reformer functioned as a prophet who replaced popes and councils as the adjudicating or secondary authority (interpreting the primary authority, Scripture) in the life of the church. ... Second, over the years Luther functioned as a prophetic teacher whose exposition of the biblical message supported and guided the biblical exposition of his followers. ... Third, for his German followers Luther remained above all a prophetic hero whom God had chosen as a special instrument for the liberation of his church—and of the German people—from papal oppression and deceit. As a heroic prophet, Luther symbolized the divine Word which brought God's judgment upon the old papal system, and he embodied the hopes of the people and the comfort of the gospel which brought new heavenly blessings upon the faithful children of God.¹

Images of Luther continued to grow and change in Europe. Bernhard Lohse traced how images of Luther changed through orthodoxy, pietism, the Enlightenment, the German classical period, and romanticism.² Well known in the popular nineteenth century was the “heroic” Luther, placed into the service of German nationalism.³

In North America, consciousness of Luther and the reformations he inspired arose primarily after 1800. In the first half of the 1800s, diverse religious groups admired Luther for a variety of reasons. Unitarians saw in Luther a forerunner of the Enlightenment and a champion of personal liberty; American-style evangelicals saw a champion of the Bible; all saw in him their anti-Catholic sentiments affirmed.⁴ In 1883, many speeches and publications on the four hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth attest to the high esteem in which he was held. Luther was seen as an heroic man, attacking papal corruption and medieval superstition, defending liberty, and fighting for religious freedom, a true forerunner of the modern world. His German heritage was viewed positively, as embodying qualities of truthfulness, loyalty, simplicity, and fearless faith.⁵

Much had changed by the four hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 1917. In April 1917, the United States entered World War I and was at war with Germany. Lutherans no longer had the luxury of focusing solely on theological insights or on claims concerning the beneficial results of the Reformation for society

¹Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 11–12.

²Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 199–217.

³Hartmut Lehmann, “Das Lutherjubiläum 1883,” *Luthergedächtnis 1817 bis 2017* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012) 63–66.

⁴Hartmut Lehmann, “Die Entdeckung Luthers im Amerika des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Luthergedächtnis*, 35–43.

⁵Hartmut Lehmann, “Luther's Impact on the United States and Australia at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 28 (Spring 2014) 49–69.

and culture. German-Americans were subject to intimidation and harassment; institutions associated with German culture were forced to close or change their names. For many Americans, Scandinavians were indistinguishable from Germans and so were subject to similar treatment.

In 1917, Reformation anniversary celebrations used Luther to support American values generally and American purposes in World War I. It was quite common for Lutherans to portray Martin Luther as the champion of liberty and democracy.

In response to the new situation, Lutherans de-emphasized the German context of the Reformation and, while continuing to highlight theological insights, also emphasized links to the development of democracy and to the civil liberties embodied in the United States Constitution. The Protestant Reformation was seen as a source of the American liberties, and of American values.⁶ In 1917, Reformation anniversary celebrations used Luther to support American values generally and American purposes in World War I. It was quite common for Lutherans to portray Martin Luther as the champion of liberty and democracy. Dr. Frank Nelson, speaking at the large celebration of the Reformation anniversary at the Minneapolis auditorium, called Luther “an advocate of liberty and freedom within the realm of government. He believed that all authority is vested in the people having the right to say under what form of government they are to live. . . . It is the doctrine of individual liberty that made Plymouth Rock historic on American soil.”⁷

Luther was not only identified (rightly or wrongly) with the causes of personal and political liberty, but was also directly identified with the cause for which Americans believed they were fighting—to make the world safe for democracy. For many who celebrated, Luther was removed from Germany and stood on the American side. The *Red Wing Daily Republican* reported on special services to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary:

In a most inspiring and patriotic Reformation address at Trinity Lutheran church last evening...Dr. D. G. Ristad declared that Lutherans who had pro-German sentiments, were opposing the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther, the great reformer. . . . In his remarks, the Ladies' Seminary president called attention to the great world war of the present day and said that the fight to make “The World Safe for Democracy” was the basic principle on which Martin Luther waged his battles against the Roman government just four hundred years ago.⁸

⁶Sarah Nytroe, “The American Reformation Quadricentennial, 1917,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (Spring 2012) 57–82.

⁷Frank Nelson, “Some Thoughts on Martin Luther with Special Reference to Our Own Times,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Tuesday, October 30, 1917, 4.

⁸*Red Wing Daily Republican*, Monday, October 29, 1917, 2.

Lutherans (and Protestants generally) used the 1917 Reformation celebrations to talk about key theological themes. They also used these themes to connect with their American context and to declare and prove their loyalty to America. Martin Luther became not only the great reformer of the church but also the great champion of individual liberty and political democracy, and Lutherans the loyal citizens fighting for American values. Since then, Lutherans have rightly raised questions about this appropriation of Luther. We know (or should know) that any images of Luther should be constructed and used with caution. Appropriating Luther (or any historical figure) for a cause, belief, or movement today must be done with care and humility.

