

ELS Catechism & Explanation, 2023

THE SMALL CATECHISM

BY DR. MARTIN LUTHER

As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household...

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean?

We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice witchcraft, lie or deceive by His name, but call upon Him in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

You shall keep the day of rest holy.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but regard it as sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not despise our parents and superiors, nor provoke them to anger, but honor, serve, obey, love and esteem them.

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not murder.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do no bodily harm to our neighbor, but help and befriend him in every need.

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not commit adultery.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in word and deed, and that husband and wife each love and honor the other.

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not steal.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, nor get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and means of making a living.

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not lie about, betray or slander our neighbor, but excuse him, speak well of him, and interpret everything in the best possible way.

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not craftily seek to get our neighbor's inheritance or home, nor get it by a show of right, but help and serve him in keeping it.

THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, workers, animals, or anything that is his.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God, so that we do not tempt, force or coax away from our neighbor his wife or his workers, but urge them to stay and fulfill their responsibility.

CONCLUSION

What does God say about these commandments?

I the Lord your God am a jealous God, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, and showing mercy to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

What does this mean?

God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore we should fear His wrath and not disobey these commandments. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore we should also love and trust in Him and willingly obey His commandments.

THE CREED

THE FIRST ARTICLE

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my ability to reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; that He richly and daily provides me with food and clothing, home and family, property and goods, and all that I need to support this body and life; that He protects me from all danger, guards and keeps me from all evil; and all this God does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all this it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

THE SECOND ARTICLE

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

What does this mean?

I believe that Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary; and that He is my Lord, Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won 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; in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; just as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

THE THIRD ARTICLE

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

What does this mean?

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives me and all believers all our sins; and at the last day He will raise up me and all the dead, and will give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

THE INTRODUCTION

Our Father, Who art in heaven.

What does this mean?

With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father, and that we are His true children, so that we may ask Him with all boldness and confidence, as children ask their dear father.

THE FIRST PETITION

Hallowed be Thy name.

What does this mean?

God's name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be holy among us also.

How is God's name hallowed?

God's name is kept holy when His Word is taught in its truth and purity, and we as the children of God live holy lives according to it. This grant us, dear Father in heaven! But he who teaches and lives contrary to the Word of God dishonors God's name among us. From this preserve us, heavenly Father!

THE SECOND PETITION

Thy Kingdom come.

What does this mean?

The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.

How does God's kingdom come?

The kingdom of God comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and live godly lives here in time and there in eternity.

THE THIRD PETITION

Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

What does this mean?

The good and gracious will of God is certainly done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done also among us.

How is God's will done?

God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh which would not let us hallow His name nor let His kingdom come, but God's will is done when He strengthens and keeps us steadfast in His Word and faith until our end. This is His good and gracious will.

THE FOURTH PETITION

Give us this day our daily bread.

What does this mean?

God certainly gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all the wicked; but we pray in this petition that He would lead us to acknowledge this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.

What is meant by daily bread?

Daily bread includes everything needed for this life, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, fields, cattle, money, goods, God-fearing spouse and children, faithful workers and rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, order, honor, true friends, good neighbors, and the like.

THE FIFTH PETITION

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

What does this mean?

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, or deny our prayer because of them; for we are not worthy of anything we ask, neither have we deserved it. But we pray that He would give us everything by grace, for we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment; and we on our part will forgive from the heart and willingly do good to those who sin against us.

THE SIXTH PETITION

And lead us not into temptation.

What does this mean?

God certainly tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world and our own flesh may not deceive us nor lead us into false belief, despair and other shameful sin and vice; and though we are tempted by them, that we may still in the end overcome and retain the victory.

THE SEVENTH PETITION

But deliver us from evil.

What does this mean?

We pray in this petition, as the sum of all, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor; and at last, when the hour of death shall come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.

THE CONCLUSION

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

What does "Amen" mean?

Amen means that we should be sure that these petitions are acceptable to our Father in heaven and are heard by Him; for He himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us. Amen, Amen: that is, Yes, Yes, it shall be so.

BAPTISM

THE NATURE OF BAPTISM

What is Baptism?

Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water used according to God's command and connected with His Word.

What is that Word and command of God concerning Baptism?

Jesus says: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you." Matthew 28:18-20.

THE BLESSINGS OF BAPTISM

What does Baptism give or profit?

Baptism delivers forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, just as the words and promises of God declare.

Which are these words and promises of God?

Christ our Lord says in Mark 16:16, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

THE POWER OF BAPTISM

How can water do such great things?

It is not the water that does these things, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simply water, and no baptism; but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit.

Where is this written?

St. Paul says in Titus 3:5-8, "According to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; that having been justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying."

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

What does such baptizing with water mean?

Such baptizing with water means that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires; and that a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written?

St. Paul writes in Romans 6:4: "We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that just as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

THE OFFICE OF THE KEYS AND CONFESSION¹

What is the Office of the Keys?

The Office of the Keys is the special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth: to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to retain the sins of the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

Where is this written?

The evangelist writes, in John 20:22-23: "Jesus breathed on His disciples and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

What do you believe according to these words?

I believe that when the called servants of Christ deal with us by His divine command, specifically, when they exclude public, unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation, and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to amend their ways, this is just as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ our dear Lord has done it Himself.

What is Confession?

Confession consists of two parts: one, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor or confessor as from God himself, and in no way doubt, but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should acknowledge ourselves guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know about, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the pastor or confessor we should acknowledge those sins only which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Here consider your own situation according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, employer, employee; whether you have been disobedient, dishonest, lazy; whether you have injured anyone by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected, wasted anything, or done any harm.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

THE NATURE OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

The Sacrament of the Altar is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself, for us Christians to eat and to drink.

Where is this written?

The holy evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke, together with St. Paul, write: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, 'Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way also He took the cup after supper, gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you; this cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'"

THE BENEFIT OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

What benefit do we receive from such eating and drinking?

¹ While the 1529 edition of Luther's Small Catechism did not include the Office of the Keys and Confession, it appears in subsequent editions shortly thereafter.

The benefit which we receive from such eating and drinking is shown us by these words: "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," namely, that forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us in the Sacrament through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

THE POWER OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?

It is not the eating and drinking that does this, but the words here written: "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." These words, along with the eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament: Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: the forgiveness of sins.

THE PROPER RECEPTION OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

Who then receives this Sacrament worthily?

While fasting and bodily preparations are fine outward training, whoever has faith in these words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," is truly worthy and well prepared. But whoever does not believe these words, or doubts them, is unworthy and unprepared because the words "for you" require only believing hearts.