

# REFORMATION 500 REFLECTIONS

1517 31 October 31 2017



Central Lutheran  
MINNEAPOLIS



## Luther and the Small Catechism

*Pastor Stephanie Friesen*

For centuries, memorizing Luther's Small Catechism has been a staple of Confirmation curriculum for Lutherans around the globe. Familiar phrases like *we are to fear and love God so that...* and *This is most certainly true* established a cadence that made the memory work of Luther's Small Catechism possible for many of us. In recent decades, however, memorizing the catechism has diminished which causes us to wonder about why it was written and why we memorized it.

Luther wrote the Small Catechism as a handbook after visiting local churches where he discovered that many of the churches' members and leaders lacked any reasonable knowledge of Christian teachings – specifically on the topics of The Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer and The Apostles' Creed. In order for congregations to teach these basic underpinnings of our faith, Luther published The Small Catechism to give leaders and parents a teaching tool – a primer of sorts – on the basics of our faith.

Luther's brilliance mandated that children memorize and continually recite the catechism as a means of learning and understanding the basics of Christian living. Luther didn't require memorization for the sake of memorization. Luther required memorization so that the basic elements of living a Christian life became embedded into the body mind and spirit of the child. Responsibility for teaching the Catechism began at home where parents were believed to have the greatest opportunity and responsibility for teaching.

For those of us who memorized Luther's Small Catechism, there are specific ideas and phrases that resonate deep within us. Many of us have forgotten some words but recall others with ease. What are the words that you remember? Why do you suppose they stick with you?

So, as we celebrate and explore all the ways in which Martin Luther and the Reformation has impacted our lives of faith in this anniversary year, we celebrate the Small Catechism. Its words and ideas continue to draw us into a beautiful and meaningful understanding of the basics of our Christian faith.



## Luther and Worship

*Pastor D. Foy Christopherson*

Lutherans define the Church by looking to its worship life: The Church exists where the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. Another way of saying this is, "All that is necessary..." Beyond that are human traditions and preferences for organization. As such, Lutherans are both conservative and liberal; united and diverse. This core definition unites us around a basic principle. From there we celebrate the diversity of its expression. This core is conservative. We are liberal in its application. A summary of issues around worship from the Reformation must include:

- Luther reduced the number of sacraments from seven to only two who met his definition – Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

- The most theological worship controversy in the Reformation period was around the sacrament of Holy Communion. Reformation era churches continued to recognize one another's baptism (in the name of the Trinity or of Jesus) as valid.
- Vestments, musical instruments and other practices are neither forbidden or required.
- Luther's only comment (off hand) about church architecture is that he had a preference that the priest face the people in worship.
- Vernacular language became more common in worship.
- Major Reformation issues that still surface: primacy of the Bishop of Rome (Pope); intercession by the saints; Mary's place in our life of faith.
- The Augsburg Confession asserts that "The Mass is maintained among us..." (Holy Communion offered monthly or quarterly is a later development; that Lutherans have sought to correct since the 1970s)
- Luther published two versions of the liturgy: one in Latin and one in German; reluctantly, for other Lutheran pastors who were looking for his guidance. These two service orders form the core about what we know about Luther's understanding of worship.

Luther's reforms of the Mass must be at the core of any reflection about Luther and Worship at the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. Both conservative of the mass in practice, and radical in reforming its theology, Luther's (Latin) *Formula Missae* (Order for the Mass) launched the Lutheran evangelical mass (Holy Communion service). Frank Senn notes that this work "has to be unequalled in the history of liturgy: to have effected a radical revision of the heart of the mass without the worshippers necessarily noticing any outward change." (Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 279)

Luther was a fine theologian and able pastor but he was not an expert on the liturgy, a discipline to

develop later. His work was occasional or practical rather than systematic. His primary theological agenda in this practical work was to assert in word and rite that the Church had no participatory part in our redemption accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result, any use of the concept of our sacrifice was abolished for the sake of clarity on this primary point. The main place this could be found in worship in Luther's day was in the Great Thanksgiving prayer at the altar. His saving grace was that that portion of the liturgy was usually prayed silently by the priest, facing the altar. Luther was able to "fix" the theology without disrupting the liturgical experience of the assembly by simply omitting the offending section. To the congregation it all looked the same, but theologically Luther had accomplished a revolutionary reform.

