

LUTHER'S LARGE CATECHISM

Martin Luther's Preface [1530]

Our desire and our plea that others would use the Catechism as constantly as we do stem from more than trivial causes. To our regret we notice that many preachers and pastors are very neglectful of the Catechism, despising both their office and the Catechism teaching itself. In some cases the reason for this is their involvement on lofty heights of learning, but in others it is pure laziness and self-indulgence. They behave as if they are pastors or preachers for the sake of their bellies, with nothing to do but to live out their years high on the hog just as they used to do under the papacy.

They now have everything they should be teaching and preaching offered to them in easy, crystal-clear form within numerous worthwhile books—books that really are what the old manuals claimed to be, "Sermons That Preach Themselves," "Sleep Soundly, Your Worries Are Over," "All Is Prepared," and "Treasury of Teaching and Preaching Aids." Yet they do not have enough principle and integrity to buy the books, or having acquired them, to look them over and read them. Such disgraceful gluttons and belly servers would make better swineherds and dog trainers than watchers over souls and shepherds of Christ's flock.

They are liberated from the useless, burdensome, mechanical rote of the seven canonical hours. If in place of

them, morning, noon, and evening; they would only read at least a page or two from the Catechism, prayer book, New Testament, or other section of the Bible, and pray the Lord's Prayer for themselves and their people, then they would show that they honor and are thankful for the Gospel, through which they were relieved from so many burdens and troubles. They might then also feel a little ashamed that they remembered no more of the Gospel than this their lazy, destructive, shameful, fleshly liberty of the sort that pigs and dogs enjoy. It is unfortunate that people take the Gospel altogether too lightly as it is, and that despite our best efforts we accomplish but little. What then will the result be if they see us continue being as negligent and lazy as we used to be under the papacy?

In addition, we have become infected by a vicious and insidious plague. There are many who are so satisfied with themselves and so bored with God's truths that they regard the Catechism as such a simple and slight instrument of instruction that they can rapidly read it through once and immediately have it all absorbed and mastered. Having read it through once, they throw it into a corner, as if ashamed to read it again.

Indeed, even among the nobility one might well discover louts and skinflints who declare that we can get along without pastors and preachers from now on because we have it all in books and can learn everything for ourselves. So they cheerfully let parishes fall into wrack and ruin and bravely let pastors and preachers suffer and starve, that being the only proper treatment for such crazy Germans! Shameful people of this sort we Germans have to put up with.

As for myself, let me say this. I too am a doctor and a preacher. In fact, I am as educated and experienced as any of those who have all that nerve and brazen self-confidence. Yet I continue to do as a child does that is being taught the Catechism. Mornings, and when I otherwise have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I would like, but must remain a child and student of the Catechism. This I do gladly. But these dainty, choosy fellows want to win a doctorate above all doctorates and learn all there is to know in merely one rapid reading. So be it. But that is also a sure sign that they despise both their office and the souls of the people, yes, also God Himself and His Word. They need not

anticipate failing; they have already failed all too horribly. What they do need is to become children again and start learning their ABCs, which they falsely imagine they already long ago had under their belts.

I heartily beseech these lazy drones and arrogant saints that they would for God's sake get it into their heads that they really are not—repeat, really are not—such learned and lofty doctors of theology as they think. Though they suffer under the illusion that they know these parts of Christian doctrine contained in the Catechism far too well already, I implore them never to imagine that they have mastered them, or that they have even an adequate knowledge of them. Even if their knowledge of the Catechism truths were perfect (something that in this life is impossible), yet to read it daily and to make it the subject of one's thinking and conversation has all manner of practical results and brings fruitful rewards. In such reading, discussion, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present to supply always more light and new insights. Thus we come to relish and appreciate the Catechism better and better day by day. This bears out Christ's promise in Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

To occupy oneself with God's Word, talking about it and thinking about it, is also a most tremendous help against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts. Psalm 1:2 calls those blessed who meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. It is certain that you will be offering up no incense or candles more potent against the devil than by occupying yourself with God's commandments and words, by talking of them, by singing them, and by meditating on them. That, let me tell you, is the true holy water, the sign before which he flees and by which you can rout him.

