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THE STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS OF LUTHER'S CATECHISM

ABSTRACT

This contribution deals with the structure of Luther's Catechism, one of Protestant basic texts. First an outline is given of the history of the composition of the text. Next some remarks are made on Luther's purpose in bringing out this Catechism. The more as scholarly discussion about it raised attention is paid to the structure of Luther's Catechism. Our conclusion is that the five parts of this Catechism are best understood in a circular form which challenges its users to go through the material time and again. Only then its specific dynamics will manifest itself which make Luther's Catechism very suitable for instruction about the Christian Faith at several levels. Following this impetus this Catechism against a tradition of misuse as a confessional text book might be recaptured as life book which proves to be useful in handing down the relevancy of Protestant tradition in the entire faith community.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Luther's Catechism, especially the Small Catechism, is widely spread in the Lutheran world. It has been published in more languages than any other book except the Bible. To put it poetically: "Its rhythms sang themselves into the hearts of Lutherans everywhere" (Wiencke 1965:379). Consulting the Tanner-collection in the Library of Luther Seminary in St. Paul (MN, USA) one will find a marvellous collection of editions of Luther's Small Catechism from all over the world. Some beautifully printed and lovely bound, others simply translated by a missionary in some African or Asian dialect, handwritten on a few sheets of paper, held together with a single string.

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Luther's Catechism is largely distributed in areas where Lutheranism was officially introduced and used as instructional material in church and school (See: Meyer 1929; Reu 1929; Fraas 1970). Sometimes preachers travelling in waste territories in America carried in their saddlebags just a few copies of Luther's Catechism to impart by it some elementary understanding of the Christian Faith to the youngsters of those who sought their fortune westward (Repp 1982). Many generations grew up with Luther's Catechism providing them a canon of what belongs to the Christian tradition. It hardly can be underestimated how deep the Christian Faith in its Lutheran outfit touched the souls of young and old. The Small Catechism was supposed to be known by heart: a five year old had to enumerate its five components, and at eight you had to know Luther's explanation as well and knowledge of the entire text of the Small Catechism was required before being confirmed.

By including Luther's Catechism in the "Book of Concord", the document of unity of many Lutherans, this Catechism got the character of confessional standard. Even for those Lutheran churches, who did not want to accept the Book of Concord as the Lutheran code, Luther's Catechism forms the basic document of their conviction. The Lutheran World Federation reckons it with the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to the confessional principle of all Lutheran churches that joined this Federation. But also all unified Protestant churches subscribe at least Luther's Small Catechism as a part of the doctrinal basis where the church is founded on.

These circumstances are already reason enough to pay attention to Luther's Catechism and to focus on the way it is structured. Its structure deserves the more attention as it did not remain undisputed. The Reformed considered – with or without sufficient reason; that is left aside here – Luther's Catechism in composition too much focussed on the proclamation of the Gospel with too little attention for its ethical consequences (Law). They therefore, to start with Calvin's second Genevan Catechism, deliberately developed Catechisms with another sequence. But also among Lutheran scholars arose much discussion about the frame of Luther's Catechism. Before taking a closer look at it, some elementary data about the genesis of the text Luther's Catechism need to be mentioned.

2. GENESIS OF THE TEXT

The coming about of the text of Luther's Catechism is a rather complex process. WA XXX contains much of the material involved,¹ while the official

1 The Works of Luther are quoted from the "Weimarer Ausgabe" abbreviated as: WA. References to the texts of Luther's Catechisms in English are taken from the *Book of Concord* (BC): 345-480.

German and English editions of the Confessions of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church give much information as well. Aland (1954) is in this respect very useful just like Peters (1990-1994). We merely refer here to the main lines of its history.

To two separate main sections of the Small Catechism, namely the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, Luther had already dedicated some publications, based on his Catechism-sermons since 1518: *Eine kurze Erklärung der Zehn Gebote* (1518) and *Eine kurze Form, das Paternoster zu verstehen und zu beten* (1519). In 1520 he brought these writings together in one edition and added an explanation of the Apostles' Creed, called: *Eine kurze Form der 10 Gebote. Eine kurze Form des Glaubens. Eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers* (A Short Form of the Ten Commandments of the Creed and of Our Father). In 1522, Luther took this text practically unchanged into his Personal Prayer Book: *Betbüchlein, der 10 Gebote, des Glaubens, des Vaterunsers und des Ave Maria*.² Later he called on pastors to write catechetical texts on this basis.

