



**PAIDEIA
CENTER**

FOR THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLESHIP

DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

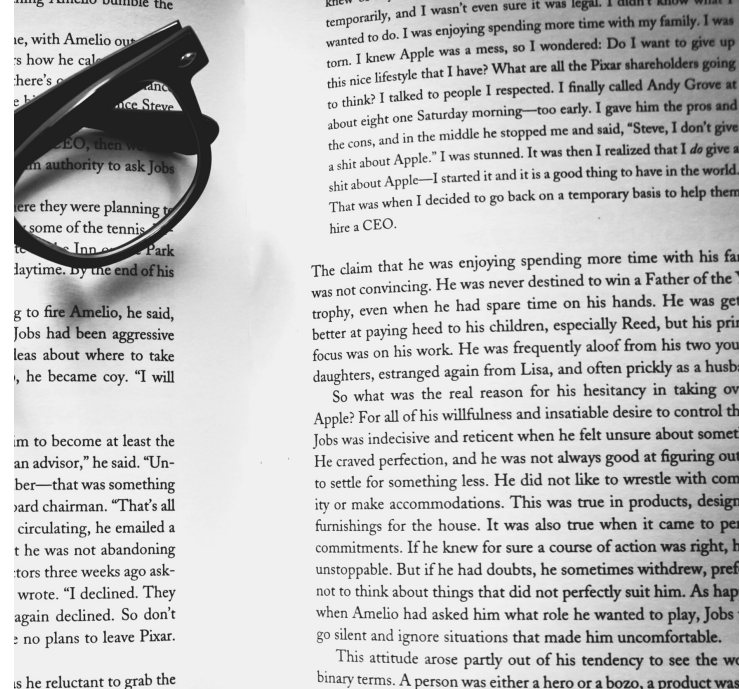


**MARTIN LUTHER,
*THE LARGE CATECHISM***



DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

MARTIN LUTHER,
The Large Catechism (1529)



INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther (1483-1546) needs no introduction. He is well known for his Ninety-Five Theses that launched the Protestant Reformation in 1517, his three treatises of 1520 that laid out the outline of his theology, and his translation of the Bible into the German language.

Carl Trueman has noted that most biographies of Luther tend to end his story around 1525, downplaying the importance of the last two decades of his life. This means that relatively little attention is paid to his Catechisms, Small and Large, both published in 1529. Luther himself granted to his catechisms (together his *Bondage of the Will*) pride of place among his publishing writings. These were the only works of his that would be worth preserving, alongside his book *The Bondage of the Will*, in his own judgment. (See Timeline below.)

What may strike many Reformed readers when they pick up Luther's Catechisms is how little they seem to resemble catechisms. It is important to bear in mind the senses to which Luther and other sixteenth century reformers employed the term. In a more narrow sense, a catechism was a primer on doctrine to be memorized, usually in the form of a questions and answers. In the broader sense, catechism (or catechesis) described more generally the process of Christian formation. When speaking of the enduring work of his Large and Small Catechisms, the former is in view. But it is just as important to see his broader concern for the Christian nurture of young and old.

Both catechisms begin with Luther's astonishment at the theological illiteracy of the German people at the dawn of the Reformation. In the Small Catechism we read:

The deplorable destitution which I recently observed, during a visitation of the churches, has impelled and constrained me to prepare the Catechism or Christian Doctrine in such

a small and simple form. Alas, what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, know nothing at all of Christian doctrine; and many pastors are quite unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet all are called Christians, have been baptized, and enjoy the use of the Sacraments, although they know neither the Lord's Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments and live like the poor brutes and irrational swine. Still they have, now that the Gospel has come, learned to abuse all liberty in a masterly manner.

Luther includes the standard contents of catechisms: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments. Catechism was the means of restoring these symbols of the Christian tradition to their prominence to the piety of the laity. These essentials of the faith were lost in the "Babylonian captivity" of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the heretical meanderings of the Radical Reformers. He eliminated other features common to medieval catechisms, such as prayers to the saints, the *Ave Maria*, and a catalogue of the seven deadly sins.

