

# The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther<sup>a</sup>

1529

KIRSI I. STJERNA

## INTRODUCTION

In the *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther offers a radical reorientation<sup>b</sup> in the matters of theology and spirituality. After diagnosing what appeared to him as his church's failures to provide proper spiritual care, Luther set out to offer a new compass for religious life. The sweeping reforms he proposed took root primarily through preaching and education as people embraced the new vision and transmitted it to their children. He believed all Christian people—laity and priests—needed a guide to comprehend the basic biblical, creedal, and sacramental teachings.

<sup>a</sup> Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in the *Book of Concord*, ed. Timothy Wengert and Robert Kolb (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), [introduction, 377–79,] 379–480. *Der Große Katechismus*, in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 6. Auslage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967). See the new critical edition with parallel texts of the Early Modern High German and Latin, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (Vollständige Neuedition), ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); and *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche: Quellen und Materialien* (Vollständige Neuedition), ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

<sup>b</sup> For interpretation of Luther's catechisms in English, see Timothy Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis:

1. The 1530 *Augsburg Confession*, the first public Lutheran confession in twenty-eight articles, was presented at the long-awaited imperial Diet at Augsburg by Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), Luther’s closest colleague at Wittenberg. Melancthon crafted the text on the basis of previous working documents prepared by a group of Wittenberg theologians, including Luther. The confession was presented in German (verbally) and Latin to Emperor Charles V, who immediately rejected it with Catholic theologians’ *Confutatio*. Melancthon’s *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531) is also included in the 1580 *Book of Concord*. See BC, 107–9. Also, Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

2. Philip Melancthon, a humanist and a professor at the University of Wittenberg, was Luther’s closest friend and an interpreter and systematizer of Luther’s theology. A promoter of unity, he is known for writing the first Lutheran systematic theology, *Loci communes*. See also Timothy Wengert, *Philip Melancthon, Speaker of the Reformation* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 2010).

3. *The Book of Concord*, from 1580, is the standard, official collection of Lutheran confessional texts. The book was facilitated by Martin Chemnitz and Jacob Andrae and their respective nobility from north and south concerned about the unity in the midst of increasing inner-Lutheran disputes. It includes the ecumenical Creeds, Luther’s *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*, Melancthon’s *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Luther’s *Smalcald Articles*,

Luther published two of the most popular catechisms of all time: the *Small Catechism*<sup>c</sup> for children and the less educated laity, and the *Large Catechism* for the clergy and more educated readers. While the *Small Catechism* utilizes the catechetical form of questions and answers, the *Large Catechism* does not. Both were adopted into use immediately in the new evangelical congregations. Along with the 1530 *Augsburg Confession*<sup>1</sup> by Philip Melancthon,<sup>2</sup> Luther’s catechisms stand apart as the most widely

Fortress Press, 2009); Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000); Robert Kolb, *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther’s Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012). The most comprehensive study is in the five volumes of Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms* (Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer, Baptism and Lord’s Supper, Confession and Christian Life), trans. Thomas H. Trapp et al. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–2013).

<sup>c</sup> See the *Small Catechism*, in TAL, vol. 4, forthcoming.

employed Lutheran confessional texts included in the 1580 compilation called the *Book of Concord*.<sup>3</sup>

According to his own recollection,<sup>4</sup> Luther already in 1516–17 was preaching<sup>d</sup> from the materials typically included in the medieval catholic catechisms:<sup>e</sup> the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and the Ave Maria.<sup>5</sup> This was

Melanchthon's *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, and the *Formula of Concord* with its two parts: the Epitome and the Solid Declaration. See note a above for the newest critical edition of the confessions in the original languages.