One could argue about the question whether these writings are already to be called a Catechism or that they have more the character of (personal) devotional literature. An attempt in 1525 of Luther himself to write a Catechism initially resulted in: *Eyn buchlin für die leyen vnd kinder* (A booklet for lay people and children), a text which for the first time contained the five chapters of the Lutheran Catechism: Commandment, Faith, Prayer, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In 1528 Luther preached again on the Catechism themes. The experience of his latest visitation to Saxony made it clear to him that a Catechism for the illiterate and simple people, which could also serve as instructional material for pastors explaining the "evangelical" Faith, was bitterly needed. Therefore, he began in 1528 to write a catechism based on these sermons (Meyer 1968) In April 1529 this work resulted in the edition of the *Deutsch Catechismus* (German Catechism), by others later called the "Large Catechism" (in Latin: *Catechismus Major*). This Catechism included the five chapters already mentioned, preceded by a brief Preface. The second edition of this Catechism also contained an "Exhortation to Confession" and encompassed a longer introduction to the chapter on the Lord's Prayer. This printed version was provided with woodcuts made in the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder. The third edition of 1530 had a longer Preface, which Luther presumably had written during his exile at the Coburg.

Soon after the Large Catechism had been published a Latin translation was made by Vincent Obsopoeus. This Latin text was filled with classical quotations and allusions to the Ancient history.

2 The text of this Short Form (*Kurze Form*) is to be found in WA 7: 204ff. and that of the Prayerbook (*Betbüchlein*) in WA 10: 375ff.

The last correction of Luther's hand on the Catechism text of 1538 showed only minor changes. While Luther was busy writing the Large Catechism, he began to conceive a Small Catechism containing key texts on the three main components (Commandment, Faith and Prayer), which were printed on broadsheets to be hanged on the wall (in German called: 'Tafeldrucke'). Shortly thereafter Luther added a sheet with the explanation of the sacraments. Next Luther completed his Catechism text with prayers for the Christian family (table blessing and thanksgiving: the *Benedicite* and *Gratias*, as well as a morning and evening prayer; BC: 363s.) and a "Household Chart of some Bible Passages", containing instructions for the various orders and the members of the household (also known as a "Table of Duties"; BC:365ss.).

These broadsheets, which in fact replaced the images of saints which had been used in earlier times to communicate Christian Faith, subsequently appeared in 1529 in book form, decorated with biblical engravings and provided with a new Preface by Luther, titled: *Der kleine Catechismus für die gemeine Pfarrherr und Prediger* (The Small Catechism for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers; also called: *Enchiridion* or *Catechismus minor*). The printer added to this text the so called *Traubüchlein* (Marriage Booklet; BC:367-371), that had been separately published that year as well as the *Taufbüchlein* (Baptismal Booklet; BC:371-375) which goes back to Luther's translation of the Catholic baptismal rite in 1523 and its revision in 1526.

Earlier in 1529 by the care of Bugenhagen a translation of the Catechism in Low German had been brought out. This Catechism text lacked the Preface and the Household prayers. The third edition of the Small Catechism in June of that year also included an instruction for a Liturgy of Confession and Absolution: *Eine kurze Form zu beichten für die Einfältigen dem Priester* (Short order of Confession). This instruction appeared as an appendix to the Baptismal Booklet which the printer has appended to this edition as well as a Litany.

In the fall of 1529 two Latin editions were published: *Enchiridion piarum precationum* (Booklet of pious prayer), perhaps edited by Georg Major and omitting the question form, and: *Parvus catechismus pro pueris in schola* (Small Catechism for children at school), a Catechism text made at the request of Luther in a translation by Sauermann. The latter was intended for children at school as is evident from the addition of an alphabet, vowels and consonants. In this Latin translation the part on Confession and Absolution had been inserted between the text of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. All next prints of the Small Catechism also contained the Baptismal and Marriage Booklet.

In 1531 Luther while revising the text of the Small Catechism added a fourth question regarding Baptism which contained a passage on Confession and

Absolution that replaced the aforementioned section of 1529 on this subject and was at present titled: *Wie man die Einfältigen soll lehren beichten* (How simple people are to be taught to confess; BC:360ss.), standing between the part about the Baptism and that about the Eucharist. This text, which Luther developed from a Confession Form annexed to the Baptismal Booklet, had a more catechetical impact and was meant for those who wanted to partake in the Lord's Supper.