Luther also altered the order of the elements as they were found in medieval catechisms. Instead of creed, commandments, prayer, Luther's arrangement was commandments, creed, and prayer.

He believed we must confront our failure to keep the law before we can apprehend God's mercies in Christ. This order is a movement from sin to grace, from Law to Gospel.

Luther's Large Catechism served as a commentary and explanation of the Small Catechism (much like the Westminster Larger Catechism's relation to the Shorter Catechism), intending especially to address the lack of education among the clergy. The polemics that we find in the Large Catechism are generally absent from the Small Catechism.

Scholars have lauded Luther for the brilliance of both of his catechisms, one calling them "a masterpiece of Christian pedagogy." But we do not fully capture the genius of Luther's catechisms until we link them with two other formative practices. First, his conviction that the church must be reformed in the vernacular not only inspired his German translation of the Bible; it prompted his teaching on prayer. The Latin Mass, he believed, robbed the laypeople of prayer. His revised *Prayer Book* (1529) and *Simple Way to Pray* (1535) offered instruction that follows closely to his catechisms (where the same elements are found: Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, and the Creed), and Luther urged that the catechism be used as daily resource especially for prayer. Secondly, Luther understood the role of music in the nurture of the people of God. Luther was a master of music, and many of his hymns were versifications of the catechism. Over the course of his life, he would compose a hymn for every part of the catechism.

a small and simple form. Alas, what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, know nothing at all of Christian doctrine; and many pastors are quite unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet all are called Christians, have been baptized, and enjoy the use of the Sacraments, although they know neither the Lord's Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments and live like the poor brutes and irrational swine. Still they have, now that the Gospel has come, learned to abuse all liberty in a masterly manner.

Luther includes the standard contents of catechisms: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments. Catechism was the means of restoring these symbols of the Christian tradition to their prominence to the piety of the laity. These essentials of the faith were lost in the "Babylonian captivity" of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the heretical meanderings of the Radical Reformers. He eliminated other features common to medieval catechisms, such as prayers to the saints, the *Ave Maria*, and a catalogue of the seven deadly sins.

Luther also altered the order of the elements as they were found in medieval catechisms. Instead of creed, commandments, prayer, Luther's arrangement was commandments, creed, and prayer.

He believed we must confront our failure to keep the law before we can apprehend God's mercies in Christ. This order is a movement from sin to grace, from Law to Gospel.

Luther's Large Catechism served as a commentary and explanation of the Small Catechism (much like the Westminster Larger Catechism's relation to the Shorter Catechism), intending especially to address the lack of education among the clergy. The polemics that we find in the Large Catechism are generally absent from the Small Catechism.

Scholars have lauded Luther for the brilliance of both of his catechisms, one calling them "a masterpiece of Christian pedagogy." But we do not fully capture the genius of Luther's catechisms until we link them with two other formative practices. First, his conviction that the church must be reformed in the vernacular not only inspired his German translation of the Bible; it prompted his teaching on prayer. The Latin Mass, he believed, robbed the laypeople of prayer. His revised *Prayer Book* (1529) and *Simple Way to Pray* (1535) offered instruction that follows closely to his catechisms (where the same elements are found: Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, and the Creed), and Luther urged that the catechism be used as daily resource especially for prayer. Secondly, Luther understood the role of music in the nurture of the people of God. Luther was a master of music, and many of his hymns were versifications of the catechism. Over the course of his life, he would compose a hymn for every part of the catechism.

TIMELINE

- 1516 Luther preaches sermon series on the Ten Commandments
- 1517 Luther preaches sermon series on the Lord's Prayer; posts *Ninety-Five Theses*
- 1521 Luther refuses to recant at Diet of Worms
- 1524 Start of the Peasants' Revolt
- 1525 Luther's Marriage to Katharina von Bora
- 1526 Saxon visitations begin to assess the state of the churches
- 1528 Luther preaches a series of sermons on the catechism
- 1529 Luther publishes Small Catechism (January) and Large Catechism (April)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

If you or any participants want to read further on Luther and his Catechisms, here are recommended resources:

Haemig, Mary Jane. "Recovery Not Rejection: Luther's Appropriation of Catechism," *Concordia Journal* (Winter/Spring 2017): 43-58.

