

The annotations and footnotes contextualize Luther's text broadly in Reformation history, provide references to relatively few and mostly recent studies, familiarize the reader with some of the key words in the original language(s), pinpoint central theological issues at stake, and offer leads for future study.



THE LARGE [GERMAN] CATECHISM OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER^h

Martin Luther's Preface²⁶

IT IS NOT FOR TRIVIAL REASONS that we constantly treat the catechism²⁷ and exhort and implore others to do the same, for we see that unfortunately many preachers and pastors²⁸ are very negligent in doing so and thus despise both their office²⁹ and this teaching. Some do it out of their great learnedness, while others do so out of pure laziness and concern for their bellies.³⁰ They approach the task as if they were pastors and preachers for their stomachs' sake and had nothing to do but live off the fat of the land, as they were used to doing under the papacy. Everything that they are to teach and preach is now so very clearly and easily presented in so many salutary books, which truly deliver what the other manuals promised in their titles: "Sermons That Preach Themselves," "Sleep Soundly," "Be Prepared," and "Thesaurus." Yet they are not upright and honest enough to buy such books, or, if they have them already, to consult or read them. Oh, these shameful gluttons and servants of their belliesⁱ are better suited to be swineherds and keepers

^h For the basis of the translation see the final section of the introduction, p. 288.

ⁱ The German *Frecklinge und Bauchdiener* were pejorative terms, relating to Rom. 16:18, for gluttony.

revised and expanded edition of the *Large Catechism* of 1529.

24. BC, 377–480.

25. *Der Große Katechismus*, 545–733. The new critical edition with parallel texts of the Early Modern High German and Latin, cited above in n. a, p. 279, was not available at the time, but is highly recommended.

26. This 1530 longer preface, addressed to preachers and pastors, followed the 1529 shorter one, in accordance with the order of the 1556 Jena edition of Luther's works (the fourth German volume), and was printed in the 1580 *Book of Concord*. Luther may have written this longer preface in 1530 while in the nearby Coburg Castle during the Diet of Augsburg.

27. The word *Katechismus* (the noun from Augustine) describes originally an oral method of religious instruction. See the introduction, n. 5, p. 281.

28. *Prediger* ("preachers") were appointed to the preaching office only, whereas *Pfarrherren* (pastors) performed all the pastoral acts and duties entailed with the office, exclusive to men in Luther's world. Urgent needs for proper training for these offices warranted significant reforms in the sixteenth century.

29. With the word *Amt* ("office") Luther refers to the calling of those in ministry with specific duties.

30. With *Bauchsorge* ("belly worry") Luther chastises the priests and pastoral leaders for their selfish prioritizing on the opposite of what their duty called for. This is an expression of his overall criticism of the distorted focus in his church.

31. Luther underscores the care of the soul as the primary calling of those in ministry, as opposed to the concerns of the belly.

32. Luther as a monk was familiar with the so-called seven canonical hours, or the Divine Office, as prescribed in the medieval breviary: in accordance with a monastic discipline established already during the first centuries of the Christian tradition and fixed in format by the ninth century, the daily intervals of prayer include matins/laudes, prime (6 AM), terce (9 AM), sext (noon), nones (3 PM), vespers (6 PM), and compline at the end of the day. The daily structured prayer originates from the Jewish prayer practice (Ps. 119:164—“Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws” [NIV]) and the hours come from the schedule of bells ringing for time in the forums of the Roman imperial cities.

33. Luther uses the words *Freiheit* (Ger.) and *Licentiam* (Lat.), “freedom” and “license,” to refer to people taking the license to be lazy in their Christian calling, ignoring their duty.

34. Luther means people without preachers’ or theologians’ level of religious education.

35. Luther thinks of the times before reformation, when there was no Evangelical movement but all Christians belonged to the papal-led Catholic Church.

36. With adjectives such as *toll* (Ger.) and *insanes* (Lat.), Luther often disparages his fellow German-speaking Christians. There was, of course, no “Germany” or “German nation” as such yet, while the Reformation coincided with and strengthened the growing sense of national identities in European territory, including Luther’s homeland.

of dogs than guardians of souls³¹ and pastors. Now that they are free from the useless, bothersome babbling of the seven hours,³² it would be much better if morning, noon, and night they would instead read a page or two from the catechism, the Prayer Book,^j the New Testament, or some other passage from the Bible, and would pray the Lord’s Prayer for themselves and their parishioners.^k In this way they would once again show honor and respect to the gospel, through which they have been delivered from so many burdens and troubles, and they might feel a little shame that, like pigs and dogs, they are remembering no more of the gospel than this rotten, pernicious, shameful, carnal liberty.³³ As it is, the common people³⁴ take the gospel altogether too lightly, and we accomplish but little, despite all our hard work. What, then, can we expect if we are slothful and lazy, as we used to be under the papacy?³⁵

Besides, along comes this horrible vice and secret, evil plague of security and boredom. Many regard the catechism as a simple, trifling teaching, which they can absorb and master at one reading and then toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again. Indeed, among the nobility there are also some louts and skinflints who declare that they can do without pastors and preachers because we now have everything in books and can learn it all by ourselves. So they blithely let parishes fall into decay and brazenly allow both pastors and preachers to suffer distress and hunger. This is what one can expect of the crazy³⁶ Germans. We Germans have such disgraceful people among us and have to put up with³⁷ them.