In other words, Luther's brilliance was to make a major theological shift in worship without disrupting the liturgical experience of the assembly. Unlike later reformers, he was pastorally sensitive to the assembly. And perhaps this is his most brilliant contribution to Lutheran worship.



## Luther and Preaching

*Pastor Peter Nycklemoe*

Whole volumes have been written on Martin Luther and preaching, the impact of the Lutheran Reformation on preaching and the essentials for preaching in the Lutheran tradition. My goal is to summarize some of the key points to help us have an engaging conversation. Where shall we begin? With the word, which is central for Martin Luther,

the Lutheran Reformation and our part of the Lutheran tradition.

Jesus Christ died and was raised for you. God's love for you is unconditional and eternal. For Martin Luther, the gospel or word is shared in a nutshell: "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son so that all who believe in him will not perish but will have everlasting life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17) In this gospel in miniature, we hear Luther's three-fold understanding of the word: Jesus as incarnate word, scripture as written word and preaching of the church as the proclaimed word. (O.C Edwards, *History of Preaching*, page 285) Jesus is the incarnate word of God. The scriptures are the cradle of that word. You and I are called to preach this word of God's love in all the wondrous and challenging moments of our lives.

What do you mean that all are called to preach the word? Yes, indeed. In the waters of your baptism you were named child of God when the water and the word joined with a splash. In that moment you were called to preach, in and through all of your God-given gifts. You may not be called to stand up in the midst of the assembly as a public preacher, but you sure are called to preach in all of the private ministry of daily life. Public and private preaching are the two helpful categories that Dr. Gerard Forde loved to talk about, and they are helpful for us to think about as the baptized children of God. The line between the two does not need to be so hard and fast. I believe that each of us has a message, a testimony to share in private and in public.

The word of God is spoken in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and in the preaching of the body of Christ – private and public. For Luther, there is energy around the preaching of the word. Why so much energy? "The Gospel is received in no other way than by

hearing," Luther wrote time and time again. (LW 29:145) Faith comes by hearing, and we receive this by preaching, both private and public. We tell our dearest beloved ones that God loves them and so do we. We gather each week for worship to hear that God love us in Jesus Christ.

Hear the word of God, you are loved, child of God, Jesus Christ has died and been raised for you! "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Rom. 10: 17)

Questions to discuss:

1. Who has preached to you, who has told you about God's love in your journey of faith?
2. Where are you called to privately preach the word? What are unique ways that you are called to preach, to share the love of God?
3. Do you think everyone has a couple of sermons, some testimony to share? How has the church encouraged your public sharing or how could the church do a better job in encouraging all the baptized to preach the word?
4. At the heart of Lutheran preaching is the law/gospel distinction, have you heard of that before? How do you understand this gift in the history of preaching?



## Luther and the Neighbor

*Pastor Melissa Pohlman*

It is no secret that Martin Luther did not like the book of James. He called it "an epistle of straw." (1522 Preface to the New Testament) Many of the folks who work to care for others in our world

struggle with this because they take much comfort and direction from James 2:17 that says, "Faith without works is dead." So how are we to care for our neighbor as followers of Luther?

This conundrum didn't exist for Luther. It wasn't a question of if we care for the needs of our neighbor, of course we would. Luther's emphasis was that these good works were not the way in which we worked our way into heaven. The church had set up an easy payment plan to get into heaven by purchasing indulgences. Several of the 95 Theses dealt directly with Luther's concern that people were buying indulgences instead of supporting and caring for their neighbor who was hungry. People with limited income were more concerned to secure a place in heaven than care for their neighbors on earth. People with vast wealth were choosing to buy their way to heaven and their loved ones' way through memorial masses, endowing buildings and commissioning art. The church was preaching that if you wanted to quickly spring your loved ones from purgatory you would put your money in the coffers. If you were poor you were doomed to spend a large part of eternity waiting to get into heaven simply because you didn't have the money on earth to pay the church to speed up the process. Then we had two problems, the poor were going hungry and the church was teaching them that they were not going to heaven anytime soon due to their poverty.