In the German editions of the Small Catechism of 1540, respectively 1542, the Household Chart was expanded with a section on due obedience to the spiritual and secular leaders. The latter passage already occurs in the Latin edition of 1529, but was lacking until 1540 in the German editions. These additions are undoubtedly not of Luther's hand.

The Lutheran Book of Concord (German in 1580 and Latin in 1584) contained the text as well of the Large as of the Small Catechism. In most copies of the Book of Concord the Marriage Booklet and the Baptismal Booklet were omitted from the Small Catechism. The latter was omitted because of objections in some parts of the Lutheran world to the included passages on exorcism which were considered there to be 'papist'. The former because wedding, just as other ceremonies, varied too much in the Lutheran churches to be presented in a fixed form.

The German text of the Small Catechism in the Book of Concord usually follows its 1531 edition. The Latin text follows the translation of Saueremann with the Preface to the first Latin translation. In later official editions of the Lutheran Confessions (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* and *The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*) most of these omitted passages were reinstated.

3. MOTIVE AND PURPOSE

An immediate cause for editing a Catechism Luther found in the urgent need for catechetical material for the evangelical congregations to teach the basics of Christian Faith. Luther was rather depressed by the deplorable situation he encountered while visiting the congregations in Saxony. He refers to it in the Preface of the Small Catechism.

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. Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian

faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers (BC:347).

To provide in this need Luther kept the outline of his Catechism quite simple. Hence perhaps the division in five parts, easily to memorize by the five fingers on one's hand (WATR 6:222).

Besides children and newcomers Luther had also pastors in mind who had to preach on these subjects. This concerns both the Large and the Small Catechism. Although the Large Catechism's first aim was to present sermon material for the preachers, Luther's Preface also states as its aim the education of children and simple people in the Christian Faith (BC:348). The title of the Small Catechism is a bit ambiguous too: at one hand addressed to "gemeine Pfarrer und Prediger" (i.e. the unlearned preachers), but at the other hand intended for children as is apparent from the Latin translation: "*pro pueris instituendis*" (for children to teach).

The Small Catechism has two versions: a "lay version" with an alphabet, containing only the texts of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Our Father, the Baptism Command and the Words of Institution of the Lord's Supper, intended for the education at school or at home, and also a "pastor version", which consists of a very simple and brief explanation of the Catechism, in the same order followed by a part on Confession and Absolution, the Household prayers and the Household Chart. There may also be a shift in target group in the sense that Luther originally only meant to instruct children and newcomers, but soon found it also appropriate to have the Small Catechism to be used by the clergy for whom the Large Catechism was apparently too difficult (Wenz 1996:251).

Another important figure to be mentioned is the *housefather* who was already addressed in the broadsheet version of the Small Catechism but who is more emphatically mentioned in the printed version, namely in the preamble of the various components as the one who has to hand over the contents of the Catechism to the members of the household and has to take care that they will master its substance (BC:383). "Household" should not be narrowly interpreted, but includes the entire community of those living and working on the manor.

Although Luther refers here to the traditional rural patriarchy, wherein the housefather holds supreme authority and final responsibility for all the on-goings in the household, this idea of handing over the Christian tradition by means of the household besides the role of church and school could be considered "modern". The embedding of catechesis in the daily life of the household is a refreshing new thought (Stolt 2005:106).

Both Luther's Catechisms have to be seen from the same perspective and are – so to say – on one line. To clarify their mutual coherence the Small Catechism could be described as “textbook for students” and the Large Catechism as the “teacher's manual” (Slenczka 2005:23s.). However, it is wrong to regard the Small Catechism a summary of the Large or to consider the Large Catechism an extension of the Small, since each of them has its own import which also explains the different approach of various sections in both. It should furthermore not be forgotten that the Small and the Large Catechism have each their own fields of language and speech, best detected by reading the texts aloud.

For example, the exposition of the Law in relation to the Gospel is in the Large Catechism closely related to the position Luther is trying to take in the conflict between Agricola, who would prefer to abolish the Law and Melancthon, who wishes to maintain the Law as contrasting the Gospel (Wengert 2009:14-16, 121-122). This particular position in a theological debate is not demonstrable in the Small Catechism.

Another striking difference can be found in the explanation of the first commandment which in the Small Catechism is indicated as God's total claim on man's heart and soul, while the Large Catechism at this point starts with a very open attitude towards divinity and religion as a broad field wherein the true faith in the true God is sketched (Ebeling 1969).

