

We are broken

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



In 1526 the reformers embarked on a program of visiting the parishes in Electoral Saxony. It's known as the Saxon Visitation. As would later be stated in the Augsburg Confession, its objective was to determine if "the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly."

Martin Luther himself visited the parishes in and around Wittenberg. He wasn't pleased. He found that many clergy didn't receive adequate compensation, and that the gospel was not clearly taught or understood.

Luther, in his inimitable subtle style, wrote: "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. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result, they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom." Yikes!

Luther's experience led to the publication of his Small Catechism, a "Handbook for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers." In clear and concise language, he explained the basics of the Christian faith so that all people, not just educated professionals, could understand the great gift of the gospel and live it in daily life.

Theologian Timothy Wengert points out that Luther rearranged the typical order of medieval catechisms to make clear the evangelical understanding that the good news means law and gospel, judgment and promise. Luther "insisted on moving from law (Ten Commandments) to gospel (Creed and Lord's Prayer)."

This uniquely Lutheran understanding of the gospel is an important contribution to the Christian movement. It calls out the reality of the human condition, that we are broken and have broken creation, that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves, that we need a just and loving God who has no illusions about human nature and, at the same time, has infinite love that claims us and sets us free.

This is true evangelicalism that rejects what I call the "Billy Joel gospel" that declares: "I like you just the way you are." God's love is unconditional, but God does not like us just the way we are—that's why we have Jesus.

I am concerned that our branch of the Lutheran movement can become watered down to the point of Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—a concept developed by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their 2005 study of common beliefs of American youth. To paraphrase very roughly the results of their study: God exists, God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, the central goal in life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, God does not need to be particularly in one's life except when God is needed to solve a problem, and good people go to heaven when they die.

In this philosophy, there is no awe in the presence of the Transcendent, no turning outward from self, no horror of the reality and the effects of sin—and not in the narrow sense of individual moral failings—no wonder at the intimate love of God shown in the incarnation and the crucifixion, no deep gratitude for the liberation of the resurrection.

In 2017, I called this church to study Luther's Small Catechism. I think we did for a while. I ask that we all study it again, use it in Bible study and preaching, refer to it when navigating the demands of daily life, incorporate it in our work of justice and advocacy, use it in honest self-examination, and trust its witness to the gospel when we receive the Lord's consolation. Luther said he needed to study it every day—and he wrote it! Let's us do the same. 