



What About . . .

The Small Catechism

What is the Small Catechism?

The Small Catechism, written by Martin Luther in 1529, is a collection of questions and answers on six topics: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father (the Lord's Prayer), the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Luther wanted the Catechism to be used by the head of the household to teach the family the Christian faith and life.

Also included with the Small Catechism are daily prayers, a table of duties for Christians in their various callings in life, and a guide for Christians to use as they prepare to receive Holy Communion. Most editions of Luther's Small Catechism also come with an explanation of the Catechism, which is a longer collection of questions and answers with extensive quotations from the Bible. These explanations have a long history and were added during Luther's lifetime.

Why did Luther write the Small Catechism?

Luther answers that question in the preface to the Small Catechism:

"The deplorable, miserable conditions which I recently observed when visiting the parishes have constrained and pressed me to put this Catechism of Christian doctrine into this brief, plain, and simple form. How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw: the common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, and many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach. Yet all the people are supposed to be Christians, have been baptized, and receive the Holy Sacrament even though they do not know the Our Father, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments and live like poor animals of the barnyard and pigpen. What these people have mastered, however, is the fine art of tearing all Christian liberty to shreds."

You can tell how strongly Luther felt about the need for a clear explanation of the Christian faith and life!

Luther also wrote what is known as the Large Catechism. The Large Catechism is yet another excellent resource that most adults find very helpful after studying the Small Catechism. Your pastor can help you obtain a copy of the Large Catechism.

What is the benefit of the Small Catechism?

The Small Catechism is an excellent summary of what the Bible, God's Word, teaches us. The shape of the Catechism is the shape of the Christian life: Repentance (Ten Commandments), Faith (Creed), Prayer (Our Father), Forgiveness of Sins (Baptism, Absolution, Lord's Supper), then daily prayer and our daily work. It is very important for us to learn by heart the truths of God's Word as summarized and beautifully explained in the Small Catechism.

God uses the precious truths of His Word to keep us strong and growing in our faith in Jesus Christ. The Catechism helps us understand God's Law, which shows us our sin, and how we are to live as His people. The Catechism beautifully articulates the Gospel, the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for our salvation.

Luther realized that the truths of God's Word, as summarized by the Small Catechism, were matters of eternal life and death. They are the most important truths we can ever know. It is genuinely unfortunate when people think they no longer need the Small Catechism and say to themselves, "That's enough of that; now I can move on to more important things."

How can the Small Catechism be used in the life of the individual Christian?

Luther offers us good advice when he writes in the Large Catechism, "Every morning and evening, and whenever I have time, I read and say 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 gladly do it." The Small Catechism is intended to be a prayer book for individuals and families. As we meditate on the various portions of the Catechism, we look for instruction from God, then look for what we can thank God for, then for what we need to confess to God and, finally, we finish our prayerful meditation by asking God for His blessing and mercy so we may live according to His Word. It is in this way that daily use of the Catechism is a powerful tool for the Christian life.

How can the Small Catechism be used in the home?

The Small Catechism was designed to be the family's Christian handbook. In fact, some have referred to the Small

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Catechism as the “layman’s Bible” because it provides such an excellent, brief, clear summary of God’s Word on the essentials of the Christian faith.

Families can use the Catechism in their daily devotions. Luther provided suggested prayers for the family to say at the beginning and end of meals, and for each member of the family to pray when they go to sleep and when they wake up.

Families that use the Catechism find it helpful to pray the Lord’s Prayer together and then to say the Apostles’ Creed together. Then they continue to work on the explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Holy Baptism, Confession and Holy Communion. Gradually, over the months and years, the entire family will be able to recite the Catechism from memory and discuss together its meaning.

How can the Catechism be used in congregations?

The Catechism is a key resource in confirmation instruction for both children and adults. The Catechism can be used in so many other ways as well. It is an important resource for Bible classes and other groups that meet at the church. Wouldn’t it be good for every group that meets regularly in a Lutheran congregation to begin their meeting by reviewing a part of the Catechism and then concluding that review with prayer?

Many congregations make it a practice to print out a portion of the Catechism and recite it during the Sunday worship service. Other congregations devote the seasons of Advent and Lent to a careful review of the Catechism’s six chief parts during their mid-week services. Still other congregations will spend time during the non-festival half of the church year devoting special attention to reviewing the Catechism. There are pastors who use the Catechism as the subject of children’s talks during the worship service. That is certainly a fine practice.

Other congregations have been richly blessed by using the Catechism and its explanation in adult Bible classes, or other study groups. Study groups have found much to discuss and learn by working their way carefully through the Catechism.

Many people have discovered that the Catechism is also a very helpful resource for witnessing to others about Jesus Christ and all that He means for us. Being able to repeat the explanation to the Creed is a good way to tell others what Jesus is all about and how one receives salvation in Christ.

What is the benefit of learning the Catechism by heart?

There is a great deal of benefit! The Catechism is learned by regular and repeated reading, discussion and prayer. The head of the house should lead the rest of the family in speaking

the various parts of the Catechism and so, slowly but surely, learning the Catechism by heart. One week, for instance, the family can work on the First Commandment and its meaning, or the First Article of the Creed and its meaning, and so forth.

Learning the Catechism by heart is vital for teaching the Catechism. Perhaps every word will not make sense at first. That is not a problem. Just keep working on learning them. Understanding will come in time, but learning the words must begin right away. We are making a serious mistake if we wait to have children memorize the Catechism until they can understand every word. We need to learn to speak the language of our faith before we can understand it. Families might be surprised at how quickly children can memorize the words of the Catechism and then learn to understand them.

Martin Luther was very concerned that this be done. He wrote in his Preface to the Small Catechism, “So adopt whatever form you wish, and then stick with it at all times. . . . keep to a single, fixed and permanent form and wording, and teach them first of all the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, etc., according to the text, word for word, so that they can repeat it after you and commit it to memory.”

Where can we obtain copies of the Small Catechism?

You may purchase copies of the Small Catechism from Concordia Publishing House by calling their toll-free number, 800-325-3040.

— Dr. A. L. Barry
President

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod