

THE HAMMER OF GOD AS CATECHESIS

Over fifty years ago, Bo Giertz wrote a little essay under the title, “What is an Evangelical Lutheran Christian?” He begins that essay by noting that just as the man who cannot distinguish between a cow and a horse ought to avoid discussions of farming, so those who think that the differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics have to do with such external matters as making the sign of the cross, ought refrain discussing matters that pertain to Christianity. Then Giertz goes on to comment “The deciding factor is something entirely different. It is justification by faith. He alone is an evangelical Christian who possesses the secret of faith in his heart, so that he believes in the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ’s atonement and through faith is united with his Savior. That faith is found only where God through His Spirit and Word teaches us the poverty of the spirit and daily leads us to the cross of Christ. Evangelical Christianity stands or falls through faith. When men live in God’s justification, then all of life, both worship and daily living falls into a specific pattern.”¹ That pattern, I would like to suggest, is laid out for us in the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther.

In 1520, Luther observed that “There are three things that everyone must know to be saved. First, he must know what we are to do and leave undone. Then, as he discovers that it is impossible for him to accomplish either with his own strength, he must know where to seek and find the power that will enable him to do his duty. And, in the third place, he must know where to seek and obtain that aid.”² This three-pronged approach would shape Luther’s preparation of the Small Catechism.

Luther’s Small Catechism has been characterized as a road map to the Scriptures, a survival kit for Christians, a whetstone for the church. It is all of these and more. The Small Catechism provides Lutherans with a particular orientation toward life, a worldview, if you will. It is this catechetical worldview that has given shape to *The Hammer of God* (all citations from *The Hammer of God* are taken from the revised edition published by Augsburg Books in 2005. Page numbers are noted in the text of the paper) and in turn this very Lutheran novel has great potential as a tool for catechesis in the classroom as well as catechetical preaching. In varying degrees all six chief parts of the Catechism come to expression in *The Hammer of God*. In this paper, I propose to examine several key themes from the Small Catechism as they are illustrated by Bo Giertz.

What C.F. Walther does in a systematic and propositional fashion in his classic book *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, Giertz does in the form of a novel. *The Hammer of God* demonstrates how God’s law and gospel function. I have no evidence that Giertz was familiar with Walther’s book, yet there is a remarkable parallelism between the two as the work of both men draws upon classical Lutheran categories. In particular, Walther and Giertz following Luther and the Formula of Concord, see the

¹ Bo Giertz, *The Message of the Church in a Time of Crisis and Other Essays*. Translated by Clifford Ansgar Nelson (Rockland: Augustana Book Concern, 1953), 14.

² Quoted by James Nestingen in “The Lord’s Prayer in Luther’s Catechism” *Word and World* XXII (Winter 2002), 38.

right distinction of the law from the gospel as a necessity for the consolation of terrified consciences. In particular, the words of the Formula determine the theological aim of both Walther and Giertz: “The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God’s Word properly (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15) and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law.”³

Luther re-orders the traditional configuration of the catechism so that the law embodied in the Decalogue comes first for it is through the law that sin is exposed and condemned. The law is relentlessly at work in the world whether it is recognized or not. This is what Werner Elert calls nomological existence—life under the demands of divine law that both curbs and kills.⁴ Human beings may deny the reality of the law but they cannot escape its potency. The God who stands behind the first commandment crushes every adamic assumption about deity. Giertz illustrates this early on in the novel with the Pastor Savonius’ frustration at his inability to comfort dying Johannes. “Savonius’ brain worked desperately. The man was certainly out of his head; his hand was very hot. Still, one could sense a certain logic in the wanderings of his mind. The curate knew that sinners could repent and be absolved, but he had scarcely thought that it could take place except in the obligatory absolution of adulteresses in the sacristy. But it was evident that this man had long ago experienced sorrow for his sins, which for that matter did not seem to be so great. Why in the world did he, then, doubt the grace of God? Savonius could very well understand that one could doubt such things as the miracles and the sacraments, Adam, the fall into sin, and hell. But grace – nothing could be more obvious than that. Must not all who believe in the most high God also acknowledge His goodness? Could not even Voltaire be quoted in support of this? But how could he get this strange man to believe it?” (17). Savonius belongs to that era when theologians had forgotten how to pray through the Catechism, to use Edmund Schlink description of the age of classical liberalism.