Even if there were no other result or benefit, you should read the parts of Christian doctrine in the Catechism gladly and discuss, ponder, and practice them for this reason alone that thereby you can drive away the devil and evil thoughts. For he cannot stand to hear God's Word. The Word of God is not like some empty fiction, for example the tale about Dietrich von Bern [Theodoric], but as St. Paul says in Romans 1:16, it is "the power of God," the power, in fact, that flames out to blister the devil but to strengthen, comfort, and help us immeasurably.

Why should I go on? If I had to tell all the benefits and blessings that result when God's Word is at work, where

would I find time enough and paper enough? The devil has been called the master of a thousand arts. What then shall we call God's Word, which routs and destroys this master of a thousand arts together with all his wiles and power? It must surely be the master of more than a hundred thousand arts. Are we, especially we who want to be pastors and preachers, frivolously to disdain this might, benefit, power, and success of the Word? If we do, we deserve not only to have our food cut off but also to be driven out by dogs and to be pelted with garbage as we go. Not only do we daily need God's Word as our daily spiritual bread, we also need to use it every day against the daily, unremitting ambushes and attacks of Satan with his thousand tricks.

If this is not enough admonition, there is also God's command. That in itself should be enough to impel us to read the Catechism daily. Deuteronomy 6:7-8 solemnly directs us always to meditate on God's precepts whether we are sitting, walking, standing, lying down, or getting up, and to keep them before our eyes and in our hands as a constant token and sign. It is certainly not for nothing that God requires and demands this so earnestly. He does so because He knows our danger and need. He knows the devil's constant and furious charges and attacks. Against these God wants to warn us, and He wants to arm us with good armor against Satan's "flaming darts" and to protect us with His good antidote against their evil poison. O what mad, senseless fools we are! Although we find that we must continue living and dwelling among such strong enemies as the devils are, yet we despise our weapons and armor, too lazy to give them a look or a thought.

What do you suppose those bored, arrogant saints are doing who don't like to read and learn the Catechism daily? What else than imagining they are much wiser than God Himself plus all His holy angels, prophets, apostles, and all Christians? God Himself, however, is not ashamed to teach the Christian doctrines every day. He knows of no better teachings than these; He always teaches these same ones; He presents nothing novel or different. And all His saints know of nothing better or different to be learned than this doctrine, and none of them ever finishes learning it all. Aren't we some splendid fellows, though, to imagine that if we have once learned it or heard it, we know it all and need to read or learn no more! Think of it! In one hour we can finish learning what God Himself cannot finish teaching, although He has been at

it from the beginning of the world and will continue to the end; the prophets, too, and all saints have been busy learning and yet have always remained pupils and must go on being pupils.

For this is certain that the person who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scripture. In all cases and circumstances, he will be able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. He is qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines, classes of men, individual persons, laws, and whatever else is in the world.

Take the whole Book of Psalms. What else is it but reflections based on the First Commandment? Now, I know very well that those lazy lubbers, those arrogant fellows, do not understand a single psalm, let alone the entire Holy Scripture. Yet they put on that they know the Catechism, despising the book which is a brief summary and abstract of the entire Holy Scripture.

Once again, therefore, I beg all Christians, especially the pastors and preachers, not to try too soon to be doctors of theology and to imagine that they know it all. Inflated ideas, like new cloth, will shrink in the wash. Rather, let all Christians exercise themselves daily in the Catechism and put it into practice constantly. Let them guard themselves with greatest care and diligence against the poisonous infection of false security or self-delusion. Let them continue steadily reading, teaching, learning, thinking, and reflecting, never stopping until experience has made them absolutely certain that they have taught the devil to death and have grown more learned than God Himself and all His saints.

If they show such diligence, I can promise them—and they themselves will experience—that they will reap a harvest and that God will make fine persons of them, persons who in time will make the excellent confession that the longer they use the Catechism, the less they know of it and the more they have to learn. Then, because they are hungry and thirsty for the Word, that which now in their bloated, surfeited state they do not even care to smell will first begin to taste really good to them. To that end may God grant His grace. Amen.