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LUTHER THE CATECHIST

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WHY THE CATECHISMS?

In the history of the church, there are two competing impulses—one for Christian *unity* and the other for Christian *purity*. The first impulse has led to mainline churches suppressing their own doctrinal immune systems to such a degree that they are now doctrinally and morally the easy prey of every opportunistic infection.¹ The second impulse has led to thousands of denominations and even sects who at times are known less for the gospel than for their extreme doctrinal oddities.² This situation has caused us to read John 17 according to our personal preference toward *either* Christian unity or Christian purity when, in fact, the text comprehends both unity and purity. Envisioning both Christian unity and Christian purity in late twentieth-century America (or anywhere on the globe) is as prone to eliciting headaches as pondering Buddhist conundrums: “If a tree falls in the forest with nobody to hear, does it make a sound?” Perhaps we should ask, “If a Christian truly loves Christ, can he truly love another Christian?”

Despite the difficulty of reaching both goals simultaneously, that does not mean we are free to stop trying. Like Paul, we are under obligation to “proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Col. 1:28). This means, at least, that our goal should be not

only to give each person the opportunity to receive Christ, but more than that, we should seek to convert and disciple *everyone!* At the very least, our goal should be that everyone we contact in the course of our ministry should bow to the lordship of Christ, receiving eternal life through Him, and then *walk* in basic obedience and in the Christian world view. At best we have produced a church full of people with a “Christian preference”—perhaps a desire for some fire insurance, perhaps a commitment to watching only R-rated movies, or even putting a few dollars in the offering plate, but not much more. “Christian Worldview” is more likely the name of the next 24-hour religious cable network than a mark of discipleship.

What we ministers of the gospel need—or even as Christian fathers seeking to raise our children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:14)—is a tool to relate basic doctrine and basic practice. Ideally, for the sake of promoting both Christian unity and Christian purity, there should be a basic course of Christian knowledge that all biblical Christians could agree upon. It would be a tool suitable for both public teaching and family discipleship. The result of such a training tool would, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, produce Christians who as a group would think and act like Christians, despite diverse denominational backgrounds with their distinctive emphases. Fortunately, there are such tools. They are the Reformation Era Catechisms of Luther, the Reformed Churches, Anglicanism and the Westminster Assembly.³

The Reformation catechisms contain no doctrine in abstraction. Rather, they contain both *credenda* (belief) and *agenda* (action). Between devoted students of the Reformation catechisms, there should exist a genuine “catechetical ecumenism” that transcends denominational labels and unites them in rejoicing over the free grace of God in the gospel and practical Christian living marked by piety and

prayer in true Christian community. As our nation seems headed into a post-denominational quagmire where solid doctrine is cast aside in the name of unity, the greatest gift we can give the next generation is to emphasize these catechisms with their emphasis on the “heart of the matter” so that however much denominational distinctives become obscured—or exacerbated—the faith will retain its basic integrity.

The Reformation era catechisms reflect a fundamental unity, not merely in the areas of justification, but in many practical areas relating to Christian life. Pastors who are weary of the plethora of “fill-in-the-blank” discipleship training programs that seem to specialize in adding another layer of man-made bureaucracy to already comatose churches will find a highly duplicable, self-contained discipleship program in the Reformation catechisms. Christians tired of riding the emotional roller coaster of contemporary spirituality will find the catechisms giving depth to their spirituality and order to their thinking. Any follower of Christ will find that these documents contain searching applications of the truth of God to awaken them to faith and action.

Most Reformed Christians are familiar with the *Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms* or the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Baptists from time to time have adapted both the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and the *Heidelberg* for their own congregations with appropriate changes.⁴ The catechisms less likely to be studied by Reformed Baptists or Reformed Presbyterians are Luther’s catechetical works. This discussion centers on the topic of “Luther As Catechist” as he seeks to unite truth and zeal in the emerging Reformation church under his charge through his publication of his *Larger Catechism*.⁵

This overview will compare and contrast Luther’s work to other catechisms of that day. The reader should read

Luther's Catechism for himself. It is spiritually refreshing and should not be reduced simply to the status of a document for scholarly analysis.

