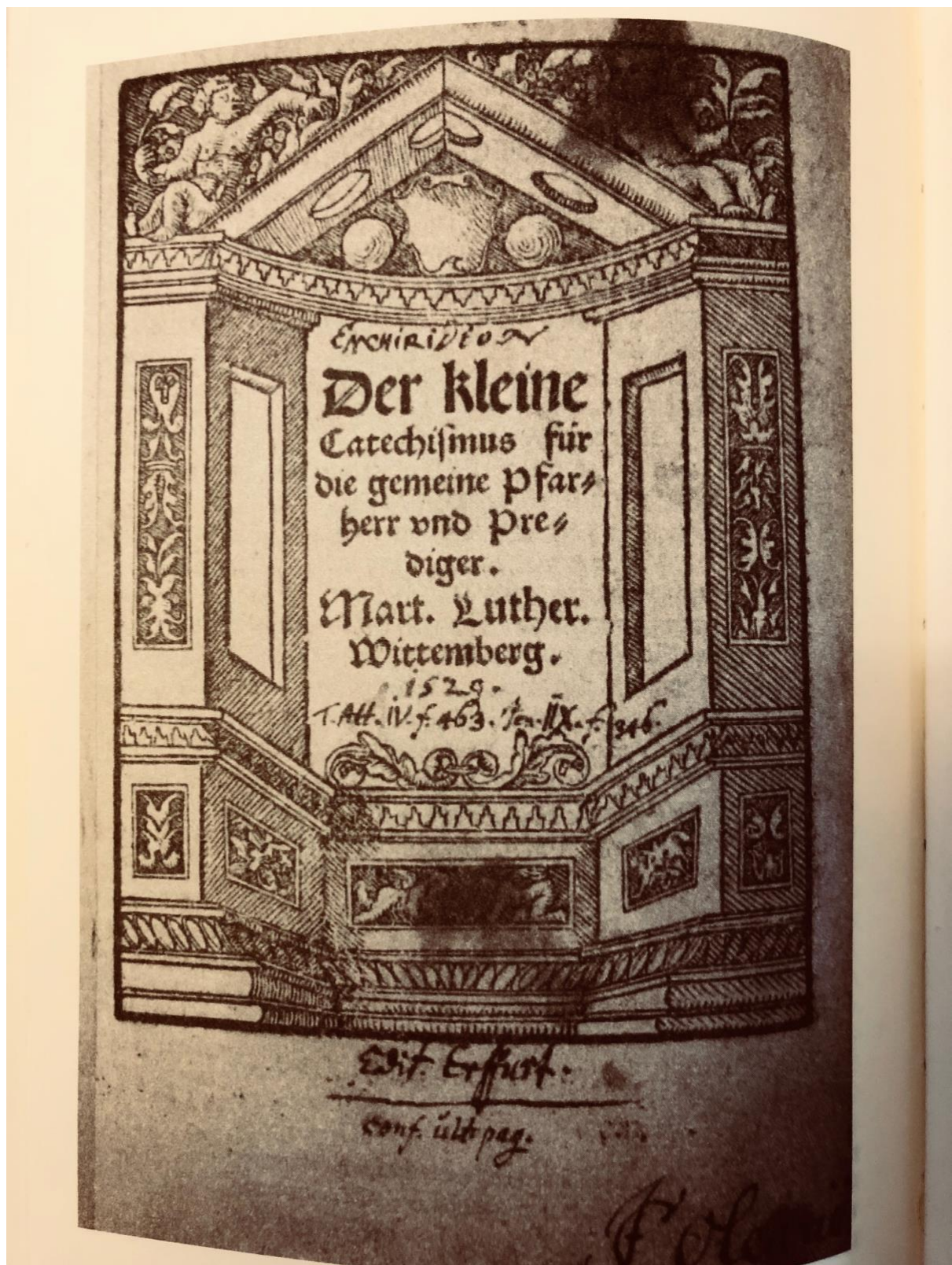


Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism

HIS INTRODUCTION IN 1529

Wilhelm Weber

INTERNATIONAL LUTHERAN SOCIETY OF WITTENBERG | OLD LATIN SCHOOL



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0. People need this Christian teaching

Dr. Luther addresses faithful and godly pastors and preachers. He highlights the pressing need for this catechetical instruction, because of the dire situation encountered during the so-called Saxon Visitation. He calls it “deplorable and miserable”. On this inspection tour, he encountered pastors unable to teach and preach and therefore also many so-called Christians, who didn’t know the 10 commandments, Lord’s Prayer nor the Christian Creed. Making them not much better than the beasts of the fields and dumb boars. Still, they were baptized and went to the Lord’s table as a matter of course. This is a damned shame and a terrible misuse of Christian liberty, but still remains the responsibility of the bishops in charge. Luther emphasizes their episcopal obligation and answers his own calling as pastor, teacher and bishop by positively leading the way. Showing how this pastoral duty is best carried out amongst young and old, beginners and advanced learners. Step by step and going from the initial introduction to the higher levels of learning and understanding.