Every attempt that Savonius made to convince Johannes that he had nothing to fear failed. Pious talk about the goodness of God does not bring an end to the law’s accusation. Luther’s explanation of the first commandment as requiring the fear, love and trust in God above all things leaves no room for anything less. Savonius’ assurance that Johannes is “a better and a more upright soul than anyone I have ever met” (18) brings no resolution to Johannes’ fright in the face of death.

³ *The Book of Concord*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 581.

⁴ See Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*. Translated by Carl Schindler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 49-76 and *The Structure of Lutheranism*. Translated by Walter Hansen (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 17-58.

“It was a false, misleading dream that God his Law had given that sinners could themselves redeem and by their works gain heaven. The Law is but a mirror bright to bring the inbred sin to light that lurks within our nature” (*Lutheran Worship*, 355) says Paul Speratus’ great Reformation hymn as it echoes Luther’s teaching. Giertz shows a young pastor unable to get beyond the Law—the Law that the young cleric thought that he had domesticated with his enlightened view of God’s goodness. Yet the Law cannot be so easily tamed. It accuses and it will not be silenced save for the blood of Jesus Christ who suffered under the Law to redeem us from its curse.

So here in this first novella, Giertz provides a catechetical episode in the right distinction between the Law and Gospel showing himself to be a skilled craftsman in this highest Christian art. Throughout the remainder of the novel, Giertz returns to this theme. When a confident, young Friddefelt boasts that he has given his heart to Jesus, the Rector calmly reminds him that faith is not a matter of anything to Jesus. Rather Jesus is the Lord who rescues a rusty tin can from the junk pile and claims it as a prized possession. Thus the Rector tutors the young curate: “And now you must understand that these two ways of believing are like two different religions, they have nothing to do with each other.”⁵ Here Giertz echoes Luther in a table talk of 1542 or 1543: “I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the Law and of the Gospel, I lacked nothing before this except that I made no distinction between Law and Gospel. I regarded both as the same thing and held that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except the times and their degrees of perfection. But when I discovered the distinction—namely, that the Law is one thing and the Gospel another—then I was found in breaking-through.”⁶

The chapter “A Heart of Stone and a Rock of Salvation” is especially helpful in highlighting the right use of the Law and the Gospel by those in the pastoral office. Early on, Pastor Torvik confuses the preaching of the Law with the condemnation of specific sins. Law preaching does not aim to reprimand the hearer for certain pet sins but to expose the sin that is the root of all sins...namely the failure to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

The law does not merely scold, cajole, or challenge...it kills. It closes every door that the sinner would attempt to use as a way of escape! The only result that the law can bring is death. The law cannot change the sinner. In fact, if it does not find its *telos* in Christ, it will lead either to despair or pride. Such a mishandling of the law in preaching will lead to what Luther calls a “Turk’s faith” in a sermon on Galatians 3:23-34 preached on January 1, 1532. In this sermon, Luther says “For that reason their faith is, to say the best, purely and simply a Turk’s faith which stands solely upon the bare letter of the Law and on outward acts of doing or not doing, such as ‘You shall not kill’ and ‘You shall not steal.’ They take the view that the Law is satisfied if a man does not use his fist for homicide, does not steal anyone’s property, and the like. In short, they believe that sort of external piety is a righteousness that prevails before God. But such doctrine and faith are

⁵ Also see Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*- Volume I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 10.

⁶ *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986) 54:442. Hereafter LW.

false and wrong, even though the works performed are themselves good and have been commanded by God.”⁷

Here recall the words of Mother Lotta to Pr. Torvik: “I think you can blame yourself, Pastor. If one whips the flock of God with the scourge of the law instead of guiding it to the springs of living water, everything will eventually go wrong. No one can endure unlimited lashings” (237).