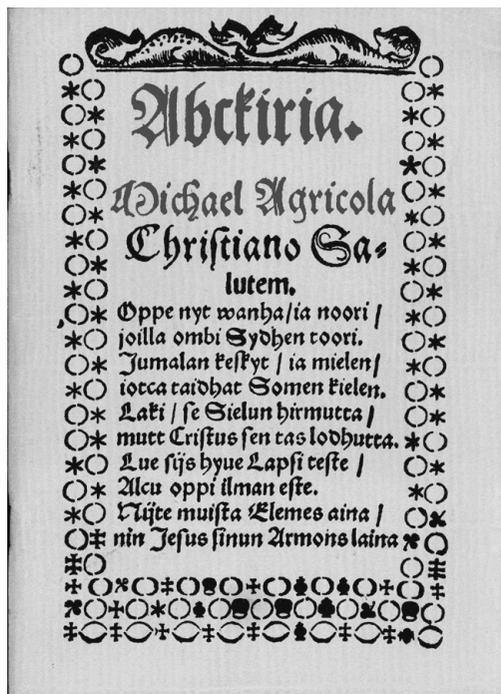
But this I say for myself: I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish,

^j Luther’s *Personal Prayer Book*, *Betbüchlein*, from 1522, was an enhanced version of his *Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer* (the *Kurze*/shorter form). See LW 43:3–45 and TAL, vol. 4, forthcoming.

^k *Pfarrkinder* (“parishioners”) in its literal translation is “parish children.”

but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.³⁸ These fussy, finicky folks would like quickly, with one reading, to be doctors above all doctors, to know it all and to need nothing more. Well this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the people’s souls, yes, even God and God’s own word. They do not need to fall, for they have already fallen all too horribly. What they need, however, is to become children and begin to learn the ABCs,³⁹ which they think they have long since outgrown.¹

Therefore, I beg such lazy bellies and presumptuous saints,⁴⁰ for God’s sake, to let themselves be convinced and believe that they are not really and truly such learned and exalted doctors



Finnish reformer Mikael Agricola’s 1543 ABC book for the education of the Finns with the Reformation theology.

See the maps on pp. xiii–xiv in the front of this volume.

37. With the words *müssen leiden* (Ger.), Luther literally means “must suffer”; he expresses often his frustration with his compatriots.

38. Luther writes in his commentary on Psalm 117 (LW 14:8): “I confess this freely as an example to anyone; for here am I, an old doctor of theology and a preacher. . . . Yet even I must become a child; and early each day I recite aloud to myself the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and whatever lovely psalms and verses I may choose, just as we teach and train children to do. . . . I study them daily and remain a pupil of the Catechism.”

39. One of the first and foremost steps of the reforms was the education of the common people, for which catechetical materials were provided. As a prime example, the Wittenberg-trained reformer Bishop Mikael Agricola (1510–1557) provided the first ABC book in the Finnish language to facilitate people’s ability to read the Bible for themselves. Luther’s emphasis on the education of every child is at the root of this vision of implementing theology in practice.

40. The word for the saints, the holy ones, *heiligen* (Ger.), shares the root with “to sanctify” and “to make holy” or “to hallow.” Notice later, with the explanation of the Creed’s third part, Luther’s wording about the Holy Spirit’s “sanctifying,” “holy-making” work.

¹ A proverbial expression, “They have split their shoes.”

41. The word for “present/presence” (Ger.: *Gegenwärtig*) is important here in Luther’s argument about the tangible promises of God’s presence in the intentional reflection of the word. The promise of studying the catechism is not only education but also evoking and realizing the manifold presence of God’s Spirit.

42. Luther’s word translates as “thinking,” without necessarily implying a methodological contemplative prayer-reflection used in monastic life or specific spiritual practices. Here Luther presents an invitation for the ordinary Christian to learn a habit of prayer and in faith engage the word as the compass in one’s life.

43. In Luther’s medieval world, it was common to use “holy water,” *das rechte Weihwasser* (Ger.), *aqua illa sancificat* (Lat.), or “sanctified water/water that sanctifies” in, e.g., exorcisms to drive away evil spirits.