#### 4. Timeline

- 1518 Sermons on catechesis materials
- 1518 Exposition of the Lord's Prayer
- 1521 Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*
- 1525 *Booklet for the Laity and Children*, Stephen Roth
- 1522 *A Personal Prayer Book*
- 1523 Reform of the Latin Mass
- 1524 First evangelical hymns
- 1526 German Mass
- 1527 Summer: Visitations
- 1527 November: Torgau meeting
- 1528 Visitations articles
- 1528 Ember sermons on catechesis
- 1528 Catechisms by Johann Agricola
- 1529 January: *Small Catechism*
- 1529 April: *Large Catechism*
- 1529 Latin translation [Revisions]
- 1529 October: Marburg Colloquy, *Marburg Articles*
- 1530 June: Diet of Augsburg, *Augsburg Confession*
- 1538 Last edition of *Large Catechism* in Luther's lifetime
- 1580 *Book of Concord*, includes catechisms

5. The word *catechism* comes from a Greek term, κατηχέω, meaning to “teach orally” (literally, “to echo back”). This method of utilizing “questions and answers” has long roots in Christian tradition. It has been employed since the second century to teach Christians the basics of Christian faith and for proper preparation for receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In

<sup>d</sup> *Decem praecepta Wittenbergensi praedicata populo* (WA 1:394–521).

<sup>e</sup> E.g., *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519) (LW 42:15–81). Luther's *A Personal Prayer Book* (1522) included his 1519 preaching material on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer (LW 43:5–45). See also TAL, vol. 4, forthcoming.

the early church, rigorous catechetical education of the adult converts took place for those desiring to be baptized, who then received the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and permission to attend the eucharistic gathering.

6. In the Middle Ages, the catechetical tradition focused on the penitential practice. Manuals, after the model of Augustine of Hippo's fifth-century *Enchiridion* [Handbook] on Faith, Hope, and Charity, were designed to teach the meaning of the Creeds, the Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer in particular. One of the most popular of such medieval manuals, from a Franciscan preacher, Dietrich Kolde (1435–1515), *The Mirror of a Christian Man* (1470), gave instruction on what to believe, how to live, and how to die, with a premise that one could improve one's chances with right faith and action. The leading work in Luther's time came from the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier* (1501). Catechetical methods of teaching have also been used in different religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., Socrates).

7. Catechetical preaching days coincided with so-called Ember Days: in the Western tradition, four times a year, sermons were offered in a set of three days in one week (often Wednesday, Friday, Saturday), with an invitation for Christians to pray and fast.

8. Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558) was Luther's friend, pastor, and colleague. Also a lecturer at the university, he was instrumental in organizing the evangelical churches and writing evangelical church orders in northern Germany and Denmark. See Kurt K. Hendel, ed., *Johannes Bugenhagen*:

not unusual in any way.<sup>6</sup> Regular "catechetical" preaching was normal and expected in certain areas in Germany already before the Reformation.<sup>7</sup> Often substituting as assistant pastor for his friend and colleague, the Wittenberg town pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen,<sup>8</sup> as was the case in 1528, Luther climbed the preaching pulpit at the Marienkirche (St. Mary's Church) in Wittenberg for three rounds of catechetical sermons. The listeners' notes from three sets of these sermons (18–30 May; 14–25 September; and 30 November–18 December 1528) give insights into Luther's singular method in both preaching and teaching, as evidenced in the printed catechisms.<sup>f</sup>

Education on the basic tenets of Christian faith and practices was essential for establishing the evangelical theology in praxis. While developing their distinctive Reformation Christian identity and faith language, Lutherans needed tools for interpretation and application. A flurry of new catechisms with evangelical theology flooded the busy market.<sup>9</sup>

The *Large Catechism* was published on the eve of the Marburg Colloquy of October 1529, which was convened by Philip of Hesse.<sup>10</sup> Here Luther would meet with his Swiss counterpart Ulrich Zwingli<sup>11</sup> to test the waters for unity that could potentially allow for a pan-Protestant alliance against the Catholic imperial powers. The major points of agreement resonate with the theology that was fleshed out in Luther's Catechism (which has potential as an ecumenical Christian source of devotion and

<sup>f</sup> WA 30/1:2–122. The English translation of the third series is included in LW 51:135–93.