When the law is not preached in such a way as to kill, it will be received in such a manner as to lead the hearer to conclude that it is doable. Again note the sage advice of Mother Lotta to the young pastor: “...it won’t do to offer Moses a forty percent agreement and expect him to be satisfied with our becoming absolutely pure and loving and honest, as you are always talking about. It will be nothing but patchwork. It will not result in a whole and acceptable righteousness, as the heart will surely attest, and it will certainly not do as the basis for salvation. Those outward sins which can pluck away as one rids the padding of a sofa of vermin, one by one, are by no means the worst. And that is true also of those sins thought that you can take hold of as you would a bug and show the Lord, and say, ‘Here it is.’ But the corruption of our nature, Pastor, the sinful depravity, that remains where it is, and I should like to see, Pastor, how you would turn that over to God” (281-282).

Throughout the novel, one hears echoes of Luther on the necessity of distinguishing the Law that kills from the Gospel that vivifies. Luther lectures on Galatians in 1531 makes uses of the biblical imagery of Jeremiah 23:29 to expound this distinction—the image that Giertz enlists as his title—*The Hammer of God*. Luther writes “Therefore the proper and absolute use of the Law is to terrify with lightning (as on Mt. Sinai), thunder, and the blare of the trumpet, with a thunderbolt to burn and crush that brute which is called the presumption of righteousness. Hence God says through Jeremiah (23:29): ‘My Word is a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces.’ For as long the presumption of righteousness remains in a man, there remain immense pride, self-trust, smugness, hate of God, contempt of grace and mercy, ignorance of the promises and of Christ. The preaching of free grace and the forgiveness of sins does not enter his heart and understanding, because that huge rock and solid wall, namely, the presumption of righteousness by which the heart itself is surrounded, prevents this from happening. Therefore this presumption of righteousness is a huge and horrible monster. To break and crush it, God needs a large and powerful hammer, that is, the Law, which is the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the lightning of divine wrath. To what purpose? To attack the presumption of righteousness, which is a rebellious, stubborn, and stiff-necked beast... Then the Law is being employed in its proper use and for its proper purpose. Then the heart is crushed to the point of despair. The use and office of the Law is felt by terrified and desperate consciences.”⁸ Again Luther in the 1532 sermon: “For the Law has its terminus, defining how far it is to go and what it is achieve, namely, to terrify the impenitent with the wrath and displeasure of God and drive them to Christ. Likewise the Gospel has its unique

⁷ Cited in John T. Pless, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 116.

⁸ LW 26:310

office and function: to preach the forgiveness of sins to troubled consciences. Let the doctrine then not be falsified, either by mingling these two into one, or by mistaking the one for the other.”⁹

Giertz shows the Law doing its proper work, so that ultimately the Gospel might be heard for the voice of consolation that it indeed is. The Gospel is the news of reconciliation wrought by Christ Jesus on the cross. *The Hammer of God* serves to catechize readers in this Gospel confessed in the Second Article of the Creed. The Gospel is that preaching which delivers Christ with all His gifts; it is all about Him as He carries the verbs of our salvation. Giertz persistently exposes all that would diminish the Gospel. There is the rationalism of Savonius that we have already noted who had sacrificed the biblical Gospel for the principles of a rationalism religion of moral precept. Then there is Fridfelt, zealous to prove his own piety and chattering so much about himself and the heart that he has given to Jesus that Jesus is eclipsed by his religiosity. The old rector’s words sting his ears: “One ought not talk about oneself, it may hide Jesus from view” (151). Giertz makes Jesus manifest as “true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary.” He is the Lord, who has redeemed lost and condemned humanity not with gold or silver but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

Fridfelt would learn to preach Christ as he is confronted by the futility of self-focused spirituality at the bedside of the dying Frans. He returns to the church just in time to conduct the Transfiguration Day service, unprepared to preach. Reaching for a sermon of Henric Schartau is rescued as he reads “It is a blessed thing when the faithful soul in prayer fixes his uplifted eyes of faith on Jesus only; when he does not look about him to lay hold on his own scattered thoughts, nor behind him at Satan who threatens him with the thought that his prayer is in vain, nor within in him at his sloth and lack of devotion; but looks up to Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God and makes intercession for us” (172).

