

The Small Catechism Published—1529

Rev. Dr. Matt Richard

We are all familiar with the Small Catechism, even though it has come to us in different formats, book bindings, and colors. I know many people studied the Small Catechism in a dark blue 1943 edition, whereas others studied it in a light blue 1986 edition, and currently the catechism comes in a burgundy color book.

Regardless of the color of the Small Catechism or the edition, one thing is for sure, the Small Catechism with its six chief parts have been responsible for teaching and shaping the faith of millions of Christians throughout the last approximate 500 years.



Where did the Small Catechism originate, though? The origins of the Small Catechism reach all the way back to the Sixteenth-Century when Martin Luther took over preaching and teaching in Wittenberg for Wittenberg's chief pastor. You see, Pastor John Bugenhagen had been away in a nearby city helping the church in the reformation, so Luther took to preaching and teaching the faith in the church. Long story short, in Luther's

sermons on the chief parts of the Christian faith (i.e., Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, Etc.), Luther worked to summarize the six chief parts of the Christian faith in short single sentences. The short sentences were a way to keep things simple, to the point, and clear for the average parishioner. Therefore, it could be said that It was from Luther's sermons and his pithy summaries that Luther develop the Small Catechism as we know it today.



500 Years of the Lutheran Reformation
Southeast Circuit North Dakota District

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Structure of the Catechism

At the very heart of the Small Catechism are The Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, and The Lord's Prayer. These three are known as the 'triad' of the Christian faith. What may be surprising to the average Lutheran, though, is that Martin Luther changed the order in which these three parts appeared in the Small Catechism. In other words, before Luther, these three sections were traditionally placed in the following order: Creed, Prayer, Commandments. It was thought that people needed to know the faith first (e.g., Apostles' Creed), then they needed to know how to pray (e.g., Lord's Prayer), and after prayer, they would need to know the morals they were to walk in (e.g., Ten Commandments).

However, Martin Luther consciously changed the traditional order by placing The Ten Commandments first, followed by The Apostles' Creed and then The Lord's Prayer.

But why the change? By putting the Ten Commandments first, Luther wanted people to encounter what God expected of humanity, as their Creator. In this way, the Ten Commandments were tied to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed which addresses God the Father as our Creator. Consequently, as readers of the Small Catechism assessed the Ten Commandments laid forth by the Creator, the reader would then be shown their sin, in which they would then be brought to the middle section of The Apostles' Creed speaking of God the Son—Jesus Christ's redemption and forgiveness. Indeed, in this reordering, there is a natural movement from Law to Gospel. Then from Jesus Christ, the reader of the Small Catechism would read about God the Holy Spirit in the later part of the Apostles' Creed, followed by The Lord's Prayer. Here too there is a natural movement; the Christian lives by faith, being led by the Holy Spirit as they pray The Lord's Prayer.

In other words, Luther brought The Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, and The Lord's Prayer into a Creedal and Trinitarian framework. He provided a way for the Christian to understand sin, redemption, and the life of the Christian in prayer. By placing The Ten Commandments first, the Apostles' Creed and The Lord's Prayer not only speak of the forgiveness of sins but also help in honoring and respecting the Ten Commandments. That is to say, instead of the Ten Commandments giving value to The Apostles' Creed and The Lord's Prayer, the Creed and Prayer provide the resources for us to live according to the Ten Commandments. A truly wonderful reordering that places Jesus Christ not only in the center of the Apostles' Creed but at the center of the triad as well.

Next Week: Katerina Von Bora, Luther's Marriage, Family—Rev. Sean Daenzer

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