ethics). The central disagreement on the theology of the Lord's Supper, however, prevented unity between the Swiss and the German reformations.<sup>12</sup> Included in the *Large Catechism* is Luther's teaching on the Lord's Supper and explication of his emphasis on Christ's real presence in the sacrament offered to each recipient. This nonnegotiable point would remain one of the characteristic Lutheran teachings—closer to the Catholic teaching on the matter, actually, than any of the other Protestant explanations. This has not only been a sixteenth-century issue: efforts toward table fellowship among different Christian groups have kept the theology of the Lord's Supper at the center of ecumenical negotiations.

## Reasons for Writing

The stimulus for Luther to write his very own catechisms came from at least three directions. In 1524, he had received an invitation to write a catechism for laypeople from Pastor Nicholas Hausmann (c. 1478–1538). He also wanted to address the theological controversy between Melanchthon and Johann Agricola<sup>13</sup> regarding the place of the law in Christian life. And finally, he was deeply disturbed by what he and others discovered in the Saxon Visitations of 1528, which continued in a first round until 1531.

*Selected Writings*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

**9.** About thirty new catechisms were published just between 1522 and 1530. On the writing of evangelical catechisms, see Ferdinand Cohrs, *Die Evangelischen Katechismusversuche vor Luthers Enchiridion*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1900–1902); and Johann Michael Reu, *Quellen zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Unterrichts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands zwischen 1530 und 1600*, 9 vols. (Gutersloh, 1904–1935; Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 1976).

**10.** Philip of Hesse (1504–1567), “the Magnanimous,” Landgrave of Hesse, was one of the primary princely leaders and supporters of the Reformation.

**11.** Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), a humanist and a chaplain, was the leader of the Reformation in Switzerland and Luther's most important “conversation partner” on the issue of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

**12.** With hopes for a pan-Protestant unified front, Luther and Zwingli cordially met at the Marburg Castle and agreed on fourteen out of the fifteen articles of faith. The last one, on the Lord's Supper, presented a stumbling block, and the men left Marburg as sworn enemies. See the *Marburg Articles*, in English translation in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 88–92.

**13.** Johann Agricola (c. 1494–1566) was a former student of Luther and the head at the time of the Latin school in Eisleben. He was later a teacher in Wittenberg and, starting in the 1540s, a court preacher and a superintendent in Berlin. In the 1530s, he became a

vocal proponent of an antinomian position, opposing Melanchthon and Luther. Agricola's criticism of the 1527 Latin version of the *Instructions* had irritated Melanchthon enough to launch him into writing his own catechism, a project he politely set aside as soon as Luther began to prepare his. See Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over "Poenitentia"* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

14. For the translation, see LW 40:263–320. Luther, Melanchthon, and others led the early visitations that examined the health of the Saxon congregations, their finances, the quality of preaching and teaching, and the overall status of ministry. The written articles addressed a wide spectrum of doctrinal and practical concerns and served as the stepping-stone for catechisms and church orders that were to regulate life in evangelical communities. For an example of such articles, in English translation, see *The Saxon Visitation Articles* of 1592, in Kolb and Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts*, 256–60.

Luther had made known his concerns about the sorry state of the churches in Saxony to Elector John Frederick 1 (1503–1554), who in 1527 issued a guide to be used by appointed visitors called *Instructions and Order for Dispatching Visitors*. Luther was not fully satisfied with the document, so Melanchthon created an alternate document in Latin called *The Articles of the Visitors*, which consisted of eighteen items, including the Ten Commandments, the sacraments, worship, theological issues such as Christian freedom, and societal topics, including the Turks and the office of superintendents of schools. The *Articles* were translated into German by Luther, Bugenhagen, and Melanchthon starting in September 1527. Then Luther himself wrote a preface to these instructions that appeared in print in early 1528 under the title *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors of Saxony*.<sup>14</sup>