CATECHISM: A DENIAL OF SOLA SCRIPTURA?

The sentiment, "no book but the Bible," has been used to disparage catechisms and confessions of faith as "man made" and therefore to be condemned. How do we know this? By the *man made* commentaries, books, magazine articles, and sermons which denounce them!

Levity aside, *Luther's Catechism* is self consciously grounded in the Holy Scriptures. For the Reformer who could not subordinate his conscience to anything less than the Word of God, this catechism does not contradict his stance. Instead it serves as a "subordinate standard," the best exposition then of Christian basics he can muster during this tumultuous time of reformation when so many lacked basic education and were ignorant of the rudiments of evangelical faith. While our populace consists of many who can read the MTV listings in their daily apostate newspaper, our people's knowledge of the evangelical faith is little more advanced than that of the peasants of Luther's day.

In his own words, this work, along with the body of commentaries and other learning aids produced for the Protestant pastors of that day, is in *antithesis*, a self-consciously Christian differentiation from the "minister's manuals" available under the papacy.⁶ Yea, these works are the fulfillment of what the papist tracts were supposed to be: an unfolding of the truth of the Scriptures. Admittedly, Luther implies, the *Catechism* consists of the "ABC's" of the Christian faith. But the fact is that however much we wish to see ourselves as "doctors" of the faith, we all need to constantly relearn the grace of God in the gospel. This is Luther's testimony:

As for myself, let me say that I, too, an a doctor and a preacher—yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning, and whenever else I have time, I read and recite 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 do it gladly. These dainty fastidious fellows would like quickly, with one reading, to become doctors above all doctors, to know all there is to be known. Well, this too is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the people's souls, yes, even God and his Word. . . . Therefore I beg these lazy-bellies and presumptuous saints, for God's sake, to get it into their heads that they are not really and truly such learned and great doctors as they think.⁷

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For Luther, the *Catechism* flows out of our duty to God in light of the Holy Scriptures. The Ten Commandments form the first element of the *Catechism* because they are

God's Law which tell us how to please Him.⁸ The Creed⁹ answers the questions:

What kind of being is God? What does He do? How can we praise or portray or describe Him in such a way as to make Him known?

. . . Thus the Creed is nothing else than a response and confession of Christians based on [obedience to] the First Commandment.¹⁰

So while the Creed does not quote from Scripture directly, it (or something akin to it) is required to be taught so that the Christian may be "ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).¹¹ God's command to "not take the name of God in vain"¹² requires that we take it up rightly by properly understanding prayer and, specifically, the Lord's Prayer.¹³ A discussion of the sacraments/ordinances related to *entering* and *continuing* in the Christian life (baptism and Lord's Supper) and auricular confession¹⁴ round out the *Catechism*.

The overall structure of the *Catechism* then might be outlined as:

- 1) What God Requires: God's law expounded in the Ten Commandments
- 2) Our Only Hope of Responding Rightly: God's grace expounded in the Creed and Lord's Prayer
- 3) Basics of Christian Life: baptism, Lord's Supper, confession

Because confession in Luther's scheme of things brings inward reality or conformity to the external signs and profession, while the outward signs demonstrate our submission to the reign of God, item three might even be outlined: (3) Basics of Christian Life—faith lived out.

So, far from denying *sola scriptura*, the *Large Catechism* exemplifies *submission* to Scripture as the ultimate norm of the faith. Not only are the contents drawn from the Bible, but the entire structure of the *Catechism* is shaped by the overarching themes of God's revelation: God's law and grace as objective realities, and our personal appropriation of them.

A THREE-FOLD PIETY

It is in the areas of the sacraments/ordinances where Reformed churches part company in some important ways. The balance of our discussion will therefore focus on issues of common faith and obedience, the "Three-Fold Piety" found in the Decalogue, Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer.