44. Luther frequently cites the legend of Dietrich of Bern as an example of lies and fables. Dietrich of Bern was the name applied in medieval Teutonic legends to Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths.

45. Luther writes with the experience of medieval Christians in need of concrete sacramental measures in the ongoing warfare against the devil who, like death, was always lurking to take over. A unique perspective comes from Luther’s rendition of the story of Mechtild of Hackeborn (Helfta, thirteenth century) beating the devil with her confession. See Carolyn Schneider, *I Am a Christian: The Nun, the Devil, and Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

as they think. I implore them not ever to imagine that they have learned these parts of the catechism perfectly, or that they know them sufficiently, even though they think they know them ever so well. Even if their knowledge of the catechism were perfect (although that is impossible in this life), it is still highly advantageous and fruitful to read it daily and practice it in reflection^m and conversation. Namely, through such reading, discussion, and reflection, the Holy Spirit is present⁴¹ and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion,” so that it tastes better and better and is digested, as Christ also promises in Matthew 18[:20], “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one’s self with God’s word, to speak about it and meditate⁴² on it, in the way that Psalm 1[:2] calls those blessed who “meditate on God’s law day and night.” Without doubt, you will offer up no more powerful incense or savor against the devil than to occupy yourself with God’s commandments and words and to speak, sing, or think about them. Indeed, this is the true holy water and sign that scares the devil to run away.⁴³

For this reason alone, you should gladly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism, even if the only advantage and benefit you obtain from it is to drive away the devil and evil thoughts; for it^o cannot bear to hear God’s word. And God’s word is not like some idle tale, such as about Dietrich of Bern,⁴⁴ but, as St. Paul says in Romans 1[:16], it is “the power of God,” indeed, the power of God that burns the devil’s house down^p and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help.⁴⁵

^m The words *Gedenken* (Ger.) and *meditatio* (Lat.) can be translated in different ways: the word *meditation*, used in the LW translation, associates with a specific prayer technique, whereas Luther’s emphasis here is more generally on intentional reading and use of the words.

ⁿ *Andacht* (Ger.), a term used for an attitude of devotion and reverence, but also for a prayer event; e.g., evening devotion.

^o Even if Luther typically addresses the devil in personal terms, his masculine pronoun *er* (Ger.), “he” in English, is translated here and throughout as “it.”

^p “To cause damage to someone by means of arson,” a typical expression with Luther.

Why should I waste words? If I were to tell all the benefits and advantages that God's word accomplishes, where would I find enough paper and time? The devil is called a master of a thousand arts. What then can we call God's word that routs and destroys such a master of a thousand arts along with all its cunning and power? Indeed, it must be master of more than a hundred thousand arts. Also, should we so flippantly despise such might, benefits, power, and fruit—especially we who want to be pastors and preachers? If so, we deserve not only to be given no food to eat, but also to have the dogs set upon us and to be pelted with horse manure. For not only do we daily need God's word just as we do our daily bread; we also must have it every day in order to stand against the daily and incessant attacks and ambushes of the devil with its thousand arts.

If this were not enough to admonish us to read the catechism daily, God's command should suffice to compel us. For God solemnly bids us in Deuteronomy 6[:7-8] that we should meditate on God's precepts while sitting, walking, standing, lying down, and rising, and we should keep them as an ever-present emblem and sign before our eyes and on our hands. God certainly does not require and command this so solemnly without reason. God knows our danger and need; God knows the constant and furious attacks and assaults of the devil. Therefore, God wishes to warn, equip, and protect us against them with good "armor" against their "flaming arrows,"^q and with a good antidote against their evil infection and poison. Oh, what mad, senseless fools we are! We must ever live and dwell in the midst of such mighty enemies like the devils, and yet we would despise our weapons and armor, too lazy to examine them or give them a thought!⁴⁶

And what else are these bored, presumptuous saints doing—people who will not read and study the catechism daily and have no desire to—except thinking that they are more learned than even God^r and all the holy angels, prophets, apostles, and all Christians? Even God is not ashamed to teach it daily; God knows of nothing better than to teach and always keeps on teaching this one thing without proposing anything new or different. And all the saints know of nothing better or different to

^q Eph. 6:11, 16.

^r *Gott selbs* (Ger.) and *ipse Deus* (Lat.) are translated as "even God" here and following.

46. A similar concern was addressed with Europe's most celebrated educator and humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1466–1536) "little dagger," *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier* from 1501. See *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier/ Enchiridion militis christiani*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi, in *Collected Works of Erasmus: Spiritualia*, ed. John O'Malley, vol. 66 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 1–127.