A LUTHER FOR OUR TIME? THE CATECHETICAL LUTHER

Today the heroic Luther seems at best quaint and at worst laughable or egregiously inaccurate. We do not think of Luther as a champion of democracy and would not use him to justify a war. Would any image of Luther be relevant or helpful today? I suggest one image of Luther that would be helpful—even inspirational—in our time: the catechetical Luther.

It is an understatement to say that Lutheran churches today are confronted with a massive evangelization and catechetical task. We need to educate in the faith both those who consider themselves Christian and those who do not. Many Christians express surprise when confronted with basic claims of the Christian faith and many non-Christians have no idea what Christianity teaches beyond some general moral principles. This is true of both children and adults. We need to engage in crisp, cogent teaching that seeks to present the claims of Christianity today and takes seriously the questions of people.

Luther saw clearly in his own time the importance of educating the laity in matters of faith.⁹ This was not “head” knowledge but rather faith knowledge that permeated one’s entire being. Luther did not seek to catechize to reinforce a religious position, rather, he did it out of pastoral concern. How can anyone be Christian without knowing the basic core of the faith, God’s commands and God’s promises? How could anyone derive hope and consolation from the Christian faith without knowing what that faith proclaims?

Catechetical activity was a constant theme in Luther’s life. His earliest sermons on the Lord’s Prayer took place *before* the posting of the Ninety-five Theses. His sermons on commandments, creed, Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper were widely known in the early years of the Reformation. His 1522 *Personal Prayer Book* was a type of catechism. He preached on the catechism—Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and Sacraments—three times in 1528 and used this sermonic material as a basis for his *Small Catechism* and his *Large Catechism*, both published in 1529. While never insisting that his own catechisms had to be

⁹See, for example, his introduction to the *Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (hereafter *BC*) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 347–351.

used, Luther continued to teach the basics of the faith and to encourage others to do so. Luther the catechist can help us as we consider what it means to teach the faith.

Here are a few significant themes in Luther's catechetical activity:

Teach everyone, both adults and children

Repeat, repeat, repeat. Luther knew the Christian faith is so important—and our lives so difficult—that we need to teach, hear, and learn again and again the basic claims of that faith. Respect the power of this taught word—both command and promise—to direct and console, to convict and to lift up, to terrify, and to gladden. Honor the people we teach by believing they can be taught, can ask good questions, and can understand (not merely regurgitate). Trust that the word will not return empty.

While never insisting that his own catechisms had to be used, Luther continued to teach the basics of the faith and to encourage others to do so. Luther the catechist can help us as we consider what it means to teach the faith.

Here a note on special learning challenges is appropriate. Creative and realistic approaches are needed. For example, given the level of functional illiteracy in our society, it may not be appropriate to expect all people to read. In the sixteenth century, the Reformers were faced with many illiterate people. They did not consider them any less capable of learning and understanding the basics of the catechism. Oral teaching and repetition, pictures, and music aided them. What aids can we use today?

Focus on the basics

Luther wrote his *Small Catechism* as a summary of the most essential elements of the Christian faith. For Luther, the first three parts were the chief parts. Without knowing how God expects us to live (Commandments), what God has done for us (Creed), and how to talk with this God (Lord's Prayer), it is difficult to claim one is Christian. In his *Personal Prayer Book* (1522) Luther described how the parts fit together:

Three things a person must know in order to be saved. First, he must know what to do and what to leave undone. Second, when he realizes that, by his own strength, he cannot measure up to what he should do or leave undone, he needs to know where to seek, find, and take the strength he requires. Third, he must know how to seek and obtain that strength. It is just like a sick person who first has to determine the nature of his sickness, and what to do or to leave undone. After that he has to know where to get the medicine which will help him do or leave undone what is right for a healthy person. Third, he has to desire to search for this medicine and to obtain it or have it brought to him.¹⁰

¹⁰Martin Luther, *Personal Prayer Book*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 13.

Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness....The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine—grace—which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and God’s mercy, given and made plain in Christ. Third, the Lord’s Prayer teaches all this....In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible.¹¹

In sixteenth-century Germany many pastors wrote and used catechisms. Luther’s catechisms emerged as important because they proved themselves in practice. In language, brevity, and arrangement, they expressed the faith boldly and succinctly.