Clearly Giertz is taking aim at theological trends that would diminish Christ Jesus, making Him something other than the Savior that He is. When Torvik comes to the congregation freshly minted with the historical-critical approach to the Holy Scriptures and a “history of religions” view of Christian doctrine, he is frustrated and disappointed that parishioners had little confidence in a funeral sermon that “presented the modern exegetical view of ‘the legend’ concerning the virgin birth” (201). Then there were those old fashion believers who want to hear what their pastor confessed of Christ: “It was evident that they wanted to feel his pulse, and to discover what thoughts he had about the Atonement and about the believer’s freedom from the law. What did he know about such things? They were not satisfied with a few pious phrases; they wanted factual answers. And they knew their Bibles. After a few embarrassing defeats, he had stopped arguing with them. He had memorized very few Bible verses himself. He had always been taught that this constant use of proof texts was a mistaken theological method. It was important,

⁹ Pless, 117. On the terminus of the Law, also see Steven Paulson, “Law and Gospel: Two Preaching Offices” *Dialog* 39 (Fall 2000), 169-177 and James Nestingen, “Distinguishing Law and Gospel: A Functional View” 22 *Concordia Journal* (January 1996), 27-34.

rather, to analyze every matter in accordance with the gospel. What irritated him was that he was never able to show why the spirit of the gospel insisted on just that answer to a question which he was accustomed to give. The others could always point to the letter of the Scripture, and that always made an impression” (203-204).

Pitting the Word against the Spirit, Christ against the Scripture was twentieth-century liberalism’s version of sixteenth century enthusiasm. The preaching of a brother pastor, Bengtsson calls Torvik to repentance and faith: “Outside Jerusalem, there is a hill of yellow, naked stone, ugly and hard as a dead man’s skull. Long ago men bored a socket in this rocky hill and planted a cross there, and on that cross they hanged the only one of our race who was righteous and had perfectly fulfilled the law. God permitted this to happen because, although he had tolerated sin in former ages, he wanted once and for all to show that he was righteous and that sin is followed by condemnation and punishment, and that he will not countenance any tampering with his standards of holiness. But so wonderful is God that he let all the curse and penalty of sin fall upon the Innocent One, who freely gave of himself in death for us. He was made a curse for our sakes. Thus he redeemed us from the condemnation of the law. He was made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God. He bore our sins in his own body on the tree, and by his stripes we are healed” (267-268).

The whole of *The Hammer of God* is a fine exposition of Christian freedom, the freedom confessed at the heart of Luther’s explanation of the Second article that is the outcome of the work of a Lord who has redeemed, purchased and won lost and condemned creatures that they might be His own. This freedom is demonstrated in the Dean’s words to his daughter, Hedvig to wear her mother’s jewelry with a good conscience: “You must learn to trust him so completely, Hedvig, that you will dare to wear your mother’s brooch again... You must so fully trust in Jesus that you may know that your salvation depends on him alone” (58). The Christian’s birthright of freedom granted in Christ’s atonement surfaces again in the second novella, as Fridfelt is bold to take up the drinking of coffee .

Christ atonement is the Christian’s security. The title of the final chapter, “In the Place of Sinners” bears the imprint of Luther’s confession of Jesus in his explanation of the Second Article: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, 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, that I may be His own and 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 certainty of Christ’s atonement is reflected in Britta Torvik. Giertz writes “Britta Torvik was, since childhood, brought up in a traditional firm and faithful Lutheranism. She had learned to live in the light of Christ’s substitutionary suffering. She knew that the whole course of history revolved around a great sacrifice, which God had chosen to be able to satisfy and atone and avoid condemning all the sins that so often sinks the fates of man and the decrees of history into dark night. Thus she never saw only night, but always the light behind it” (317). So in the face of war’s destructiveness and the uncertainty of the