For a last example of these differences can be referred to the stronger eschatological tone of the Large Catechism. This is evident from its explanation of various prayers of “Our Father” where the life of a Christian is penetratingly outlined as an existence that is in a severe degree beset by the devil. In these passages the bitter contests to which the believer is exposed in this life, has an important place (Seeger 1935). This aspect is virtually absent in the Small Catechism.

3.1 Confession and Absolution

A particular problem in the composition of the Catechism concerns the part about confession and Absolution. In the second edition of the Large Catechism Luther added an “Exhortation to Confession” based on his sermons during the Holy Week in 1529. In the Small Catechism, in which two versions on “Confession and Absolution” were circulating, the latter was at a certain moment replaced by a text on the “Office of the Keys and Confession”. Moreover that section was taken into the Catechism text either between the fifth chapter on Baptism (as chapter 4) and the Lord's Supper (as chapter 6) or as sixth chapter placed after that on the Lord's Supper.

The text about the “Office of the Keys” does not stem from Luther, but from the “Nürnbergger Kinderpredigten” (Sermons for Children) of Andreas Osiander in 1533. It stands there between the sermon on Baptism and the sermon on the Lord’s Supper as a sermon on the Office of the Keys which ends with a summary based on the text of the Small Catechism about Confession and Absolution. Later this passage from Osiander’s Children Sermons was considered to be a part of Luther’s Catechism itself.

Until now, nobody figured out how this process exactly ran (Aland 1954:21ss.; Peters 1994:V, 15-27; Reu 1904:passim). The precise wording of the section on the Office of the Keys and Confession varies in most editions of the Small Catechism as well as in other catechisms of the Lutheran Reformation.

The Book of Concord did not include the section on the “Office of the Keys”. The German text follows the section of the 1531 edition: “How simple people are to be taught to confess”, whereas the Latin text puts between the fourth and fifth part of the Catechism a text titled: *De Confessione, Quomodo simpliciores de ea eruendi sint* (On confession, how ordinary people are to be taught about it). The official German and English editions of the Lutheran confessional writings do not contain the section on the “Office of the Keys”, but include both versions of Luther’s Small Catechism on Confession. The text on “Office of the Keys and Confession” is however is to be found in most separate ecclesiastical editions of the Small Catechism. The hesitation to offer a liturgical form for Confession and Absolution has undoubtedly to do with a growing reluctance towards the confessional praxis in the Lutheran churches that can be established since the 18th Century.³

4. THE STRUCTURE OF THE CATECHISM

Comparing Luther’s Catechism with catechisms in use during the Middle Ages it strikes that Luther refrains from certain classical elements. He omits the treatment of the “Ave Maria” though it was included in his *Betbüchlein* of 1522. Obviously Luther pays no longer attention to the seven sacraments of the church, but highlights only those two of which the Bible gives evidence that they are instituted by Christ himself, namely Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

An explanation of the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer is since long a regular part of the catechetical instruction and is therefore also adopted by Luther. In the treatment of the Ten Commandments however Luther shows quite

3 E.g. Dutch editions of the Small Catechism consider the part on Confession and Absolution as completely optional (adiaforon) and they also skip the “Exhortation to Confession” in the translation of the Large Catechism (Zwanepol 2007:15ss.).

a different view. Originally the Decalogue has been used as a "Beichtspiegel": a mirror of conscience (confession guide), i.e. a list of commands and bans by which sins could be detected in order to be confessed to the priest. In a similar sense medieval catechetical instruction dealt with the Decalogue. Luther on the other hand attributes to the Ten Commandments an important role in the exposition of the contents of Christian Faith.

The order of the three main parts of the Catechism deserves much more scrutiny: Ten Commandments, Articles of Faith and Our Father. In the Middle Ages two tendencies of organizing these chapters could be observed, namely Faith → Prayer → Command and later: Prayer → Faith → Command. Luther crossed that order by the sequence: Command → Faith → Prayer. What is exactly behind this? How consciously did Luther make a choice here? This has raised much discussion among scholars (Peters 1990:I, 38ss.).

The debate mainly concentrates on the significance of the Ten Commandments, apparently mainly used by Luther as "Law" according to which human failure, i.e. sin and guilt can be demonstrated and consequently forgiven by the Gospel as set out in the Articles of Faith. That idea is the more plausible when we realize that Luther in a pre-form of his Catechism, the *Kurze Form* from 1520, explained that sequence with a metaphor derived from the medical world, namely that the Command indicates the sickness for which Faith is the medication, while Prayer shows from where this drug could be obtained (WA 7:204).

