

Discipleship and Spirituality According to Luther's Catechisms

Colleagues,

Both Discipleship and Spirituality were hot topics during our time with the Lutherans in Singapore last year. If for no other reason than that these terms had come over from the USA and were front and center in the rhetoric of other Christian congregations in Singapore. And these congregations were growing! So, no surprise, this guest from America was asked to discuss "Lutheran" notions of those two terms. I opted for Luther's catechisms as a point of departure. It came out something like this. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I. Introduction Luther intended his Small Catechism to be the handbook to be used in the home for daily Christian living. Today some Christians call that "Discipleship and Spirituality." [He also wrote a "Large Catechism" for pastors—both for their own Christian life and for leading Christ's people in the Christian congregation.] Here are some examples in the catechism: Prayers at morning and evening, prayers at table, Baptism as a daily event, the Lord's prayer for everyday use, "discipleship" = being

“owned” by Christ and serving him, the Third Article of the Apostles Creed as the secret to Christian “spirituality.”

II. Some Background Information for Martin Luther’s Two Catechisms.

- 1. In the year 1529 Martin Luther wrote two catechisms (German titles: Kleiner Katechismus, Grosser Katechismus). He did so after a survey was made in congregations in Saxony in the year 1528. In this “Saxon Visitation” seminary professors from Wittenberg (Luther too) went out into the towns and villages to listen & learn what was actually happening in the preaching and teaching in the congregations. What they discovered was “bad news.” Many people in the congregations, & many pastors too, did not know basic Christianity. Luther’s own words in the preface to the Small Catechism: “Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people . . . have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent.” With his 2 catechisms—small one for laity, large one for clergy—Luther offers help to improve the sad situation.*
- 2. There was a long tradition of catechisms in the Western Latin-speaking church. They usually had three parts: Apostles Creed, Lord’s Prayer, 10 Commandments, and usually the parts came in this order: Creed first, Lord’s Prayer second, Commandments last. Luther changed the order in his catechisms, but—more important—he changed the theology underlying all parts of the catechism. He also added 3 more parts—Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Private Confession & Absolution. A total of Six Chief Parts.*

3. Luther's original discovery, his "breakthrough," as he called it, for reading the Bible, was that God speaks two different "words" in the Bible: God's word of law and God's word of gospel (often called "God's word of promise"). Two words from the same God to the same human beings, but as different as death and life, night and day. Law is God's requirement. Its primary verb is "require." God's law requires that we do (or don't do) this or that. The Gospel is God's gift. Its primary verb is "offer." God offers—as a gift—his mercy and forgiveness. Luther's catechisms apply this distinction between law and gospel in all 6 parts.
4. Previous catechisms used in the Western church did not know that distinction. They taught the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, & the Commandments as revelations of God's will for Christians: what people OUGHT to believe, how they OUGHT to pray, & how they SHOULD behave. Those three Words of God, it seemed, touched the basic areas of a Christian's life—faith, worship, ethics; (or) the mind, the heart, the hand; (or) thinking, feeling, acting.
5. But the language of "should" and of "ought" made the entire catechism to be God's law—things which God required people to do. That is not Good News for sinners, not Gospel.
6. Luther begins both catechisms with the 10 Commandments, not the Creed. But he does not present the 10 Commandments as ethics. Instead the 10 commandments are God's word for diagnosis, God's X-ray, to show us our sin, our sickness. They do tell us what we should do, but they show us that we are NOT doing what we should be doing. They show us that our person (inside), not just our action

(outside), needs to be changed. They show us the path we should take in life, but do so to show us that we are already OFF the path and going some other direction.

7. The first commandment, said ML, is really the only commandment there is. "The First Commandment is the chief source and fountainhead from which all the others proceed; again, to it they all return and upon it they depend, so that the end and beginning are all linked and bound together." The other 9 commandments actually "repeat" this first one—we should fear, love and trust in God—in these other areas of our life. But even with all their godliness, the 10 commandments are not good news for sinners. None of us (on the inside) is fearing, loving & trusting God in all areas of our life "with all our heart, all our mind, all our strength" all the time. We're all first-commandment-breakers.
8. In Luther's catechisms Good News does not come until we get to the Apostles Creed. And even there the Gospel's sort of Good News is not present in the Creed's first article. The first article says that God is our creator and that everything we have is a gift from God. That sure sounds good. But these gifts put us under obligations ("oughts") that we can never fulfill. That fact is often "softened" in some translations of Luther's words here. For example, what I memorized in my childhood was: "For all of this [all the gifts of creation that God has given me] it is my duty to thank and to praise, to serve and obey God. This is most certainly true." That suggests that the "duty" is do-able. What Luther's German actually says is much

more drastic: “For all this I am already in arrears, way behind in my obligations, to thank and to praise, to serve and obey God. This is most certainly true!” Even the first article of the Apostles Creed concerning creation leaves us guilty before God.