future, Britta takes comfort in the cross: “Her sense of security was a deeper thing. She understood nothing of politics – and she was not quite convinced that her husband and the other arguing parish leaders understood anything either – but she had a deep and unquestioning trust in God that was proven in the school of prayer. She felt how God lived and was present everywhere, how his rule entwined itself round the most trivial things in the kitchen and the nursery, and in her heart she was certain that it was no different in the puzzling business of the big world. She took it almost as a consolation from God himself that he allowed the great snowfall to happen on this black Wednesday and that he allowed this wonderful sun shine when every hour was full of suffering, because one knew that the poor people now were packing their belongings and leaving their homes over there in Karelia. It was as if God wanted to say: Yes, my children, that’s how evil you have made the world, but now I am spreading the whole cover of the Atonement over the dirt and the bloodspots – as I spread the white clothing of Christ’s righteousness over you all in baptism, as I clothe the sinner with the same righteousness, if he believes, and one hour on your deathbed shall spread the white burial clothe of the Atonement over your poor heart if you fall asleep believing in the merit of Jesus” (317).

The redemption accomplished on Calvary is bestowed by the Spirit in Gospel and sacraments. In the above-cited passage, we observe how Britta confesses baptism as the place where the blood-bought righteousness of Christ is bestowed. The achievement of our salvation is done by Christ as is its delivery. Through the instrumentality of the oral word of preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, the fruits of Christ’s passion are distributed. Sermon and sacrament are *extra nos*, giving certainty because they are of Christ and not from the internality of the believer. Luther’s description of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Large Catechism shapes the novel: “Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and accomplished; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his suffering, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have all been in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed in which he has given us this treasure, this redemption. Therefore being made holy is nothing else than bringing us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, to which we could not have come by ourselves.”¹⁰

This theme from the Large Catechism is aptly illustrated at numerous points in *The Hammer of God*. We see it in the opening chapter as Katrina speaks gospel words that quiet the tormented soul of the dying Johannes. It is only through the external Word that sinners are given access to Jesus. So Bengtsson preaches: “Only *one* way leads from that stony foundation to the Rock of Atonement, a firm stone bridge built once and for all. It is the Word. Just as only the divine Word can convict man of sin and lay bare the soul to its rocky base, so nothing but the Word can reveal the truth about the Redeemer. The external Word is as inescapably necessary for the gospel as it is for the law. No one who is awakened in earnest would ever be able to believe in the forgiveness of his sins, if God had not built a bridge leading to the Rock of Atonement. The supports on which it rests

¹⁰ Kolb/Wengert, 436

are baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution; the arches are wrought by the holy Word with its message of redemption. On that bridge a sinner can pass from the stony ground that condemns to the Rock of Salvation. But should a single one of the arches be allowed to fall, then is man condemned to remain eternally under the law's condemnation, either as a despairing sinner or a self-righteous Pharisee?" Here Giertz is demonstrating the evangelical necessity of the means of grace through the lens of the theology of the cross.

When the pastors in this novel fail to recognize the treasure that the sacraments are, it is the laity who confess the Lord's gifts, reminding the clerics of Christ's promises. Savonius is in turmoil after his rather inept visit to dying Johannes. Taking leave of the peasant carriage driver, Pastor Savonius expresses his regret that he could not have been of more help to Johannes. Peter replies, "Pastor, have you not brought him Christ's body and blood? Have you not exercised the blessed authority of the keys, which comes from God? Can a man do more?" (34). When Pastor Fridfelt is on the verge of denying baptism, it is a clear-sighted layman who declines his invitation to the conventicle saying "You must not take it ill, Pastor...but I would consider it wrong against God if I should put my baptism in question. I accept God's Word and sacraments with reverence, but I pass no judgment upon them" (176). Mother Lotta admonishes the young Pastor Torvik for his careless stewardship of the Lord's table in admitting an unbaptized woman to come to the altar (see pp.240-241). That ordinary laymen and laywomen are able to speak God's Word with such clarity is a reminder of the strength of the Catechism as the "layman's Bible" to borrow words from the Formula of Concord. Laity catechized in the Small Catechism are able to confess the faith even in times when their pastors falter.