By way of overview, let it be stated that these three texts were entrenched—if one may use that word to denote a favorable compulsion—in the hearts of the Reformers. For example, Calvin's *Institutes* expound these texts. So do the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Anglican Catechism*. Most Reformed liturgies from the continent, those of Anglican Reformers and Richard Baxter and even Knox, contain all three texts regularly as part of divine worship. Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory*¹⁵ shows that Baxter, while in general concurring with the *Westminster Standards*, was fearful of "subscription" to either Puritan or Anglican authorities, having been a victim of such subscription requirements before. He suggested that subscription be limited to the Decalogue, Creed, and Lord's Prayer alone. Likewise, he suggested that these texts form the basis of much more "practical preaching" in the parishes. Known for his catechizing successes, one might say Baxter's entire ministry revolved around this "three-fold piety."

We might ask why the Westminster Assembly rejected including the Apostles' Creed when other Reformers included them so easily and automatically. One can only

conclude that the Assembly sought to completely subordinate themselves to Scripture and for precision's sake, did not include the Creed. But the rejection is not complete. The *Westminster Catechisms* (and therefore Spurgeon's *Catechism*) expound the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer. But even these *assume* the Creed as they unfold the essentials of the Christian life. Regarding the Creed, the appendix to the *Shorter Catechism*, found in the complete *Westminster Standards*, states:

And albeit the substance of the doctrine comprise in that abridgment, commonly called the Apostles' Creed, be fully set forth in each of the [Westminster] Catechisms, *so as there is no necessity of inserting the Creed itself* [emphasis added]; yet it is here annexed, not as though it were composed by the Apostles, or ought to be esteemed canonical Scripture . . . but because it is a brief sum of the Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the churches of Christ.¹⁶

As moderns, romantics or simply slothful people, we value "spontaneity." This reflects itself in our desire for spontaneous prayer instead of liturgical prayer or even studied prayer . . . or if you're from the rural "pew jumping South," even studied sermons at times: "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it" is a proof-text (and excuse!) for a "spontaneous sermon," not a more generalized promise of divine assistance!¹⁷ Obedience is to be the result of the "promptings of the Spirit" on the spur of the moment, "God *telling me* to do something specific and immediate," not the result of meditating on God's law day and night (Ps. 1; et.al.). And our understanding of God must come from dramatic "religious experiences" and private "revelations," not, of course, through the sometimes dreary discipline of seeking to emulate godly virtues in the crucible of church

life as we seek to conform all things to God's Word.¹⁸

Is there any doubt that we have lost something here in our pursuit of the ultimate Christian experience? Disciplining our minds to meditate on these classic texts of Reformation spirituality as they relate to the rest of Scripture could help us escape the tyranny of the spontaneous. Accordingly, a return by the Reformation churches—Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist—to their catechisms would do much to rescue the spirituality of Protestant Christendom from subjectivism. May God grant us such "three-fold piety."

Now let us go on to briefly review how Luther handles each text.

THE OBEDIENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN MAN

Luther at times can sound like Hell's worst libertine. That is certainly how his papist opponents portrayed him. Even those who are, on balance, Luther's friends recoil in horror at some of his statements on obedience to God's law.¹⁹ In part, Luther is a man caught between the demands of legitimate Christian obedience, an exhilarating freedom from the tradition-of-the-elders legalism of Romanism, and Luther's own shock and dismay at the misuses of God's law as justification for the peasant uprisings and the Anabaptist radicals.

The *Large Catechism* has none of these antinomian blemishes. Instead, here Luther is at pains to quell libertinism with true, faithful obedience as seen in this quote:

Now that they are free from the useless, bothersome babbling of the Seven Hours, it would be fine if every morning, noon, and evening they would read, instead, at least a page or two from the Catechism, the Prayer Book, the New Testament, or something else from the Bible and would pray the Lord's Prayer for themselves and their parishioners. In this

way they might show honor and gratitude to the Gospel, through which they have been delivered from so many burdens and troubles, and they might feel a little shame because, like pigs and dogs, they remember no more the Gospel than this rotten, pernicious, shameful, carnal liberty.²⁰

Luther expositis the text as a man who sees the commandments as given by Christ. On the level of practical hermeneutics, Luther holds that the Mosaic Law is binding universally only in so far as it is embraced and expanded upon by the new covenant Scriptures.