Packer, James I., and Gary A. Parrett. *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010). Packer and Parrett remind contemporary readers of the historic but largely forgotten Christian practice of catechesis.

Persaud, Winston D. "Luther's Small and Large Catechisms: Defining and Confessing Christian Faith from the Centre in a Religiously Plural World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46:4 (Winter 2007): 355-62.

Trueman, Carl R. *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015). Especially helpful is Trueman's description of Luther's comprehensive catechesis program in chapter 4, "The Liturgy of the Christian Life," pp. 99-115.

Wengert, Timothy J. *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). A helpful analysis of Luther's educational initiatives in the social world of the German Reformation.

Note: This discussion leader guide divides a three-part study of the Large Catechism in the following way (pagination refers to the Fortress Press edition of the Annotated Luther Study Edition):

First Month:

Preface (289-99)

Commandments 1-4 (300-327)

Second Month:

Commandments 5-10 (327-51)

Apostles Creed (352-66)

Third Month:

Lord's Prayer (366-87)

Concerning Baptism (388-402)

On the Sacrament of the Altar (402-15)

Note on the edition: The edition that we are using for this study is part of the six-volume Annotated Luther series published by Fortress Press. The Large Catechism is an offprint from volume 2, *Word and Faith*. Critics have commended the Annotated Luther for its up-to-date English translation, useful illustrations, and helpful notes and cross-references. However, the Paideia Center does not agree with all of the translation decisions or explanatory notes in this edition. In fact, there are at least a couple spots where there are brief editorial asides with which we would strongly disagree (e.g. regarding same-sex marriage on p. 335 fn. 136, which you may choose to address in discussion with your group).



1ST MONTH

Preface, Ten Commandments [1-4]

Martin Luther's Preface

We noted the strong language of the preface to the Small Catechism. Luther did not mince words in the Large Catechism preface either. At the very outset, he launches into withering criticism of the state of preaching in Germany. When priests become pastors they still need training to become preachers.

It is not for trivial reasons that we constantly teach the Catechism and exhort and implore others to do the same, for we see that unfortunately many preachers and pastors are very negligent in doing so and thus despise both their office and this teaching. Some do it out of their great learnedness, while others do so out of pure laziness and concern for their bellies. 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 (289).

The condition of the church was desperate, and the Reformation was making no progress. In Luther's word, the "crazy Germans" were a "disgraceful people." He conceded that many had come to despise catechism. But he added his own testimony of his dependence on it:

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, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism – and I also do so gladly. (290).

The condition of the church was desperate, and the Reformation was making no progress. In Luther's word, the "crazy Germans" were a "disgraceful people." He conceded that many had come to despise catechism. But he added his own testimony of his dependence on it:

Discussion Questions

- Do you recognize the contemporary church in Luther's description of the crisis of the church of his day? What signals does he highlight for this crisis in his own day? Are they similar or otherwise in our own day?

- How does Luther describe the relation between the catechism and the Gospel? The catechism and the Holy Spirit?
- Does Luther's approach to the catechism commend itself in our age? Do Christians ever outgrow catechism?
- What does the preface suggest about the charge that Luther and Lutheranism are antinomian?
- Do you agree with Luther's five chief parts of the Christian faith? What is the significance of Luther's ordering of these parts? Of which of these parts is the contemporary church most illiterate?

The Ten Commandments (1-4)

Reformed and evangelical readers must bear in mind that Luther follows the medieval numbering of the commandments that dates back to Augustine. While this divides the sin of coveting into two commandments, Luther will treat them together in his commentary.