1. Stay with one formulation

This is Dr. Luther’s first point. Obviously, he has come across many different formulations and verbalizations of the gospel. Some better, some worse. That is, how it goes. He himself worked on his formulations for these main articles of faith since the beginning of the reformation decade.¹ Still, at this stage he strongly stresses, that the pastor should follow the good example of the church fathers throughout the ages and stick with one formulation of these doctrinal markers from year to year. That will help the initiates to learn the words by heart and not get confused.

Of course, you should not stay at this beginner’s level, but move on to higher levels of learning. Dr. Luther encourages the pastors and teachers to continue teaching the main articles of faith to their advanced members. Perhaps Dr. Luther does this with a twinkle in his eye, when he writes:

“But when you preach in the presence of learned and intelligent men, you may exhibit your skill, and may present these parts in as varied and intricate ways and give them as masterly turns as you are able.”

After all, he knows both the pastors and the parishes. Both are often not quite as bright as they might like to seem.

Although nobody is ought to be forced to faith, the parents, teachers, pastors and lords need to make sure, that their entrusted subjects – families, students and subordinates – do know the main articles of the Christian faith. Otherwise

- 1.1. They are no Christians
- 1.2. Should not be allowed to the sacrament.
- 1.3. Should not become godparents and hold any infants over baptism.
- 1.4. They should not enjoy Christian liberties.
- 1.5. Not get food nor drink from their parents or masters.
- 1.6. Rather, the lords should banish them from their lands and into exile.

It is Dr. Luther’s conviction, that if somebody wants to live in a certain town, then he “**must know and observe the town laws, the protection of which he wishes to enjoy.**”



Wer in einer Stadt wohnen will
der soll das Stadtrecht wissen
und halten; daß er genießen wil
D. Martin Luth. er.

Point for discussion: This is an important issue in the present debate on inculturation, indigenization, citizenship, immigration and refugee status.

2. Teach the meaning of the subject learnt and take sufficient time doing this.

Taking the fixed formulation from the start proceed next to impart the meaning of the words learnt. This needs enough preparation and consideration. It is a timely process. Shortcuts are ill advised. Rather proceed step by step and not in too much haste, but only as the matter is digested and understood, “otherwise they will be overwhelmed, so as not to be able to retain any well.”

Point for discussion: This process suggested by Dr. Luther is obviously something which is best done in daily instruction over weeks and months if not years as was customary in our congregations for decades. It's just not possible to get the same results in crash courses for confirmands in primetime of the holidays – never mind for prospective students of theology, no matter how bright they might be.

3. After learning the Small Catechism proceed to the Large one.

Here too you need profound insight and a wide perspective to grasp the richness and depth of these Christian articles of faith. Go into the various works, benefits, dangers and ills as many commentaries give good examples of. Concentrate especially on those issues, that are needful amongst your people. Be it the 7th commandment for artisans, tradesmen, farmers and staff or the 4th with children and common folk. In all this remember to focus on the governing bodies and parents, who are in charge of children and students going to school and having to learn these Christian articles of faith to become faithful pastors, teachers, scribes etc. themselves. This is a very serious matter, which if neglected can cause terrible calamity.

4. Lastly, emphasize the importance of the Lord's Supper

As the papal tyranny was stopped by the Reformation and Christian liberty introduced, many people misused this liberty and ignored the Lord's Supper. Dr. Luther emphasizes that this remains a matter of Christian freedom, but people should realize that without Word and Sacrament they are worse than pagans, because they ignore, what has been entrusted to them before.

“Hence, you must not make any law in this matter, as the Pope does. Only set forth clearly the benefit and harm, the need and use, the danger and the blessing, connected with this Sacrament, and the people will come of themselves without your compulsion. But if they do not come, let them go and tell them that such belong to the devil as do not regard nor feel their great need and the gracious help of God.”

This admonition is the obligation of the pastors and preachers. Therefore, they should not quit warning and inviting the people, not giving in to sloth or cowardice. It is always a matter of learning and living. True faith and holy living belong together. Luther concludes: *“Our office is now become a different thing from what it was under the Pope; it is now become serious and salutary. Accordingly, it now involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trials, and, in addition thereto, little reward and gratitude in the world. But Christ Himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully. To this end may the Father of all grace help us, to whom be praise and thanks forever through Christ, our Lord! Amen.”*

ⁱ Compare “Eine kurze Erklärung der Zehn Gebote” (1518) and „Eine kurze Form der Zehn Gebote, eine kurze Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers“ (1520) in Martin Luther Deutsch-Deutsche Studienausgabe Bd.1 Glaube und Leben. Ed. Dietrich Korsch. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig: 2012. Pg.13ff. 317ff.