The sacraments are not rituals of human performance. Instituted by the word of Christ Jesus, they deliver what they promise. Sinners are not left alone in condemnation but are given the consolation of the forgiveness of sins in audible and tangible form. The truth of Christ Jesus and His salvation is found nowhere else but in His words and sacraments. Here we see Giertz mount a polemic against every form of enthusiasm whether it is the unbridled zeal of the revivalists or its more refined genre represented in Schenstedt who placed personal convictions over the Scriptures.

In contrast to such enthusiasms, Torvik confesses a concrete faith that is bound to the incarnate Lord, crucified and raised from the dead: "Today it has become clear to me that the Christian faith is a sacred heritage, which must be faithfully preserved, if it is not to be dissipated. There is only *one* Savior. He has lived *once* here on earth; he has spoken certain definite words that can never be changed or recalled, and he has accomplished saving works, whose validity endures to the end of time. As long as the world lasts, all Christianity is bound to this Jesus Christ. Just as no one could be a disciple of Jesus during his lifetime only by agreeing with this or that word which he spoke, or by acknowledging the principle of love or something else which one selects from his teaching, so it is no more possible for anyone to be Christian today by holding to an abbreviated, reinterpreted, or modernized gospel. In those days a man was a disciple by following just this Jesus of Nazareth, hearing him, obeying, believing, and accepting him. Today one becomes a disciple by being united with this same Jesus of Nazareth, being baptized to him, nurtured by him in his church, and receiving his gifts. These gifts are the

same today as then. The same words reach us through the Bible, the same feast is celebrated in the Lord's Supper, the same forgiveness is pronounced in the absolution. The conditions of discipleship are the same, salvation is the same. Once and for all, the faith that embraces all this has been delivered to the church. And this is the holy and unchangeable faith for which the Word here bids us contend" (270-271). Luther's catechetical, "This is most certainly true" rings loud and clear.

Baptism becomes the test case as to whether the Gospel is understood completely as the gift of God's favor in Christ. Fridfelt's struggle over infant baptism, sparked by the rebaptism of his friend from university days, Conrad provides a marvelous catechetical illustration of the dynamic of baptism as God's work. Riding high on the crest of the revival, Fridfelt receives an exuberant letter from his old friend, recounting how he was "baptized with the true baptism according to the will of Jesus and the testimony of Scripture"(156). Conrad tells of his spiritual conflict, his lack of peace and the misery that he had experienced prior to his obedient surrender to what he perceived as the will of the Lord. Now all of that was a fading memory as he lived the victorious life. So Fridfelt wonders, if perhaps this letter is a sign from God, a convicting epistle from the Holy Spirit Himself. Tortured by the slump in the revival, Fridfelt questioned the reliability of his own baptism: "Had not God let him along the same path as Conrad? During the revival in March he had some fellowship with the Baptists. He had found them to be strict and earnest Christians. The place and significance of baptism had therefore become a burning question for him also. He had felt for some time that the baptism of infants had no real significance for the Christian life. Making too much of baptism served only to make nominal Christians more entrenched in their false security. After all, everything hinged on conversion. But it had never occurred to him that a true conversion would also include a new baptism. In searching the Scriptures, he could not now help noting the role which baptism played in the first Christian church. Could he then be satisfied any longer with a baptism which in his own eyes had never meant anything?" (162).

Fridfelt's doubts concerning baptism were coming to a head and would have to be resolved. But resolution would have to be postponed as Fridfelt is called to the bedside of a dying old man, Frans, known for his soft-spoken but mature Christian insights. Now in the throes of death, Frans speaks as though he were still a soldier, barking out orders and swearing oaths, arguing with his mates and inviting his fellows to drink. Lena, Frans' daughter, is ashamed of her father and disturbed by his impious language. She reports to Pastor Fridfelt: "When I got here...I said 'You are thinking about Jesus, are you not, Father?' And he answered me, 'I am not able to, Lena, I can't think any longer. But I know that Jesus is thinking of me'" (165).