Roman Catholic/Lutheran Numbering	Anglican/Reformed Numbering
1. You shall have no other gods before me.	1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.	2. You shall not make any graven image.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.	3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Honor your father and mother.	4. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.
5. You shall not kill.	5. Honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not commit adultery.	6. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not steal.	7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house.	9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or goods.	10. You shall not covet.

Luther follows tradition in his commentary. He divides the commandments into two categories: those that relate to duty toward God (1-3) and duty toward neighbor (4-10). For each commandment, he describes sins of omission and commission. Notice throughout Luther's treatment how far-reaching is the meaning and significance of the decalogue.

Discussion Questions

First Commandment:

- Did an alternate way of numbering the commandments prompt you to consider them in a different way? Why?
- What does it mean to “have God” or to “have a god?”
- What is “extreme idolatry” in the mind of Luther?
- What are the threats and promises of this commandment?

Second Commandment:

- What is the greatest misuse of God’s name?
- How do habits (good and bad, often dating from childhood) shape our use of the name of God?
- How would you assess Luther’s encouragement to use the sign of the cross and what does he mean by playful fear of the Lord?

Third Commandment:

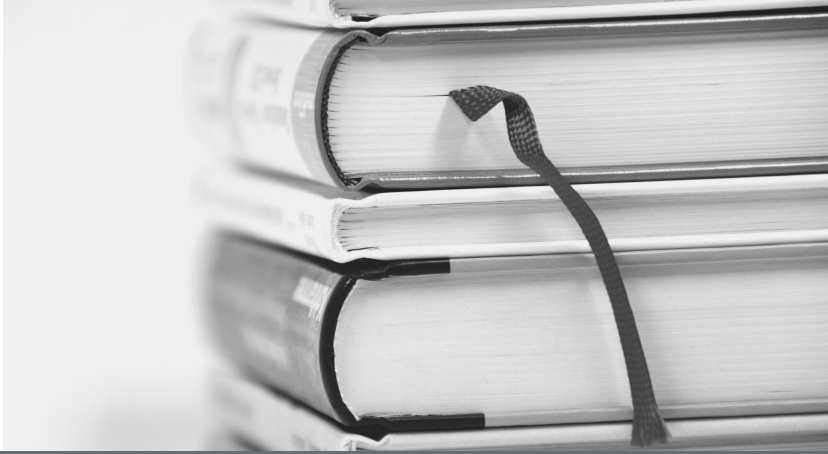
- What is the meaning of “Sabbath” for Luther?
- What is the most holy thing in the lives of Christians?
- How do we violate this commandment even when we attend church?

Fourth Commandment:

- What is the difference between loving someone and honoring that person?
- How does the doctrine of vocation and “station in life” inform Luther’s idea of good works?
- How does the world despise this commandment?
- Beyond parents, what other authorities are included in this commandment?

2ND MONTH

Ten Commandments [5-10], Apostle's Creed



Ten Commandments (5-10)

Several characteristics of Luther's theology emerge in his comments on commandments 5-10. His doctrine of vocation emerges: our callings are the opportunities for us to obey God by serving our neighbor. In the fifth and seven commandments, his "two kingdom" theology informs his view of the civil magistrate. The sixth commandment gives Luther opportunity to underscore the noble institution of marriage.

All of these commandments are far-reaching, and require patient and diligent teaching. Christians must not never rationalize their adultery, hatred, lying, or greed, but must always place before them the wrath of God, and thus flee to the grace of the gospel.

Fifth Commandment:

- Does this question forbid the taking of all human life?
- How are we tempted to break this commandment?
- Luther concludes his discussion looking at the command positively as commending kindness and love for our enemy. Why would this "not be preaching for the monastics?" (330)

Sixth Commandment:

- How does this commandment prompt our thankfulness for the institution of marriage? (332-33)
- How is the monastic vow of perpetual chastity contrary to God's Word? (333-34)
- Why is it important for children to be taught the blessing and duty of marriage? (334-35)

Seventh Commandment:

- Why is the world "nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves?" (337)
- How does this commandment shape our treatment of the poor? (339)