In his exposition here of the Decalogue, Luther is, while constrained by time limitations, the supreme casuist relating the general principles of each command to many specific evils in his day. For its short length and historic situation, it is remarkably "timeless" and undoubtedly one of the best expositions of the Decalogue in church history. Here Luther instructs servants how to relate to the masters and vice-versa. He chastises unjust judges. He deflates the self righteousness of those who believe demands of their religious vocation make them more holy than faithful Christian peasants. He attacks the ethical rationalizations that allow sinners to outwardly conform to God's law

while transgressing it. Luther's discussion of heart idolatry is perhaps the outstanding section of the entire exposition. All is quite searching, yet refreshing.

The biggest obstacle for some evangelicals to embrace the Catechisms may lie in the area of the Decalogue. It's not uncommon to hear, "But we're not under the old covenant." But reading Luther on the Ten Commandments is not an exercise in hearing a Jew explain the Ten Words without reference to the Christ event or the New Testament; far from it. Luther expositis the text as a man who sees the commandments as given by Christ. On the level of practical hermeneutics, Luther holds that the Mosaic Law is binding universally only in so far as it is embraced and expanded upon by the new covenant Scriptures.²¹ Luther's Sabbatarianism, like Calvin's, is regarded as deficient by the English Puritans who felt the Lord's Day observance on the Continent to be loose at times. But Luther's view does illustrate his sensitivity to the Christian's position as being under the new covenant. While Luther may not have indulged in lawn bowling as some allege the Genevan did after the Sunday sermon, Luther's perspective may be similar in that he translates the Sabbath command as, "You shall sanctify the holy day." Holy Day "rest" is maintained to be consistent with "natural law," but the more important element for the German is that the day is to be sanctified by public worship.²² Christ, who in His finished work becomes our Sabbath Rest (Col. 2; Heb. 4) by faith, is embraced in that way. To worship Him alone as the Savior meets the crucial obligation of observing the Sabbath under the new covenant. "Note then that the power and force of this commandment consist not of resting but of the sanctifying, so that this day should have its own particular holy work,"²³ i.e., devoting this special day to Christ. Sanctifying it comes by hearing and applying the Word.

Though lengthy, I hope this digression concerning

Luther's approach to the Decalogue and Sabbath will encourage many to return to their catechisms and preach this Old Testament text who otherwise feel these texts somehow "undermine" the gospel. They do not. Luther provides a wonderful model of how the Decalogue is in some ways the very foundation of gospel preaching because it forces us to confront the question "How Shall We Then Live?" and then leads us to find the grace of God in the gospel to answer the question. Further, Luther demonstrates a Christological interpretation of each command so that the Ten Words inspire true faith. The Reformers were not novices who accepted these texts without considering their actions. We, the heirs of their labors, ought not discount their choices lightly either.

Would we restore a basic moral vision to our churches? Perhaps it is past time to restore our Catechisms.

TRUE FAITH

As stated previously, the first commandment tells us of God's prerogatives for our lives and demands we define what we mean by "God." Who is the God of the Bible? The Creed tells us: "I believe in God the Father, who created me; I believe in God the Son, who redeemed me; I believe in the Holy Spirit who sanctifies me."²⁴

God as Father created the world and rules it by His providential dealings:

Hence since everything we possess, and everything in heaven and on earth besides, is daily given and sustained by God, it inevitably follows that we are in duty bound to love, praise, and thank Him without ceasing, and, in short, to devote all these things to His service, as He has required and enjoined them in the Ten Commandments.²⁵

God the Son is Lord of redemption.