Designated teams consisting of four persons—two from the elector's court, one from the school of law and one theologian (elected by the theology faculty)—all approved by the Saxon elector visited the regions and their churches for the purposes of examining the overall situation of congregations, including the teaching and preaching, the finances and the staffing. Luther himself briefly took part in the visitations in 1528. The teams returned with a sense of urgency to remedy the unacceptable ignorance and confusion even about the basics of the Christian faith, not to mention its evangelical orientation. In his preface to the *Small Catechism*, Luther reflected on the sad state of the churches uncovered through the visitation: "The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version. . . . The ordinary person, especially in the villages knows nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers."<sup>g</sup>

The ongoing debate with Agricola also fueled Luther's drive to write the catechism. With three catechisms of his own (1527–28), Agricola unambiguously taught Christian life on the basis of the promise of the gospel, diminishing any positive role for law and the fear of God's punishment in inducing necessary

repentance. In Luther's—and Melancthon's—opinion, omitting law meant watering down the gospel and led to illusions about human nature. Law and gospel together stimulated proper repentance that was to characterize the life of the baptized.<sup>15</sup>

## A Theological Compass for Daily Life

The pedagogical format and the easy flow of the language Luther employs in the *Large Catechism* should not fool the reader to dismiss its theological ammunition. Its parts make up a spiritually oriented summation of Luther's doctrine. Luther masters the skill of theologizing in ways that make sense for a novice reader without compromising the complexity of issues at stake. Luther himself wrote: "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" (BC, 380:8).

The order with which Luther proceeds in the *Large Catechism* is deliberate, with a distinct theological rationale: the Commandments express God's expectations; the Creed proclaims God's promise; the Lord's Prayer translates law and gospel into a personal discourse with God; and the sacraments offer tangible expressions of God's grace and signs to lean on in faith. Through all these pieces, Luther follows the tracks of the Holy Spirit as the overarching enabler, to a degree that the *Large Catechism* could be named the "Book of the Spirit."

Beginning with the Ten Commandments, Luther demonstrates that the law has its place in Christian life—to judge, to illumine our sinful condition, and to guide. The constructive role of law becomes clear only in light of the gospel, and the old reality of sin is replaced by the new reality of forgiveness. Luther's explanation of the law is thus telling and expresses his confidence in God's promise of grace: the law maintains its positive function exactly because of the promise of grace expressed in the Creeds, and solely because of the merit of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the word. With his positive teaching of the law, Luther emphasizes both the reality of sin in human life and points back to the redeeming work of Christ and God's grace.

According to Luther, the gospel is amply summarized in the Lord's Prayer, which serves as a compass for the Christian's daily

15. Luther, Bugenhagen, and Agricola met on 26–29 November 1527 in Torgau to address their different views on, e.g., law, repentance, and faith. These negotiations foreshadowed the direct conflict between Luther and Agricola in the so-called antinomian controversy of the late 1530s.



**16.** In Luther's vision, the daily Christian life entails a deeply mystical dimension on the basis of the real presence of Christ in faith, gratuitously affected by the word. The Finnish Luther scholar Tuomo Mannermaa introduced a hermeneutical shift in this regard with his ecumenically inspired rereading of Luther's doctrine of justification and the centrality of the effective righteousness, and the interconnectedness of faith and love in Luther's theology of salvation. See Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); and idem, *Two Kinds of Love: An Introduction to Luther's Religious World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

**17.** Luther worked in particular on his third set of sermons from 1528, with extra attention to the revision of the second and third commandments, already printed; the added comments on these would be included in the end of the conclusions on the Commandments.

**18.** Luther was then focusing on the confession and the Eucharist. For an English translation, see *Martin Luther's Sermons from Holy Week and Easter, 1529*, Irving Sandberg, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999).

**19.** Comparing the different sermon and lecture notes, prints and texts, it is evident how instrumental preaching was for Luther's theological development and articulation. One example of this is the enhancement of the Lord's Prayer through the different versions available.