Our salvation for Luther was rooted in our baptism. It was our baptism that was the leveling field for all Christians and the very wealthy and the very poor were all baptized with the same baptism. It was our baptism for Luther that sent us out to care for our neighbor. Our vocations then were to care for one another because this was how we showed our thankfulness to God for all the benefits God has lavished upon us, and God works through us in order to serve our neighbors. (LW 14:114)

The Reformation helped to nail these ideas down more firmly when in 1522 the Wittenberg Order

was passed by the city council. It provided for how the Mass would be celebrated in the churches, and it also provided for how the hungry were to be fed in the city. As the "Lutheran reform" was accepted in cities across Germany It reformed both worship and welfare in the churches and the towns. These two went hand in hand.

This is how cities began to have Community Chests. They would begin by taking property of the church that was surplus or overly extravagant and selling it off to use the money for establishing schools, educating children and feeding people who were hungry. It was a throwback to the Early Church in Acts who "had all things in common...and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need." Acts 2:44-45 From that Community Chest "gifts and loans could be made in Christian love to all the needy in the land." (LW 45:172-173)

This reformation of both worship and welfare has shaped us as Lutherans from Luther's days of Community Chests through the history of Lutherans establishing hospitals and social service agencies up to our days of establishing a Clothes Closet/Free Store. This work among our neighbors is a rich part of who we are as Lutherans.

Questions to discuss:

1. How do we claim our heritage and continue to reform our Lutheran understanding of caring for our neighbor?
2. How does our worship life inform our community life at Central and how does our community life inform our worship life?
3. Have you experienced generosity from a "Community Chest" type of organization, institution or fund? What was that like?



## Luther and Music

Deacon Mark Sedio, cantor

In order to understand the importance of music and Luther's contribution to it we need first to talk about music in the Middle Ages. During this time music moved from plainchant (often called Gregorian) to polyphony. Polyphonic music might be defined as composed pieces in which two or more lines of independent (but often related) melody move simultaneously. Because of the complexity of polyphonic compositions such music could not be performed by untrained singers. Thus, more and more music in the Church became the property of choirs. People listened and watched as choirs sang prayer or praises to God on their behalf. These included those parts of the liturgy that do not change from week to week (called the Ordinary of the Mass): the *Kyrie* ("Lord, have mercy"), *Gloria* ("Glory to God in the Highest"), *Credo* (Nicene Creed), *Sanctus* ("Holy, Holy, Holy"), *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God").

In addition, other parts of the service (Mass, Western rite) had been curtailed as well. The singing of Psalms and the chanting morning and evening prayer were taken over by the clergy, choirs or singers from religious orders. All of this lessened people's singing in worship.

Luther wanted the Church's song to, once again, be the song of the people - the worshipers, the gathered assembly. He understood the power of participatory singing - how singing a hymn can gather a group of individuals into one worshipping body - the Body of Christ. Luther created hymns to take the place of the chanted Ordinary, translating them from Latin into German - the language of the people. In doing this he created the "Deutsche

Messe," the "German Mass." We still have these hymns (translated into English) in our hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*: *Kyrie* - #409; *Gloria* - 410, *Credo* - 411, *Sanctus* - 868, *Lamb of God* - 357.

Luther, a fine musician himself, wrote hymns paraphrasing the contents of his *Small Catechism* (ELW 746 - his explanation of the Lord's Prayer; 499 - his explanation of the Lord's supper - a portion of which we've been using the past month as our post communion prayer). He knew that singing helps memory - it's far easier to memorize something if the words are cast in rhyming form and put to a melody (think of the "Alphabet song"). He crafted hymns that were simple enough so people could understand them, be moved by them and be brought to faith by them. His efforts focused on making the Word of God through song "live among the people" which he called "Viva vox evangelii" - "The Living Voice of the Gospel." Luther understood that we sing not only passes through our lips, but plants itself in our minds and, moreover, in our hearts.