Let this be the summary of the article, that the little word "Lord" simply means the same as "Redeemer," that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and now keeps us safe there. The remaining parts of this article simply serve to clarify and express how and by what means this redemption was accomplished—that is, how much it cost Christ and what He paid and risked in order to win us and bring us under His dominion. That is to say, he became man, conceived and born without sin, of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin, that he might become Lord over sin; moreover, he suffered, died, and was buried that He might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owed, not with silver and gold but with his own precious blood. All this in order to become my Lord.²⁶

God the Holy Spirit sanctifies us.

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in Him and take Him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death and resurrection, etc. . . . In order that this treasure might not be buried . . . God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation. Therefore to sanctify us is nothing else than to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, which we could not attain by ourselves.²⁷

Here is the place of the Creed in Luther's catechism and theology of grace: through the saving knowledge of Christ as expressed in the Creed, we are driven to love and delight

in the God who commands us "because we see that God gives Himself completely to us, with all His gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all His works, and the Holy Spirit all His gifts."²⁸

For most evangelicals, reciting the Creed in public worship never occurs—"too Catholic," they say. For others it's simply another meaningless ritual. Saying the Creed, though, should cause us to meditate on the Holy Trinity and God's manifold blessings poured out in history on our behalf. By saying, "I believe . . ." just as the Israelite made confession in Deuteronomy 26, we link ourselves to God's covenant actions in history and affirm by faith, "Yes, I am part of that."

Affirming that we are part of God's people during worship—or in the language of 1 Corinthians, by participating in the congregational "Amen" (1 Cor. 14:16) in response to the proclamation of God's truth—is a legitimate way to symbolize the presentation of our bodies, "a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1). The words of the Creed become the "proclamation" which explains the significance of our "offerings." The offerings in turn typify the laying down of our lives for the saints and devotion of all we have to the Lord (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:1-9).

Can our people be motivated by the love of Christ? Let us return to the Creed and the Catechisms!

TRUE PRAYER

In the *Westminster Catechisms*, each commandment of God was considered as having both a positive and negative element—a prohibition and a prescription. Likewise for the great German Reformer. The command not to take God's name in vain meant we were to use it rightly. Part of taking God's name rightly is not to swear falsely, making God an alleged partner to our sins. Beyond that however,

yet in the same vein, the taking of God's Name and pleading for covenant blessings involves us asking God to rightly honor His oaths to us made and sealed in Jesus Christ. If Queen Esther rightly feared to approach an earthly king to seek his blessing, how much more should we respectfully approach *our* heavenly Sovereign and Father?

In his context Luther is especially concerned that the common people do not fail to pray out of the fear that they are not "holy enough" (compared with the monastics) for their prayer to be heard. To counter this fear, Luther stresses that it is not our subjective holiness which makes us fit enough to pray, it is simply the fact that God commands us to pray that ought to drive us. But if the command of God is not enough to spur us to prayerfulness, perhaps the promises of God will be enough. After reciting several such Bible promises, he reminds us that prayerlessness is not only a denial of God's right to call us to prayer, it is a denial of God's goodness in failing to believe that He will meet our needs through prayer.²⁹

In the midst of constant threats to his own life, Luther must have become quite experienced at trusting God for protection and deliverance. That reality surfaces in this section on prayer when he says:

This we must know, that all our safety and protection consist in prayer alone. We are far too weak to cope with the devil and all his might and his forces arrayed against us, trying to trample us under foot. Therefore, we must carefully select the weapons with which Christians ought to arm themselves in order to stand against the devil. What do you think has accomplished such great results in the past, parrying the counsels and plots of our enemies and checking their murderous and seditious designs by which the devil expected to crush us, and the Gospel as well, except that the prayers of a few godly men intervened like an iron wall on our side? Oth-

erwise they would have witnessed a far different drama: the devil would have destroyed all Germany in its own blood. Now they may confidently ridicule and mock. But by prayer alone we shall be a match both for them and the devil, if only we persevere diligently and do not become slack. For whenever a good Christian prays, "Dear Father, thy will be done," God replies from on high "Yes, dear child, it shall indeed be done in spite of the devil and all the world."³⁰

Luther's exposition of the prayer is brief—"short and sweet." It matters little to the expository value of this section that Luther's text follows the Vulgate (and the modern eclectic Greek New Testament Texts) and does not include the KJV's "for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory." By the time he finishes, we are quite aware that the kingdom, power and glory are God's alone! Each paragraph resounds with the wisdom of one who knows suffering and, more importantly, suffering relieved through God's answers to prayer.

