



## THE BOOK OF CONCORD: A SOURCE OF HARMONY

# The Large Catechism

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Luther's Large Catechism, or German Catechism, is meant to be a basic instruction to Christians in the fundamental parts of Christian faith, containing "what every Christian should know." These parts include the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and a treatise, both on Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. According to Luther's first preface, it is designed as a handbook to the heads of the households to help them teach their families and household. The second preface directs it more to preachers and pastors, providing them a model for Christian education.

The Large Catechism was formulated alongside the Small Catechism, and in a way, can be read as the basic draft to this most successful booklet ever of the reformation era. As in the Small Catechism, Luther treated the basic texts of Christian teaching in the tradition of the medieval church, adding two parts—Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar.

The work resulted from three series' of sermons Luther preached in 1528. For several months that year, Luther replaced John Bugenhagen, the local pastor and superintendent in Wittenberg. He began writing in September 1528, but in January 1529 became ill and resumed his work in March. By mid-April 1529 the Large Catechism was published. The "Brief Exhortation to Confession" was inserted in the 1529 revised edition.



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Catechetical instruction had been taking place in Wittenberg since 1525. The reformers increasingly recognized the need for public and popular information about basic Christian truths. Luther had started treating the Decalogue, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer in sermons as early as 1518, but the disastrous results of the visitation program in Saxony in 1527/28 finally enforced the need to publish a concise synopsis of fundamental Christian doctrine in a clear-cut reformation perspective. The medieval canon had been cleansed from parts like the Ave Maria, and enlarged by the treatises on the two sacraments, as counted from a reformation point of view. (Luther sometimes labels Confession the third sacrament.) These are "in all, five parts covering the whole of Christian teaching."\*

The inner structure of the Large Catechism is guided by the idea of God's solemn and sacred self-communication. This theme steers the explanation of the Ten Commandments, as the First Commandment focuses on God's promise: "I, I myself will give you what you need and help you out of every danger." To this promise, God's claim corresponds: "Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else." In the First Article of the Creed, Luther states that "God has given to us Himself with all creation . . . apart from the fact that He has also showered us with inexpressible blessings through his Son and the Holy Spirit." Thus, in the Second Article, we learn, how God "has given Himself completely to us, withholding nothing." Therefore, the Creed helps "us do what the Ten Commandments require from us."

The petitions in Lord's Prayer, correspondingly request nothing but the fulfillment of what is commanded in the Decalogue; moreover, "God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words." Likewise, the sacraments are regarded as "a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps" or "all the treasures He brought from heaven to us...placed at everyone's door, yes upon the table."

According to the *Binding Summary of the Formula of Concord* (1577), the Large Catechism summarizes Christian teaching as a "Bible of the Laity." The five parts of this work, linked by the principle of God's self-donation willing to communicate His salvation to all humankind, are meant to effectively introduce a fundamental summation of the Christian life, even on a daily basis. With this perspective in mind, the Large Catechism can serve as an exemplary piece of Christian education, motivating us to live our Christian life in the light of the Gospel as rediscovered in the Lutheran reformation.

\*Quotations from *The Book of Concord* translated by Kolb and Wengert, CPH 1993.



**The Independent Evangelical—Lutheran Church (SELK)** was formed in 1972 by most of the confessional Lutheran bodies in Germany. In 1991, the Evangelisch—Lutherische Kirche in the former German Democratic Republic joined the SELK. Today, it has 187 congregations and 37,760 baptized members.