**20.** Lucas Cranach Sr. (1472–1555), a painter, printmaker, pharmacist, real estate mogul, and a dear friend of Luther offered multifaceted support for the Reformation, perhaps even shaping its direction. See Steven Ozment, *The*

life, in which we alone cannot live up to the demands of the law. We cannot fully realize the law's guidance on how to live to the benefit of our neighbor, nor are we able to love and respect God of our own accord. So we are encouraged to pray without ceasing and without doubting God's word.

In his *Large Catechism*, Luther states his unflappable trust in the powerful active presence of God in human life specifically through the word. He assures his fellow Christians of the certainty of God's promise to be present and active for those who engage God's word. He writes: "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 meditate upon it. . . . For this reason alone you should gladly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism" (BC, 381:9–11). "In such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present" (BC, 381:9).

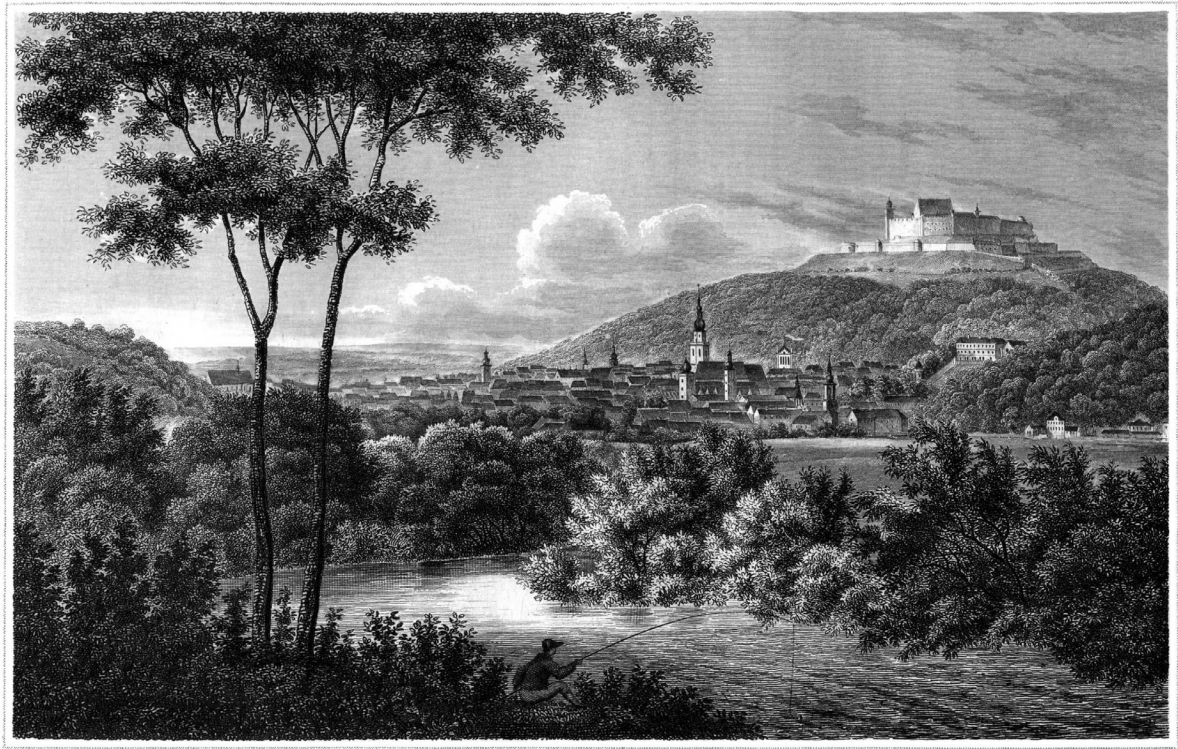
If one wants to talk about Luther's mysticism, the *Large Catechism* gives ample evidence of the experiential foundation of Luther's theological orientation and his personal religiosity. It seeks to lay the groundwork for the faithful to encounter God and to teach the many ways God's own word calls forth faith. In sum, Luther's *Large Catechism* is a book of faith and invites the reader to explore the many mysteries of God that intersect all dimensions of human life.<sup>16</sup>

