

## In Sync with the Catechism: Theology Confessed, Prayed, and Lived

Edmund Schlink spoke of modernity as that time when "dogmatics had become largely a playground for the subjective originality of speculative piety, **a period in which Christians generally forgot how to pray through their Catechism** (*The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, 36 - emphasis mine). Schlink's words call us back to something that ought to characterize a confessional Lutheran seminary. Namely seminarians should remember how to "pray through their Catechism." Unbuckled from the content and rhythm of the Catechism, theology too easily degenerates into religious speech about self or philosophical assertions about an unknown God. The Catechism itself establishes the contours for our speaking of God for it anchors us in what God says and does. Genuine theology is always confessing, speaking in the presence of God the words that God has spoken to us. Creativity in theology is the blight of the church. Our aim is not creativity but faithfulness to God's speaking and doing.

The Formula of Concord would come to call the Catechism "a Bible of the Laity, in which everything is summarized that is treated in detail in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for salvation" (FC-SD Epitome I:7, Kolb/Wengert, 487). Commandments, Creed and the Lord's Prayer, drawn from the Scriptures form the core of the Catechism. Luther adds Baptism and the Lord's Supper anchoring both in the words of Jesus' that institute them, unpacks their benefits, and tutors us in how faith receives the gifts. In time Luther would also insert a short form of confession between Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. Our duty "to thank, praise, serve and obey" (First Article) is given concrete form in the daily prayers and the table of duties appended to the Catechism. God's Law (Ten Commandments) brings us to see our sin. The Gospel of the triune God is embodied in the Apostles' Creed. Faith calls on the Father in the words His Son has given us to pray (Lord's Prayer). Faith receives the gifts Jesus' designates in Baptism, in the word of absolution, and with His body and blood in the Supper. Lives made holy by the Spirit are lived in the "holy orders" of congregation, community, and home. The Catechism is geared to repentance, faith and holy living.

Theology for Luther is not an academic exercise but a life that is lived in the promises of God and under the cross that puts to death the old man driving us back to Christ alone. God is not the object of our theological inquiry but the subject. He does the verbs of salvation. Creation, redemption and sanctification are His works. We are on the receiving end without "any merit or worthiness of mine" (SC II:2, Kolb/Wengert, 354). Praying the Catechism locates us in the pattern of His giving, our receiving His gifts, and the fruition of His gifts on our lips and in our lives.

Paul exhorted Timothy to "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 1:13). This is what we are given in the Catechism, "the pattern of the sound words...in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." This pattern guides us in the study of theology- the speaking of the true words about God received from Him. Faith confesses Christ. Love hands on the gifts that we have been given to the neighbor. We remain students. Listen to Luther "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 - and I also do so gladly" (Preface to the Large Catechism, Kolb/Wengert, 380). Luther's practice commends itself to those of us who teach and learn theology. May it never be said of us that we have forgotten how to pray through the catechism.

-Prof. John T. Pless

II. 4. 2004