In this little episode, certainly one of the most evangelically potent in the whole book, Giertz, illustrates the *simul iustus et peccator*. There is no confidence in the flesh, even the flesh of the pious. Fridfelt is stunned: "...was it really anything other than hypocrisy? Here he was supposed to bring comfort, and he himself was chockfull of sin as this dying old man. The only difference was that he was still in possession of his full senses, and in the interest of his good reputation must cover up tightly all the uncleanness within. As for

the poor old man, his lid had fallen off, and everything lay bare. But for God, to be sure, everything was always naked to his eyes” (167).

Now in the midst of all of this, there is a crying baby in the room, yelling “despotically at the top of his lungs” (167). The death rattle of the old man and the bawling of the infant, are too much for Fridfelt. He takes the baby outside to lessen the commotion. “He was thoroughly provoked at this stubborn and selfish little creature, who though not a year old still showed much of the same self-will and stubborn desire to command attention as its elders. Surely, human nature from cradle to the grave was bent on having its own way, trying to dominate others and makes its own will supreme....Such a screaming, self-willed bundle, filled to the brim with selfish obstinacy, could it be saved? Why, it could not believe at all. But the evil nature was there, the same evil nature that was active in the old man to the very last” (168-169). This incident would prove crucial in resolving Fridfelt’s doubts about baptism. Here Fridfelt begins to see that “if one starts from the premise and defense of freedom of the will one will end in bondage” to use a phrase from Gerhard Forde.¹¹

Fridfelt now goes to the prayer meeting where baptism was to be discussed. His skepticism regarding baptism melted away and Fridfelt spoke of the inborn sin that children bring with them into the world. He raises the question of whether a little child may be saved and if so on what grounds. Fridfelt confesses baptismal regeneration as God’s work. New-born infants and dying old men may not have a mental consciousness of Christ, but this does not mean that they lack faith. This section of *The Hammer of God* bears the firm imprint of Luther’s teaching on baptism in both the Small and Large Catechism. Baptism is not a human work that commends us to God. It is God’s own gracious work of giving new birth by His Word comprehended in the water. No more than can a person decide to be born can he decide to be born again. Baptism provides certainty precisely because it is the gracious work of the Triune God. Fridfelt’s apologetic for infant baptism parallels Luther’s argument in the Large Catechism that “my faith does not make baptism; rather it receives baptism.”¹² Like Luther, Giertz accents the consolation that baptism brings because it delivers Jesus to the oppressed conscience. “No greater jewel” Luther writes “...can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for thorough it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.”¹³ Fridfelt’s confession of baptism in the presence of his Baptist-leaning friends surely bears the imprint of the Small Catechism’s confession of the blessings of Baptism: “It works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare”

The place of absolution and the Lord’s Supper are skillfully and unobtrusively woven into the fabric of *The Hammer of God*. Giertz focuses the reader’s attention of the character of the Lord’s Supper as gift, as Christ’s testament of the forgiveness of sins.

¹¹ Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 44

¹² Kolb/Wengert, 463

¹³ Ibid., 462

Christ is faithful to His promises as over the years, these “moth-eaten saints with moldy breath” (Franzmann) come to the altar to receive forgiveness and strength in the Lord’s body and blood. So Giertz gives readers a view into the soul of the old Dean as he administers the sacrament to the congregation: “He thanked God for every confessional service, opening anew the portals of repentance and forgiveness for the people of his parish and reaching some stained soul with the words of absolution. He thanked God for the church itself, standing like a fortress in the village, a mighty storehouse of heavenly treasure, where Sunday after Sunday he could stand and pour out heavenly seed, even as the sexton with his scoop dispensed grain at the parish storehouse and filled the bags of the poor. In quiet joy he returned to the altar rail to serve the next table of communicants” (85).