Does that mean that in his Catechism Luther deliberately chooses an irreversible order: first, the Law and then the Gospel?

Some scholars are indeed of such an opinion and deduce from the order in his Catechism that Luther in the discussion between Agricola and Melancthon on the meaning of the Law has chosen the side of the latter: the Law must not be abolished, but maintained since it is a necessary contrast to the Gospel. Other scholars, however, deny that Luther on purpose chose this order and even speak of a certain randomness in the way Luther presents the three main parts of his Catechism. What are we to say?

Luther's intent can hardly be called arbitrary. There is much evidence of a deliberate sequence: Command → Faith → Prayer. The remarkable passage by which Luther closes the part on the Commandments in the Small Catechism which enforces – so to say – a sequel into the next section (BC:354), is one the clues of Luther's deliberate intention to start with the Law and to continue with the Gospel. This however does not necessarily make the order Law-Gospel to an unchangeable iron rule. Such an order wherein you first have to undergo the condemnation of the Law before the forgiveness of the Gospel could reach you, is more a pietistic presupposition about the order of salvation which however does not correspond

with the complex way Luther is dealing with the relationship between Law and Gospel.

Started as a method to interpret Scripture the distinction between Law and Gospel soon became for Luther a basic rule of expressing that the Word of God is always on the move by taking us from the positions we already are but shouldn't be at, and by bringing us into a condition where God wants us to be. The dynamic way Luther treats Law and Gospel is turning many commonly acquired ideas about this distinction upside down. You cannot identify the Old Testament as Law nor the Gospel as the New Testament, nor can you equate Law with everything imperatively worded and anything concerning the Gospel as indicatively phrased. The effect of the Word of God as Law or Gospel fully depends on the situation where it will be spoken of. From this perspective the most rigid biblical regulation can in a given situation be liberating 'Gospel' whereas the most wonderful promise in the Bible can turn into relentless 'Law' (Ebeling 1970:110-124).

Incorrect is anyway the suggestion that the Command would give you a bad conscience, so that Faith can make you feel better and Prayer and Sacrament will give you peace. Luther did not want people to feel bad or guilty. Nor did he want to talk pious passivity into people's heads. Rather, his concern is about the *homo incurvatus in se* (a human being curving into oneself; WA 56:356) to be loosened from his or her egocentrism. To be freed from constantly being busy with him- or herself the sinner is to be erected before God who makes him bend over to his fellow creatures. 'Law and Gospel' is the outline of the movement in which this change takes place. For that reason, the Commandment in the Catechism is not just a severe demand, but also contains an element of promise that echoes in the refrain that is repeated at the beginning of each Commandment: namely "that we should fear and love God" (Beutel 1996).

That does not mean that the sequence-question is irrelevant and that it doesn't matter where you are starting with, as if Faith is just as good to begin with as the Command or the Prayer. All those who just love just to hear the Gospel in the Commandment will stumble over the remarkable combination of promise and threat by which Luther is winding up the part on the Decalogue while explaining the admonition of Ex.20:5-6 concerning the entire Decalogue:

God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore we are to fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments. However, God promises grace and every good thing to all those who

keep these commandments. Therefore we also are to love and trust him and gladly act according to his commands (BC:354).

For those who stick to the idea that it is all about "Evangel" in the Commandments this conclusion must sound like a dissonant noise into their ears, since it is precisely this threat that prevents the promise from reaching here the level of certitude of faith inherent to the Gospel. Therefore the part on the Commandments is structurally leading us to an ambiguity about being Law or Gospel which in the next part of the Catechism (the Creed) will be taken up again.

This is in no way saying that there is no question of a break. On the contrary. The caesura which is demonstrable in the Catechism and could be indicated in terms of "Law and Gospel", is however not so much in the transition from the section on the Commandments to the section on the Creed, but in the turn which is made *within* the section on Faith with the explanation of the second article of the Creed speaking about salvation in Jesus Christ. This shift can better be described as the transition from the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*) to the God who reveals Himself (*Deus revelatus*).

The turning point of the Catechism is thus found in what is said about Christ:

true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is my LORD. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true (BC:355)

This central role of the second article of Faith is not just our interpretation, but is in accordance with Luther's own vision on the centre of the Catechism (WA 30I:187), so that can be said that everything preceding runs to this centre and everything that follows is flowing from it.