9. Only when we come to the 2nd article of the creed [“I believe in Jesus Christ”] does the Good News begin. In this article the confession is simple: Jesus Christ is my Lord. Lord means owner, Luther says. “My Lord” means the one to whom I belong. The biographical elements in the second article of the creed are the means by which he became “my” Lord and made me his “own.”
10. After the 2nd article of the creed all the remaining parts of the catechism are Good News—the creed’s third article, then the Lord’s Prayer, and then the three items Luther added in his catechism: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Confession and Absolution.
11. The Creed’s third article is the “good news” about God’s work (through Holy Spirit and the church) to connect people today to Jesus Christ as Lord. It tells how sinners today receive the Good News that they too need in order to survive in the face of God’s X-ray report about them.
12. The Lord’s Prayer is Good News for practicing our trust in Christ & for receiving God’s continual care and blessings in the struggle of daily life, a struggle articulated in the 7 different areas of the 7 petitions of the Lord’s Prayer.
13. Baptism, Lord’s Supper and Confession & Absolution are three resources (means of grace) that God supplies for keeping us connected to Christ in our

struggle to live by faith in daily life. In these add-on parts to his catechisms Luther's emphasis is not CORRECT TEACHING about these 3 sacraments, but the best way to USE all 3 for daily life. Here is Luther's gift for discipleship and spirituality.

14. "Using" baptism means dying and rising with Christ every day that we live, facing temptation & tough situations with the words: "I am baptized!"
15. "Using" the Lord's Supper means receiving it often (not just 4 times a year!) & hearing the words "given and shed for you." You are "worthy" (prepared) for it simply by admitting that you need Christ, & trusting his promise coming to you in the Lord's Supper.
16. "Using" Confession & Absolution means actually doing it, so that the burden of our daily sinning is taken away and we hear Christ's word of forgiveness with our own name included: "Ed, by Christ's command I announce to you the forgiveness of the sin(s) you have just confessed." It's like dying and rising again, like baptism. A penitential funeral followed.

III. Connecting Luther's Catechism-theology to discipleship and spirituality.

A. Christian Discipleship always means, of course, being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Saying yes to his invitation "Follow me." In the catechism Luther makes one point central: "Jesus Christ is MY Lord." In the New Testament that same confession is at the center of discipleship. What kind of Lordship is that? One important text is Matthew 20 where Jesus specifies that his authority is not "authority over," but "authority under," supporting, sustaining his disciples all the way to "giving his

life as a ransom" for them. What kind of "following" comes from that sort of Lordship? Bonhoeffer articulated it this way: "When our Lord Christ bids us come and follow him, he bids us come and die with him." We all do die. But there are two ways to do it. One is clutching what we have "for dear life," and dying that way. The other is clinging to Christ (and his Gospel) and dying that way. Disciples of Christ, said Luther, are "little Christs."

B. Christian Spirituality in NT language is "being led by the Holy Spirit." Not all references in the Scriptures to God's Spirit are speaking of the "Holy" Spirit. "Spirit" both in Hebrew and in Greek is the word for wind, for breath. It signals power—to move things, to make alive. Even apart from Christ, God's power operates in the cosmos—as in all the data of the first article of the Creed. When the NT speaks of the "Holy" Spirit, the adjective adds something very specific. Bob Bertram liked to put it this way: the Holying Spirit is the Healing Spirit, the spirit sinners need to survive, to be re-enlivened with God's own Wind—and not simply "blown away." Therefore, no surprise, when NT writers speak of that Holying Spirit, it is always connected to Christ. "Life in the Spirit" comes when Christians are "led by the Holy Spirit," and that Spirit's leading always leads us to Christ. So the explanation of the creed's third article in the Small Catechism goes like this: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit . . . calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and preserves [sinners] in

union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." Christian spirituality is living 24/7 "in union with Jesus Christ." Especially in the Gospel of John, this Christ-connecting agenda of the Holy Spirit is driven home over and over again. The Holy Spirit "will not speak on his own, but will take what is mine and declare it to you." And Paul is not far behind, for example, in Galatians 5 where "belonging to Christ Jesus" and "living by the Spirit" and "walking by the Spirit" are all synonyms.

For both discipleship and spirituality the focus of the catechisms is living by faith in Christ out in the world of daily work and daily callings. It is a clear alternative, even antithesis, to the monastic heritage of Luther's early adult years. Not withdrawing from daily life's realities for spiritual agendas, but taking Christ-connected faith out into the worldly agendas where God has placed me. Jesus' final words to Peter in John's Gospel (chapter 21) push the point. Even as you are taken "where you do not wish to go," even there, "Follow me." There is no worldly turf that is off limits for "following Christ as Lord" and being "led by the Spirit."