In addition, Luther created vernacular (in his case German) versions of existing Gregorian Latin hymns - translating them, paraphrasing them, adding to them to create a treasury of hymns Lutherans (and many other denominations) the world over hold dear. "Savior of the Nations, Come" (a textual reworking of the Gregorian hymn "Veni Redemptor gentium") is a good example. Luther left the melody basically intact but set it to a rhythmic meter making it easier for people to sing. This simple, lovely Advent tune, that may even have roots in ancient Jewish worship, was beloved by many composers including Bach who created not only several organ settings but an entire cantata as well (Cantata 62, "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland")

Singing together is a huge part of our Lutheran heritage. It's who we are. "Tell me what you sing and I'll tell you who you are" is an old saying. This is most certainly true! *Soli Deo gloria!*



## Luther and the Hymn of the Day

*Jane Lien, associate cantor*

The Hymn of the Day is one of the most important parts of Lutheran worship. It is the hymn immediately following the sermon and so is sometimes called the sermon hymn. But that moniker does not reflect its importance.

The Hymn of the Day captures the central themes of proclamation in any worship service. The cantor or preacher chooses it based on the scriptures for the day, especially the gospel, but it also reflects any special theme or festival of the church year which is being celebrated that day. It assumes that the preacher will be focusing on those particular scriptures appointed for the Sunday. So it takes on the function of a unifier of the theme or themes for the day. It is a “musical and poetic commentary on all of the lessons and chiefly on the meaning or theme to be communicated by the service.”<sup>1</sup>

It was during the Reformation that this important part of Lutheran worship developed. Martin Luther believed hymns chosen for worship should help draw worshippers into participation as the work of the people. This had not been important in his time. Priests were liturgists and choirs sang the music. Ordinary people had no real role in worship. (See Mark Sedio’s article on Luther and Music.) In addition, during the 16th Century the church came to recognize that hymns could be substitutes for various parts of the liturgy. It also began to select hymns that fit well with specific Sundays of the church year. Luther urged that these hymns be preserved.

Though the practice of using a hymn of the day waxed and waned in the Lutheran church over the centuries between then and now, it is a common

practice in the ELCA today. There is a suggested list of Hymns of the Day. The preacher or cantor at Central always looks at the suggested hymn and often uses it but is free to choose another hymn that fits closely with the appointed texts, creed and other parts of the liturgy.

For example, today we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. “A Mighty Fortress,” Luther’s most iconic hymn, was selected as the Hymn of the Day. It reflects the spirit of the Reformation and the strong theme of the Word in the scripture readings today, most pointedly in stanza four, the strength of the Word so important to Luther: “God’s Word forever shall abide...” In our readings Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant unlike the old covenant. God “reforms” the house of Israel. God writes the Word on their hearts and so it is by God’s power that they know God. But Paul tells us this Word is no longer law. It is gospel and a pure gift. It is by God’s work and strength that a Christian is made right with God and nothing (evil) can take that away. And in the gospel, Jesus urges the people to continue in his Word. Sin cannot overcome a child of God who lives in that Word.

The hymn also resonates with the Prayer of the Day and the explanation to the Creed. A portion of the prayer says, “Protect and comfort them in times of trial, defend them against all enemies of the gospel.” The creed also speaks to God’s protection and redemption of humanity.

In addition to being sung after the sermon (the good news proclaimed in song), “A Mighty Fortress” is used today as the musical source of the prelude, postlude and the choir anthem during communion, in this way weaving the themes of the Hymn of the Day throughout the service.

Every Sunday as we lift our voices to sing, we confess our faith and proclaim the gospel together.

<sup>1</sup>Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p. 87.

These essays were developed for weekend publication and discussion starters for use during October 2017.  
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333 South 12th St, Minneapolis, MN 55404  
612 870 4416 | [centralmpls.org](http://centralmpls.org)