For instance, in his explanation of "Give us this day our daily bread," the Reformer has a better grasp of the division of earthly labor than most modern socialist "Christians" who think bread and material goods "grow on trees." He notes that this petition in reality concerns every aspect of our daily life because each loaf of bread depends on the mill, which depends on the farmer who in turn depends on the grain and the fertility of the ground. We are easily victims now more than ever of collapsing economic chains which at best are fragile already. They are easily torn asunder depriving us of employment and thus, daily bread. So to pray for every link in this chain—job, coworkers, transportation to work and our ability to save for the future—is quite legitimate. For if we are to survive and spread the gospel in this world, God, not the Devil, must be "in the details."³¹

While discussing every paragraph of value would be outside the realm of this study, the reader must be cautious when marking Luther's outstanding comments; soon one will have more marked lines than unmarked.

The story is told of Dwight Moody in Scotland asking his audience "what is prayer?" A young boy stood up and answered him, giving him the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* answer, to which Moody replied, "Thank God you were born in Scotland." Some still knew what true prayer was. Would we know true prayer in our churches? Surely we will not unless someone dares to teach it. The teaching in *Luther's Catechism* would be a fine start.

THE MODERN USE OF CATECHISMS

The Reformation era catechisms can still play a role in our churches today if we dare to use them. Each year publishers accost pastors with new "discipleship training programs" because the old ones didn't seem to work anyway. Without fail, most of them are exercises in pietistic proof-texting, priming people to crave new emotional experiences. When was the last time you saw a discipleship manual actually teach the dreaded "D" word—doctrine?³² What would our American church look like if every reformation church self-consciously went back to their catechisms and their three-fold piety?

How might they do that?

The *Heidelberg Catechism* in various editions is divided into portions for fifty-two Lord's Days per year. Originally the second sermon of the day was to be devoted to expounding this catechism. In churches with a single service, these questions might conveniently be read and explained before the worship service. It is important *not* to make the catechisms an "elective" item. Every person must be exposed to them in *some* setting.

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Many churches are tiring of the never-ending accumulation of "programs" being pushed upon them that divide their family and drain their time, energy and resources. They are seeking to become more "age-blended" and "family friendly." The catechisms make ideal resources for such churches. Fathers in these churches are encouraged to take their role in governing the family by the Word of God in a serious fashion. In our hectic days, creating an orderly system for family Bible study can seem impossible. Following the catechisms would provide such order and insure a doctrinally sound curriculum the father can apply to his family's unique needs.

What is the perfect discipleship tool? One that can be taught to person A, and then person A can immediately turn around and use it to teach person B. Ultimately, that tool is the Bible . . . when one has mastered its contents. But what if one has not mastered all the Scriptures? Yet one

still has the duty to teach. You are a family without a biblical church to attend for some reason beyond your control. The catechism is the perfect tool for this use. Why did Arminianism and emotionalism conquer the expanding American West? The stronger the denominational requirements for the pastorate, the slower the missionary response. Could Reformation churches with lofty requirements for eldership respond more effectively today to vast mission areas by equipping every family to make progress on its own while served by itinerant pastors? The catechisms are wonderful pedagogues in that regard.

What one tool could be printed in the back of every Bible or hymnal (or Psalter) sent overseas that would make sure churches we support in foreign lands receive biblical teaching? If you haven't guessed that by now, you must need to be resuscitated.