In the final chapter, Torvik is overcome with awe as he speaks the *verba Christi* and stands before the mystery of the atonement, Christ’s body and blood given sinners to eat and to drink. Surrounded by memories of sin and suffering, death and the destruction of war, Pastor Torvik is broken: “In the midst of all failure and brokenness he was kneeling, himself a sinner among sinners. But above, on the altar, where he did not dare to look, shone the light around the chalice, the Atoning Mystery was present, the Lord, the Innocent One, was dead in the place of sinners, he was risen to live as Savior – and this Sacrifice was the center of life and the beating heart of the universe” (328).

James Nestingen observes that “for Luther, the Lord’s Prayer is a continuing lesson in the theology of the cross.”¹⁴ In the theology of the cross, God is the subject not the object. He kills and makes alive. Nestingen continues “The Ten Commandments set out the requirements of the creaturely life, incumbent by creation; the Creed declares the gifts of the Triune God; the Lord’s Prayer gives voice to the circumstances of the believer living in the world of *nomos* (law) in the hope of the Gospel.”¹⁵ This description of the cruciform shape of the Lord’s Prayer coincides with the portrayal of the Christian life, the life of prayer, under the cross in *The Hammer of God*.

The boldness and confidence of prayer that dares call God “our Father” is exhibited in the elderly grandmother’s prayer for Schenstedt, her grandson. She speaks of her grandson to Pastor Torvik: “I am afraid that God must hammer a long time at his heart, before he accepts the truth again. But I’m not letting go of God’s hand, I will not leave in peace, not even for a moment. I am displaying all his promises and holding him to all the commitments that he himself has made. Ever since that difficult day before Christmas my heart has been at his feet. And I am not taking it back until he hears me” (313). No doubt that Giertz had Luther’s comments on the Canaanite woman in mind (Matthew 15:21-28). Luther said of the Canaanite woman that she threw a whole sack of God’s promises at the feet of Jesus and He would not step over them. In the face of reversals and disappointment, even confronted with what seems to be the silence of God Himself, faith clings to Christ’s promises trusting that the way to life eternal does “not go above cruel reality but straight through blood and anguish” (285) as Torvik ponders. So Giertz continues to weave Romans 8 into the narrative of the final chapter showing that faith

¹⁴ James Nestingen, “The Lord’s Prayer in Luther’s Catechism”, 37

¹⁵ Ibid., 39

learns how to speak to the Father in crucible of suffering. Giertz writes “The very suffering became a gate of Heaven, and the cross, that instrument of torture, became a sign of victory and the spring of mercy...Maybe life was such in the final account when it was at its deepest and most creative level of blessing. Once baptized into Christ and joined to his life as a member of his body, one had been consecrated to suffer and die with him – into victory and resurrection” (313).

No doubt, all of the petitions of the our Father along with their explanations in the Catechism come to expression in *The Hammer of God*, but especially prominent are the first three petitions that have to do with the hallowing of God’s name by teaching God’s Word in its truth and purity, the coming of God’s kingdom as the Father gives His Spirit so that we believe His holy Word, and the doing of His will as God breaks and hinders “every evil counsel and will which will not let us hallow God’s name nor let His kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh” so that we are strengthened and preserved steadfast in His Word and faith.

If the aim of Lutheran catechesis is repentance, faith and holy living then Bo Giertz has provided us with a book that echoes the Small Catechism. The rhythm of the Catechism as it moves from Law to Gospel, tutoring us in the life of faith and love, giving us the words to confess God’s gifts in baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, and prompting us to live in the freedom of faith is apparent in *The Hammer of God*. Giertz has enlivened the teaching of the Catechism in the characters of his novel in such a way as to enrich and enliven both its teaching and learning. The early twentieth century Bavarian Lutheran bishop, Ludwig Ihmels described the Catechism as not only a book of doctrine but also as a life book¹⁶. *The Hammer of God* has few direct references to the Catechism but it demonstrates how the teachings of the Small Catechism do indeed give shape to life, a life that is hidden with Christ in God.

John T. Pless
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¹⁶ Cited in J. M. Reu, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (Chicago: Wartburg Press, 1929), 366