In Christ God shows Himself as He really is and breaks through the ambiguous (promising or threatening) image that is pending about Him in the Commandments.

The article about Creation has insufficiently removed this ambiguity. Although in this article God exhibits His goodness in all material and spiritual contexts of life and for that reason deserves our gratitude for so many freely given goods, Luther's explanation is leaving the question unanswered of how

God's good fatherly hand can be reconciled with so much evil in the world; a problem which stays ominously hanging over the market.

In short, God's Commandment and God's Creation can still go in different directions: He apparently without obvious reason can take tomorrow away what He has given today. So, who is God: Friend or Foe? Who will tell it? A hidden God! Is this not – as Luther says in *The Bondage of the Will* – the God who does not care about us, a God hidden in his majesty “who neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. For there he has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things” (WA 18, 685)?

In other words, a God who is in such a sense hidden, that the identifiable traces of His goodness from His Commandment and Creation seem to be easily erased, when God “so tut als fragt Er nichts nach dir” (is acting as would He not be interested in us), as the poet Paul Gerhardt phrases it.⁴

This ambivalence however is broken through in the second article of Faith. Here we are brought from the darkness of a hidden God into the light of God who reveals Himself as the One who is without reservations devoted to mankind by looking after them in their despair and desolation and who Himself jumped in the abyss of human death and guilt. The means of this salvation is the total submission of the Son to us, not with ‘something’ of himself, but with the best of Himself, and to the utmost and therefore into death. This surrender is not limited to a private act between the divine Son and the divine Father with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, but a complete self-submission of the triune God (WA 26:505s.). Here we encounter the depth to be probed in the second article of Faith and here is the turning point of the Catechism.

Anything further to be said after this second article follows this movement from the hidden to the revealed God and acquires its own unique momentum from here.⁵ Such an impetus is apparent in the third article of Faith on sanctification, describing the power of the Holy Spirit who brings human beings to their belief in Christ and keeps them standing in it. The explanation of this third article ends up in a community – not of the in-crowd of those who already know so well – but a community of beggars, amidst a world that is not right at all, with lots of meaningless suffering, incomprehensible evil, tears in vain, unacceptable injustice, unbearable suppression, crying poverty and incredible cruelty. Such a community which nevertheless finds the courage to look forward to an eternal life that endures time and which doesn't give up

4 “Befiehl du deine Wege” (“Commit thy way to God”), *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* 361, 9.

5 In the elaboration of this point of view I owe much to Korsch 2000.

the dream of a 'whole' world. Such a community therefore commits itself for a peaceful and just existence for all creation with whom God has created me, as the Small Catechism explicitly says (BC:354).

This community of beggars manifests itself as a community of prayers, described in the explanation of "Our Father". Luther's interpretation of the Lord's Prayer makes it clear that to pray is not asking God for anything and everything, but calling on God to realize for us what is already reality for Himself. This also implies our request to be involved in this process of realization; a matter immediately related to a number of concrete cases from every day's life: daily bread, forgiveness of trespasses, avoiding temptation and deliverance from evil. Praying in this community brings people together as 'reciprocal questioning subjects' whose roles are not fixed. For when requested, you should be aware that one day you may be a questioner yourself and as questioner you might any moment yourself be asked for something. Such a view is more effective in bringing about solidarity among people than whatsoever high ambition or fiery dreamed utopia.

The final chapters of the Catechism on the sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist, establish the community of prayers as a community of recipients. That is where it is all about in the sacrament: not what we have to offer, but what is offered to us. *Baptism* by water awakens together with the Word of God in us a new man. Hence Baptism is principally infant baptism (BC:462-467), a "yes" that has already been expressed to us before we can say a word. *Eucharist*: bread and wine is on God's promise forgiveness of sins in the full presence of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Lord's Supper is not something for the happy few, but in several senses of the word an "all inclusive" event (BC:467-476). Since there are situations wherein God's mercy is so hard to believe, it would be wise when the church would also have a liturgy of Confession and Absolution at hand to proclaim God's forgiveness highly individually (*pro me*: "for me") to the contested conscience, for whom sin and anxiety has become an insurmountable obstacle (BC:360:-362; 476-480).

Is the story of the Catechism completed with the picture of this community of recipients, gathered around Word and Sacrament? Certainly not! You cannot take Luther's remark that you never learned sufficiently in the Catechism and that you will be its lifetime student seriously enough (BC:380). This does not just mean to repeat everything again and again, but that you literally need to make both ends meet and let the circle close itself.