Encourage further exploration: Go both deeper and wider

In his introduction to the *Small Catechism* Luther laid out a three-step process for instruction—first, teach the simple words of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the creed, and the sacraments, and second, teach the meaning of each part, using short explanations (such as those supplied in his own *Small Catechism*). Third, move to a longer catechism and impart a richer and fuller understanding of each part. Luther evidenced in many works catechetical reflection that moved toward a deeper understanding of catechetical elements. For example, in his *Treatise on Good Works* (1520) he used the Ten Commandments to elucidate what good works God wants us to do. Despite, or perhaps because of his emphasis on moving to deeper understanding, Luther also advocated returning to the basics every day, noting his own practice:

I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed....I must still read and study the catechism daily.¹²

Use the basics as an introduction to the Bible

Luther and his followers understood the catechism as both a summary of the biblical message and an introduction to the Bible. In Luther’s first series of catechetical sermons (1528), he said that in the first three parts of catechism all Scripture is contained.¹³ He meant that, though every story in the Bible is not there, these three parts convey the Bible’s central salvific message. By focusing on the central message, the catechism gives an introduction and guide to reading Scripture. (This also reflects a classic Lutheran idea, namely, that our confessional writings are normative and helpful because they say what Scripture says.) In his second series of catechetical sermons (1528) Luther remarked that after people have learned the catechism they should be led further into Scripture.¹⁴ Learning the catechism was never an end in itself but rather the beginning of a more broad and profound exploration of the Bible and Christian faith.

¹¹Ibid., 14.

¹²BC, 380.

¹³WA 30/1, 2 (Weimar Edition of Luther’s Works).

¹⁴WA 30/1, 27.

Questions are wonderful! Be in conversation

Luther's *Small Catechism* embodies the back and forth of question and answer. This form is different from the one-sided sermonic form and may be more suited to speaking the Christian message among the unchurched today. Questions empower inquirers. They also entail risk on the part of those teaching. Lutherans should realize that we come from a tradition that encourages (not discourages) questions, offers some answers, and encourages deeper exploration into both questions and answers. Will we take the risk of being in conversation, listening to questions we may not be able to answer, or answer only partially? We don't know all the answers—but we know some and we should be willing to explore significant questions in conversation with others.

Use multiple ways of teaching

Luther and his fellow Reformers knew that people had different ways of learning. They also knew that varied forms could reinforce a message absorbed first in one way. Sixteenth-century editions of the *Small Catechism* included pictures (woodcuts). For example, each commandment was associated with one woodcut depicting a Bible story. These detailed woodcuts enabled the teaching of both commandment and Bible story. Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation also knew well the power of song to teach. Catechetical hymns not only taught catechetical content, they aided memory and recitation through song.

Lutheran churches should not be known primarily for their ritual, not for their clerical structures, but rather for their knowledge of and sharing of the gospel

Yes, consider even the benefits of memorization, particularly for young people. In recent decades memorization has been much disparaged (“rote,” “mindless”) in North America, though people coming from other parts of the world find this attitude odd and still gladly memorize. Even today in North America, people memorize without realizing it. (How many readers can recite an ad they have heard many times?) Memorization in the sixteenth century was not intended to be “rote” but rather to imbed words so deeply into the person that they could be drawn upon, reflected upon, and used without any need to grab for a book.

Content, content, content

We should not underestimate the hunger for and capacity for knowledge of the faith among people today. “Knowledge” of course is not merely head knowledge but permeates the whole being. The Wittenberg Reformation was not afraid of encouraging deep exploration. The Augsburg Confession, article seven, defines the church as where the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered. Lutheran churches should not be known primarily for their ritual (of whatever form), not for their clerical structures, but rather for their knowledge of

and sharing of the gospel. Martin Luther, in his 1520 treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, asserted the right of all Christians to interpret Scripture and judge doctrine. He concluded, “it is the duty of every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error.”¹⁵

Empowering the laity can reshape the church

Knowledge empowers. A serious effort to educate the laity in the faith will have several results. A knowledgeable and active laity will reflect on what the Christian God is doing today and why it matters. Churches will come to see serious and continual catechetical work as key to their missional identity. Churches will become communities of accountability, where pastors not only preach and teach the faith diligently but also where laity hold pastors and teachers accountable for the content of what they preach and teach. This, of course, will affect the hierarchical structure implicit in so many entities. Luther’s reformation intended that a well-catechized laity hold the clergy accountable for their preaching and teaching, a radical shift away from the hierarchical structures of the medieval church. A similar shift could take place today. The continuing exploration and discussion of God’s words to us will build up the Christian community in the knowledge and fruit of the faith.

Empowering the laity can reshape how they think about their lives

Well-catechized laypersons can understand their vocations as part of God’s work in the world and can see them as lived under God’s command and promise. Yes, catechizing should ultimately get people more involved in their vocations. Evangelization and catechization should not have as their major goals to make people church “groupies.” Rather, instruction in and reflection on the faith will give to them the insight into life’s purpose that comes from God’s law and the forgiveness, life, and hope that come from the gospel.

Lutherans and other Protestants live with Martin Luther as a part of their heritage. Images of him are unavoidable. Will we be active, raising up those images of Luther that are both defensible from the standpoint of historic accuracy and also helpful for church life today? The image of Luther as catechist offers example and spur. His tireless efforts to teach the Christian faith to all people, not just the academic and learned, should guide us today. The message embodied in his catechisms offers to us purpose, reconciliation, consolation, and hope. ⊕

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¹⁵Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 136.