

LIVING OUT THE SMALL CATECHISM

Most of us think of the Small Catechism as something to be memorized that teaches us how to understand life with God and other people. And it is that. But what if we put a more active spin on the catechism? What if we looked to it to inspire concrete actions we might take, thereby expressing its wisdom in positive deeds, not just words? That's what we will explore here. (If you don't have a Small Catechism handy, it is included in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 1160–67, or it can be ordered from augsburgfortress.org.)

The Small Catechism has six chief parts:

- The Ten Commandments
- The Apostles' Creed
- The Lord's Prayer
- Holy Baptism
- Confession
- Holy Communion, or the Sacrament of the Altar

Of those, the last three are in a different category, more purely gifts of God and perhaps less adaptable to being spun out in deeds of service. So we will focus on the first three. Where might each of those lead us? Please keep in mind that this isn't meant to be an exhaustive list but rather something to seed your own imagination.

The Ten Commandments

Commandments tell us what to do, or more often what not to do. Luther's commentary opens up these narrow strictures and leads us toward ideas for positive action.

1. You shall have no other gods.
Explore other faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism. Doing so need not threaten our own Christian beliefs, but will help strengthen understanding of their perspectives on God, create partnerships, and reduce harmful stereotypes. Read about them in a resource such as *Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith* (Augsburg Fortress), invite speakers from or about other traditions, visit their places of worship.
2. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.
Get creative about prayer! One ELCA pastor has sat in a coffee shop with a FREE PRAYER sign. Let people know you are willing to pray for their concerns. Start a prayer ministry in your

congregation. Work to make the intercessory prayers in your worship more tailored to your assembly, more eloquent.

3. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.
In many places, a struggle for parents of children and youth is athletics that schedule games and matches on Sunday mornings. If this is the case where you live, consider joining with other area churches to lobby for fewer (or better, no) games before noon on Sundays.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
Many church buildings are underused on weekdays. Even if you don't have a daily preschool program, your building can be a gift to parents in many ways. Perhaps you could have a staffed nursery near a Wi-Fi-equipped room where parents can work, or an arrangement for child care while single parents get away for shopping, appointments, or recreation. Check about local requirements for staffing and insurance.
5. You shall not murder.
Who are the most vulnerable in your city or town, and how can you support them? Some ideas would include donating to or volunteering at a shelter for battered women, providing gym space for at-risk youth in afternoons and evenings, participating in a program that provides meals for seniors, tutoring recent immigrants.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
Our society's unrealistic views on marriage often mean that once the wedding is over, young couples struggle to establish sustainable relationships. Brainstorm how your congregation might help: support groups, topics and discussions, mentors, people to call when problems arise.
7. You shall not steal.
The poorest among us are often most vulnerable to predatory lending practices such as payday loans. Using the enticements of readily available cash, victims are immersed ever more deeply in debt. Study the issue and find out how you can help influence legislators crack down on the practice.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
The saying goes "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." Often the reverse is also true: people and groups get an undeserved bad rap. This can be countered on an individual basis by speaking up when you hear slander, or through a congregation coming to the aid of a population denigrated because of race, ethnic or religious identity, or economic class.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
When it comes to property care, homeowners or renters can get overwhelmed when visited by illness, injury, or the frailty of old age. How can you be of assistance? Cleaning, painting, lawn care, and simple maintenance are examples of helpful activities that can be taken on by youth or adult groups or individuals.

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The book of Acts tells us that the early church held everything in common. That may not be practical these days, but what about a decentralized “lending library” of tools? Whether it's cooking, home maintenance, lawn and garden—each area has specialized tools that aren't needed very often. Consider creating an online listing of items that people would be willing to loan out within the congregation.

The Apostles' Creed

This ancient confession of who we understand God to be is divided into three parts, or articles, each highlighting a different aspect of God's work on our behalf. And each can suggest different sorts of learnings and activities.

- **First Article—God the Father—On Creation**
Organize or take part in activities to clean up your local environment, such as picking up trash along nearby waterways. Are there organizations working to reclaim good food that restaurants and stores no longer want? If so, get involved! If not, how can you help start such a project? Watch for signs that vulnerable neighbors need help getting proper health care—a ride to the doctor, even maybe staying with them during the appointment, can be life-saving.
- **Second Article—Jesus Christ—On Redemption**
Once we leave the worship space at church and move into the adult forum classroom, we may often encounter topics such as recycling or the latest fiction, but more rarely learning experiences around redemption or salvation. Don't forget to provide opportunities for interested people (from within or without) to find out more about Christ's work. David Lose's *Making Sense of the Cross* (Augsburg Fortress) is one among many good resources.
- **Third Article—the Holy Spirit—On Being Made Holy**
The Holy Spirit gathers, but we are welcome to lend a hand. Take the pulse of your neighborhood—what sorts of social events might appeal to that population? What might they fear from coming to a church? How can you help them to overcome those fears? The object is not to trick people, simply to welcome them.

The Lord's Prayer

This most beloved of prayers gathers many concerns that are central to our life as Christians, and so its petitions and Luther's explanations of them provide another outline for ways we can be of service to others.

- **Introduction: Our Father in heaven.**
Children need a safe place where they can “ask boldly.” We hope they have that with their parent or parents, but how wonderful if they also have such trusting relationships with pastors and members at church. Think of one or two children in your congregation—how can you (with appropriate boundaries) foster such a relationship?
1. **Hallowed be your name.**
Old-timers may remember Jim Croce's song “I've Got a Name.” God knows each baptized child (however old) by name. A “My Name Project” could help lift up the name and identity

of children and adults. On index cards, put the name, its meaning if known, and why they received that name. The cards could be incorporated into a festival of baptismal remembrance.

2. Your kingdom come.

The concept of the kingdom of God is a deep and broad one, good fodder for a Bible study. It has picked up varying nuances in different times. And it was a key concept for Martin Luther. Because of that, it would be worthwhile to turn to this same petition in the Large Catechism (*Book of Concord*, p. 446). Less than two pages long, this is well worth reading and discussing.

3. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Here is a subject for study and for action: What is God's will in today's world? Think about "hot button" issues like immigration, welfare, abortion, child wellness, equal justice, and many more. Study what the Bible says, particularly the New Testament. Then—you are the church! Make your voices heard.

4. Give us today our daily bread.

Luther's extensive list of what "daily bread" includes is good for us to remember as we work and pray. But a good start would be to go with the obvious meaning and help the organization Bread for the World. Go to bread.org and look under "Get Involved." Or, for a Lutheran option, consider Lutheran World Relief (lwr.org).

5. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Forgiveness is hard for everyone. It's important that the church, and the Christians who form it, lead the way, and forgive both on an individual and on a larger level. What groups are "the enemy" these days? How can we live out forgiveness toward them?

6. Save us from the time of trial.

Trials and testings come in many forms, but in this time and place, few are as threatening as the forces of consumerism. Powerful voices and images tell us that what we really need is to accumulate more *stuff*. Yet a witness to a simpler life can be very attractive too. Clothing drives, soup suppers, community-oriented recreation—all these can speak eloquently.

7. And deliver us from evil.

Evil can erupt from any corner of society, and while we ultimately look to God for protection, we can also be God's hands in this regard. While we must not blindly vilify any group (for instance, neither people of color nor the police), we can speak up in favor of equal protections and uphold those who conscientiously work to protect.

• Conclusion: For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

As we consider service projects—"works" that we may do—we remember that as beneficial as those may be, finally it is God's grace that is our source of all good things.