We've talked about "body life" in the church for several decades. Some congregations used to identify themselves as Body Life churches. Why? Because before the "seeker-sensitive" movement, the body life movement was the way people expressed the legitimate desire (on its best days) for a vibrant loving church that attracted people by virtue of "speaking the truth in love." But what is body life? The problem in 1 Corinthians was not having people eager to exercise "spiritual gifts" and "take part" in the services. They were standing in line to do that. Yet true body life was not achieved. The problem was having people use their gifts *and* relate to one another *in a godly fashion*. People weren't being plagued with sickness and death because they refused to participate. They were plagued with illness and death because their participation violated the love of the brethren and even mocked their relationship with Christ because they trifled with other gods! (1 Cor. 10:21-22; 11:30). Body life is not spiritual exhibitionism, the church equivalent of attracting attention to your "gifts" in

the same way a "streaker" of the 1980s attracted attention to their own "endowments"! Body life which God blesses is the exercise of spiritual gifts in the context of self-sacrifice!³³ Of course a minimalistic, external obedience to God's commands never truly serves for exercising true Christian love. But true love is judged to be present when we *from the heart* obey God's commands (Rom. 13:8-10). How can every family in your church be exposed repeatedly to the requirements of true love for the brethren? How can your church and mine be introduced to true body life? In the catechisms given us by our Reformation fathers!

TO THE FUTURE

It is in the Catechisms where truth and zeal unite. Every Christian would do well to master one or more of the great Reformation Catechisms to shape his personal worship and devotion. As moderns, we fall behind in not even knowing the doctrinal issues at stake. Worse, once we have a small grasp of the issues, we have a tendency to separate doctrine from life, and are rightly accused by Christ's enemies of being sounding brass and tinkling cymbals without practical evidences of Christ's love. Calvinists who hold to the so-called "Five Points" dearly, but can't seem to muster five shreds of ordinary human kindness, are proverbial. The Catechisms seek to expunge such doctrinal elitism from Christ's body and replace them with *truly Reformed Christians*. I can report that Luther's *Large Catechism* will, with God's blessing, cause you to grow and mature in love, and I commend it to you. May God use all these catechisms towards these noble ends today.

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Notes

1. I originally heard this analogy from Dr. Richard Lovelace of Gordon Conwell Divinity School whose love was the study of revival.
2. Being from one of the larger cities in my rural state of West Virginia (where we have enjoyed the luxury of indoor plumbing for several decades), it never ceases to amaze me to meet someone whose only experience with our state has been that of seeing a TV documentary on "The Snake Handlers of Jolo, West Virginia." Often they believe Jolo is the capital of our state when, in fact, most of us post-hillbillies don't even know where the town is. But those people in Jolo certainly are

- known more for their doctrinal eccentricities than the gospel.
3. While I will not speak as much of the *Anglican Catechism of 1549*, 1662, printed in Schaff's *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 3, pp. 517-22, it follows many of the other catechisms of the era in what it considers the "core" of Christian faith.
 4. Tom J. Nettles, *Baptist Catechisms: To Make Thee Wise Unto Salvation* (self published, 1983).
 5. I shall be quoting from *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, Robert Fischer, trans. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress, 1959). The text of many Luther documents, including this one, is easily available on the Internet if you have access to the World Wide Web.
 6. *The Large Catechism*, 2.
 7. *Ibid.*, 3
 8. *Ibid.*, 55
 9. References to "The Creed" here refer to the so-called Apostles' Creed as opposed to the Nicene or Athanasian "symbols" of the faith. Of the three "ecumenical creeds," the Apostles' was the one preferred by the Reformers. The East and the West both adhere to the Trinitarianism of the Nicene formula, and the Reformers' use of the Apostles' Creed was not meant to detract from the doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps the Apostles' Creed was considered more ancient or simply more familiar.
 10. *The Large Catechism*, 56.
 11. See Deuteronomy 26:1-10 for an Old Testament use of a "confession of faith" in a liturgical context which is, in essence, part of the theological basis of Romans 12:1-2.
 12. Luther's numbering of the Commandments follows the Roman Catholic enumeration, not the one typically used by Protestants. Therefore he counts the command "not to take the name of God in vain" as the second commandment. The Sabbath command is the third commandment and so on. I must leave to others to answer the question: "Did Luther's numbering of the commandments differ from the other Reformed churches possibly affect his understanding of the 'Regulative Principle'?" I'm sure there's a Ph.D. dissertation there somewhere.
 13. *The Large Catechism*, 64.
 14. For Luther, auricular confession was not a requirement for salvation, let alone a sacrament dispensing grace. It was a way of ministering God's Word in a personal context. Confession was a voluntary experience where a parishioner could discuss with a pastor their Christian experience and how to grow in grace, dealing with their sins. In many ways it was akin to "nouthetic counseling" in an age where there were far fewer resources the average Christian could use by way of self education. This exhortation is included because many obviously needy churchgoers were not availing themselves of pastoral encouragement.
 15. *Christian Directory* is available from Soli Deo Gloria books. A photocopy edition, including Baxter's *Savoy Liturgy*, is available from Still Water