## The Printing and Publication

Luther started writing what became the *Large Catechism* in December 1528, beginning by revising his sermons from September.<sup>17</sup> In January 1529, he continued this work but, starting with the third commandment, especially used his December sermons as a basis for his work. When a period of illness forced Luther to stop working on this project, he picked it up again in March 1529; his Holy Week sermons (21–27 March 1529) greatly influenced his discussion of the Lord's Supper and (in the second edition) Confession.<sup>18</sup>

Luther's German Catechism, as the *Large Catechism* was first titled, came out in mid-April 1529, with immediate revisions to follow.<sup>19</sup> The printer, Georg Rhau (1488–1548), included an important pedagogical enhancement with woodcuts from Lucas





In this antique print, the Coburg Castle stands on the hill overlooking the city of Coburg.

Cranach Sr.'s workshop.<sup>20</sup> The 1530 edition of the work included Luther's longer preface, which he probably composed while at Coburg Castle during the famous Diet of Augsburg in 1530, which, as an outlawed, condemned heretic, he could not attend.<sup>21</sup> The very last edition from Luther's lifetime comes from 1538, and contains only minor corrections. While mostly known in its German language, the *Large Catechism* was translated in 1529 into refined Latin (with classical citations) by Vincent Obsopoeus.<sup>22</sup> *The Book of Concord* from 1580 included Luther's catechisms among the normative Lutheran confessions that have been in use

*Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

**21.** Since the 1521 Diet of Worms and its edict that outlawed Luther, he could not venture outside territories friendly to the Reformation to attend the Augsburg Diet, or any other similar imperial gathering. He observed the events from the Saxon elector's castle in Coburg, where he was attended by the later pastor in Nuremberg, Veit Dietrich, and visited by his Bavarian friend Argula von Grumbach (c. 1492–1568) on her way to the Diet.

**22.** Vincent Obsopoeus [Vincenz Heidecker] (1485–1539), a humanist and philologist, was a proponent of Luther's works.



This image from 1533 *Church Order*, published by Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Ansbach, illustrates a violation of the third commandment: “You are to keep holy the day of rest.” While the congregation is gathered for Sunday worship and instruction, a man is working outside.

23. The 1580 *Book of Concord* published in Leipzig used the so-called Jena edition of Luther’s works, which has a reversed order of the prefaces and omitted the private confession. The 2000 Fortress Press edition, reflecting an edition of the Book of Concord printed in Magdeburg, follows the second,

ever since. The catechisms were also employed with the church orders (*Kirchenordnung*) that effectively organized Lutheran religious life from the sixteenth century on.<sup>23</sup>

## A Word about the Translation and Annotations

This translation is a revised version of James Schaaf’s original work in *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*.<sup>24</sup> Also consulted was *Der Große Katechismus*, in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*.<sup>25</sup> Schaaf’s notes have been revised and incorporated in the new text provided here.

Most notably, the language of the translation has been thoroughly revised with the principle of inclusivity, with an eye toward Luther’s theological and reasonable intent, and with appreciation of both the sixteenth-century linguistic traditions as well as the sensibilities of the contemporary global reader. Whereas a strictly literal translation would have in some places led to unintended exclusivity and distracted the larger theological point Luther is making, Luther’s own principle of flexible translation in the service of the meaning and effective communication is applied in this editing process. Typically masculine words and male pronouns in reference to both humanity and divinity have been omitted or replaced with gender-inclusive or complementary

expressions, except in places where the meaning of the sentence or a paragraph necessitates specifically either masculine or feminine wording. For instance, some of the traditional trinitarian “Father” language of the Creed has been preserved. Sometimes the change is simply a matter of replacing “he” with “one” or “person,” or using a plural instead of a singular expression (e.g., “people” instead of “he” or “man”). The pronoun “himself” after the word “God” is systematically omitted.