So, the fifth chapter on the community of recipients is followed again by the first chapter on the community of doers, gathered around the Commandments and embedded in Creation. The latter of course appear from a different perspective on the stage than from the frustratingly ambivalent view of the hidden God. The true student of the Catechism will however not be surprised

that even in this way adjusted Command and redirected Creation will always be followed by a redemptive reversal and that the turn from the hidden God to the revealed God is taking place time and again.

5. OUTLOOK

To summarize, the main insight of this exploration of the structure of Luther's Catechism is that of the circular shape of the five chapters, whose direction is determined by the turn of the hidden God to the revealed God. This main line which is holding together the multiplicity of relationships between the various parts gives the Catechism a coherence wherein also deeper lying connections become apparent. All together they constitute a dynamics to be described as 'continuous feedback and a deeper penetration into the matter in question' (Peters 1990:I, 48).

Revealing this energetic power concealed in this structure is the more important since Luther's Catechism has largely lost its original dynamics by its improper use. The idea that Luther's Catechism is a sort of summary of the contents of Christian Faith (or even worse: as an abstract of the Scripture) that would reflect the correct way of salvation, has together with the suggestion that it would offer a doctrinal and confessional canon (Kolb 1979), have had a very sterilizing effect. This has much contributed to the marginal use of this Catechism in handing over the contents of Christian Faith. In the last century Luther's Catechism in catechetical instruction is almost completely ousted by material which claims to be based on the Bible or to be better didactically founded and to join in with the world of experience of the youth (Zwanepol 2009: 42-46). Though in the last decades examples of reintroducing Luther's Catechism as a useful instrument for catechesis and instruction on Christian Faith do not lack,⁶ it can in general be said that the latest generation of religious educators has lost sight of Luther's Catechism (Schobert 2006).

It is hard to say whether Luther's Catechism has still a chance to become an important medium in handing over the contents of Christian Faith. Certain is however that for playing a part in passing on the Christian tradition one should abandon the thought that the Catechism is a kind of short dogmatic or that it would present a distinctive description of Lutheranism. Such a function the Catechism has never meant to attain and is therefore not to play such a role again (Meding 2001:24ss.). Neither is the Catechism to be considered an excerpt from the Bible as it only wants to make clear what on adjacent points

6 One could refer to the American publication *Free to be*, that though orientated on the mindset of American adolescents in the nineties may still offer young people an appealing and inspiring access to the contents of Christian Faith in protestant perspective.

is set in motion when the Word of God is getting the opportunity to explain itself, unhampered by long ecclesial traditions and authorities.

Yet, to get an opportunity to be reused in transferring the Gospel of Christ uncovering of the energetic power of the Catechism is an undisputable prerequisite. The advantage of Luther's Catechism as a *life* book – and not so much a text book (Stolt 2005:103ss., 121) – will only show well in succeeding to pull Christian Faith deeply into life and conversely to immerse life in the fountain of Christian Faith (Slenczka 2005, 25ss.).

Luther's Catechism therefore has to be recaptured as a real *Vademecum* where you can continue delving deeper into and from which you never stop learning. It should permanently revert you to the points which till now evaded you and direct you to points you were not ready for.

By tracking its inner structure – instead of forcing a dogmatic or pedagogic scheme upon it – Luther's Catechism may reappear as *Enchiridion*, a manual that confines knowledge to a minimum and is considered only the first step to an unfolding understanding and is leading to an intensified experience of those who commit themselves to its guidance.

When its flexibility is brought into action Luther's Catechism is highly suitable for instruction on the Christian Faith at all levels, from an alpha course to an intellectual study circle. It will bring you to the roots of the Gospel as rediscovered from a Protestant point of view.

Those guided by the Catechism will undoubtedly experience that the tradition of Christian Faith is not only an individual matter, leaving everyone on its own in trying to appropriate its basic thoughts. The Catechism is mainly meant as a pilgrim's pathway on which young and old, beginners and more advanced meet each other, are dependent on each other and learn from each other.

The Catechism in its interesting interplay between the Large and the Small version is able to produce a meaningful operational map to be utilized in the (Protestant) faith community. Its aim could not be to safeguard the continuance of Protestantism, but to show present and future generations the innovative strength of this tradition. In this respect Luther's Catechism might still have a long way to go.

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