- Revivals books in Canada.
16. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 319. This edition contains all the documents called the *Westminster Standards* in their original form.
 17. Psalm 81:10b. I was informed of this interesting interpretation when I begged off attending a "Gospel Sing" in order to study for a sermon. I replied "I 'open my mouth' on Thursday nights," meaning my study time.
 18. E.g., Philippians 2: 1-11; 1 Timothy 3:1-11; 1 John and similar passages come to mind.
 19. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, no city, 1978). Herein, Luther is quoted positively in several places, but some of his comments can be quite shocking and are legitimately criticized. For instance, see pp. 651 ff. of this work.
 20. *The Large Catechism*, 2-3.
 21. *Ibid.*, 20n. This is a charitable reading of Luther's interpretations in practice. The theological presentation of his hermeneutic which he gave elsewhere states, in effect, that the Old Testament is binding only in so far as it agrees with the "natural law." Of course there is no such thing as a "natural law" independent of God's revelation! Like "traditional values" or "family values," the term "natural law" is another phrase for biblical morality stripped of its specifically Christian elements which require man to repent of his sin and believe in God's creation, man's rebellion and Christ's redemption. As depraved sinners, we want none of His law! It's sheer grace that we practice any restraint outside of Christ! Then why is the illusion of "natural law" so pervasive? What Luther calls "natural law" is nothing more than God's law mediated through Roman law to the then current European states. What is biblical and true in those laws seems "natural"! But as Stephen C. Perks shows in *Christianity and Law*, even by Luther's time European law had been transformed by biblical influences in many cases. Sinful men quickly transform "natural law" into a justification for any of their self-serving sins, "the law of the jungle" or the "survival of the fittest."
 22. *Ibid.*, 20. I.e., "natural law" dictates having a day of rest.
 23. *The Large Catechism*, 22.
 24. *Ibid.*, 55.
 25. *Ibid.*, 56.
 26. *Ibid.*, 58. I was taught repeatedly that Luther's view of the atonement was "Christus Victor" with its emphasis of victory over the powers of evil. The Reformed, supposedly, held a differing view centering on propitiation and the satisfaction of Christ. In his *Catechism* at least, Luther expounds a basic view of the substitutionary atonement, though Christ's victory over evil is not denied its importance.

27. *Ibid.*, 59-60. Obviously this passage hints that Luther differed from later Lutheran theologians over the issue of the *Bondage of the Will*! It differs not one whit from the Reformed Catechisms on this point of ultimate human agency in salvation.
28. *Ibid.*, 64.
29. *The Large Catechism*, 66.
30. *Ibid.*, 68.
31. *Ibid.*, 74.
32. My wife's Bible study group has recently been quite favorably challenged in the Scriptures by Kay Arthur's group Bible study manuals. Without belittling this author's God-given talents to pursue her legitimate Titus 2 ministry, is this not a rebuke upon the American church when a godly woman exposes so many ministers and ministries as laggards in this area?
33. Note how the discussion of gifts in Romans 12 links them to service within the body of Christ *after* discussing first the gospel which inspires humility—chapters 1-11—and a call to self sacrifice as an offering of ourselves wholly to Christ (Rom. 12:1-2).