How does Luther distinguish the duties of the church and civil government? (340)

•

Eighth Commandment:

- How are pastors and teachers of the church victims of sins against this commandment? (342-43)
- How does the distinction between private sin and public sin bear on criticism of the papacy? (346)
- How ought we to conduct everyday relationships in light of this commandment? Among our neighbors? Within the church? (347)

Ninth Commandment and Tenth Commandment

- What does Luther mean when he claims these were “given exclusively to the Jews”? (348)
- What is he referring to by “clever tricks” and “shrewd tactics”? (349)
- What is the difference between stealing or cheating and coveting? (351)

The Apostles' Creed

Luther emphasized that his intention was always to lead the church back to the Creed and not away from it. The Creed was no invention by the church fathers. Rather (as he wrote elsewhere), “as the bee gathers the honey from many a beautiful flower, so this creed has been collected in commendable brevity from the books of the beloved prophets and apostles, that is, from the entire Holy Scriptures, for children and plain Christians.”

In Luther’s judgment, the Creed was desperately needed by the church in the 16th century. “In our largely creedless age, much confused thinking exists on religious beliefs.” For Luther, “faith made one a Christian, but the creed marks one a Christian.” Luther says two things at once in his esteem for the Creed. On the one hand, it is a remarkably condensed foundation of the faith that condescends to the simple without overburdening them. On the other hand, it comprehends the person and work of God in richest measure.

The Apostles’ Creed describes the God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies. For this reason, Luther arranged the catechetical treatment of the Creed in three parts, contrary to prevailing tradition that divided the Creed into twelve articles. He places emphasis on God the “preserver.” The providence of God preserves his creation, Christ’s Lordship preserves his church, and the Spirit preserves our faith.

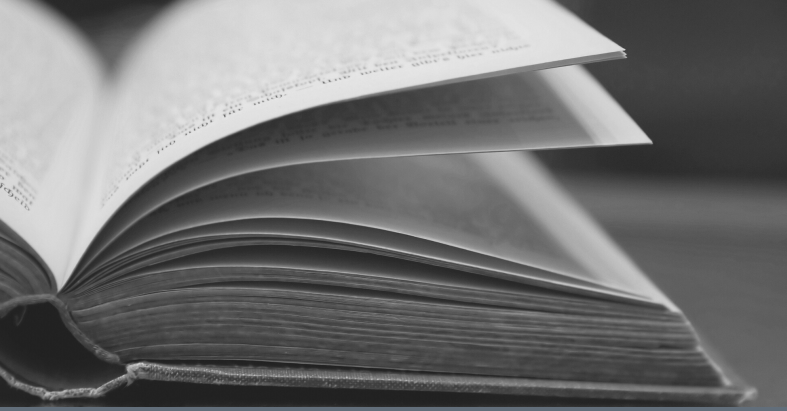
The first article of faith can be summarized by the words, “My God is the Creator,” an affirmation that comprehends God’s providential care for his creation and his sustaining of his people. Luther laments “how few people believe this article” (355) (another indication of his dismay over the state of the German churches). Genuine belief would prompt humility and terror. Notice too, how “we ought daily to practice this article” (355).

Luther summarizes the second article of faith with these words: “Jesus Christ has become my Lord,” an expression that encompasses all of Christ’s redemptive work. We find hints of Christus Victor and satisfaction theories of the atonement in his commentary. Note that there is no treatment of the “descent into hell” clause of the Creed.

Luther entitles the third article, “Being Made Holy,” and he treats this section at greater length than the first two sections combined. All of Christ’s work would remain hidden to us unless Christ were offered to us “through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit.”

Discussion Questions

- What does it mean that Jesus “is my Lord?”
- The Creed includes no overt reference to language of justification. Where does Luther discuss justification in his commentary on the Creed?
- How do you assess Luther’s claim that there was no Holy Spirit present under the papacy? (361)
- How do you explain Luther’s assertion that there is no salvation outside the church? (363)



3RD MONTH

Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Lord's Supper

The Lord's Prayer

Throughout his life Luther testified to his love for the Lord's Prayer. "The Lord's Prayer is my prayer," he wrote. "If you pray this prayer, you need not worry about having omitted anything." All of our troubles, body and spirit, are addressed here, and it offers the "the strongest consolation in all trials and temptations."

In his preface to this section Luther returns to the importance of his ordering of elements of the catechism. After the law and the creed have instructed us on duty and belief, "nothing is so necessary as to call on God incessantly and to drum into God's ears the prayer that God may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard." As he adds later, "all our safety and protection consist in prayer alone."

Following his method in his study of the decalogue, Luther stresses the breadth of the Lord's Prayer in its seven petitions. He locates the duty of prayer in the second commandment (remember his numbering): "you shall not take God's name in vain." We keep this commandment only when we praise God's name and call on that name in our need. He draws this connection in his commentary on the first petition, we can only hallow the name of our Father only when we "behave as his good children."

In the second petition, Luther describes the coming of the kingdom of God in strikingly personal terms: "that it may prevail among us and with us" and that "we may remain faithful and grow daily in" the kingdom. His parable of a "rich emperor and poor beggar" (376) underscores how boldly we must pray for advance of the kingdom.

The third petition expresses two prominent themes in Luther. First, he reminds the reader that the devil is powerful and persistent in resisting the of God. Secondly, he asserts his "theology of the cross": God's will shall prevail over the devil but only through the suffering of his people.

Beyond "daily bread," the fourth petition "includes everything that belongs to our entire life in this world, because it is only its sake that we need daily bread." This provides occasion for Luther to call for prayer for civil government (379).

The plea for forgiveness in the fifth petition “breaks our pride and keeps us humble” but also gives us “comfort and assurance,” because our capacity to forgive others is an inward sign of grace that strengthens us. (382-83).

Luther uses the sixth petition to parse the three kinds of temptation: the flesh, the world, and the devil. In the seventh and last petition, the devil is identified as “the sum of all evil.” And so deliverance from evil requires prayer for everything that attacks us, body and soul.

Discussion Questions

- What special importance does Luther attach to the first petition?
- What how does Luther describe the kingdom? How does that compare with contemporary definitions of the kingdom of God?
- How is it that Luther describes the first three petitions as petitions for our own sakes? Isn't this counterintuitive to us?
- What does Luther encourage us to expect in this life? How do the troubles of his age compare to ours? (381)
- How can we stand before God in prayer with a cheerful conscience? (383)
- Why is prayer our only hope against temptation? (380)
- Why is it a struggle for Christians to trust in God in their prayers? (387)

Baptism

Having completed the three chief parts of the catechism, Luther concludes with two important appendices: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. All Christians must be instructed in the sacraments and their benefits. Baptism is God's work, a priceless treasure. When our sins accuse, the Christian must remember: “I am baptized!”

Discussion Questions

- Luther's discussion of baptism is an extended polemic against “know-it-alls” and “presumptuous and stupid spirits” (393, 398). Who are these false teachers and what are they denying about baptism?
- How do you assess Luther's argument for infant baptism?
- What does baptism signify? How is the Christian life a “daily baptism” (401)?

The Lord's Supper

Because Jesus cannot lie to us or deceive us, the bread and wine must be what he tells us they are: his body and blood. The supper is “food for the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature.” The Christians must “prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently.”

The last paragraph (414-15) is a fitting conclusion to the Large Catechism and a reminder of the importance of catechesis. Catechizing youth people must be a priority, because children are vital to the life and health of the church: “For they must all help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight against the devil.”

Discussion Questions

- Why ought Christians not to despise this sacrament?
- What makes a person worth to receive the supper?
- What do you make of Luther’s own assessment that the catechism was among the chief of his writings?
- How might Luther’s approach to catechesis serve to prompt churches today to rethink the nature of Christian formation? Is the Christian life necessarily the catechetical life? What does that mean? What forms might that take?