

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

You Already Are

*Why a Confessional Lutheran Church Should Not Use Answers in
Genesis VBS*

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Every Answers in Genesis VBS starter kit comes with a small, full-color booklet. Its title is a question: *How Can I Become a Child of God?* The publisher recommends one for every child who attends. It has been in the 2024, 2025, and 2026 kits, and there is no reason to think it will be missing from the 2027 kit when committees start ordering this winter.

Now picture where that booklet lands in a confessional Lutheran congregation. It goes into the hands of a seven-year-old who was carried to the font as an infant. Water was poured on her head with the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The pastor said she had been born again. Her parents and sponsors promised to bring her up in that faith. And on Wednesday morning of VBS week, a volunteer hands her twenty small pages that ask, as though nothing has happened yet, whether she wants to be part of God's family.

The Lutheran answer to the booklet's question is three words long: *You already are*. This essay is about why a church that believes that answer should not hand its children a curriculum built to give a different one.

What This Is Not About

This is not an argument against six-day creation. Most confessional Lutherans believe God made the heavens and the earth in six ordinary days, that Adam was a real man formed from the dust, and that the flood covered the earth. Luther read Genesis that way, and so do I. If your congregation has appreciated Answers in Genesis because it takes the first eleven chapters of the Bible seriously, you are right to value that.

It is also not an argument that Ken Ham and his colleagues are not Christians. They confess the Trinity, the virgin birth, the atoning death of Christ, and his bodily resurrection. Their own statement of faith says the science of creation is secondary to the proclamation of the gospel. Those are brothers in Christ, and they have done real work defending the text of Scripture against people who would rather it said something else.

The question here is narrower and more practical. Vacation Bible School is catechesis. For a week each summer, it is the most concentrated teaching many of our children receive outside of the Divine Service, and for some visiting children it is the only teaching they will ever receive in our building. Whoever writes the curriculum is, for that week, teaching in our name. The question is whether Answers in Genesis teaches what we confess. On the points that matter most for a child, it does not.

A Question Already Answered

The booklet walks children through what Answers in Genesis calls the Seven C's: Creation, Corruption, Catastrophe, Confusion, Christ, Cross, and Consummation. As a sweep of redemptive history, there is much to admire in that outline. But by the publisher's own description, every page leads to one question at the end: *Do you want to be part of God's family?*

That question assumes the child is not yet in God's family and that her answer is what will put her there. This is not an accident of a children's tract. It is exactly what Answers in Genesis confesses. Its statement of faith describes the one who is born of God as someone who *has repented, recognized the death of Christ as full payment for sin, and received the risen Christ as Savior*. The new birth is defined entirely by things the sinner has done. The document runs to dozens of articles, covering the length of the creation days, the extent of the flood, and the definition of marriage. It does not mention Baptism or the Lord's Supper once.

That silence is the whole problem. Scripture does not leave the new birth floating free of water. Jesus says that unless a person is *born of water and spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). Paul says God saved us *through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit* (Titus 3:5), and that *all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ* (Galatians 3:27). Peter says plainly that baptism *now saves you* (1 Peter 3:21), and that the promise is *for you and your children* (Acts 2:39).

The Small Catechism teaches our children the same thing in words they memorize: Baptism *brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare*. The Augsburg Confession teaches that children should be baptized and that through Baptism they are received into God's grace (AC IX).

So the baptized child in our VBS is not a prospect. She is a daughter of God, already clothed with Christ, who needs to be taught what she has been given and called back to it daily in repentance and faith. A booklet that asks her whether she wants to join God's family teaches her, at the most basic level, that her Baptism did not do what God promised it did. It teaches her to look for assurance in a moment of her own choosing rather than in a promise God spoke over her with her name attached.

This matters most for the tender consciences. Some children will answer the booklet's question at age seven, again at nine, and again at twelve, because they are never quite sure the first answer took. That is not a hypothetical. It is the anxious bench, scaled down to a child's size. Our confession has a better word for that child: *You are baptized*. Not *you decided*, but *you are baptized*, and Christ does not take back what he gave.

To be fair, the booklet will also reach unbaptized children from the neighborhood, and the church should want them to hear about Christ. But the Lutheran answer for them is not a decision either. It is to hear the gospel, be taught, and be brought to the font, where God himself makes them his own. A curriculum that cannot say that sentence cannot do our evangelism for us.

Answers or the Word

Answers in Genesis describes itself as an apologetics ministry, and it markets its VBS the same way: apologetics built into every day, so children know *why* they believe what the Bible says. Behind that is a diagnosis Ken Ham has made for years, most fully in his book *Already Gone*. Young people leave the church, the argument goes, because their doubts were never answered. Somewhere in middle school they decided the Bible could not be trusted on dinosaurs and fossils, and nobody gave them a reason to think otherwise. The cure, then, is answers.

There is a grain of truth in that. Children should know that the Bible is not a book of fables, and a pastor or teacher should be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). Lutherans have no quarrel with evidence or with honest questions.

But the Lutheran Confessions locate faith somewhere else entirely. The explanation of the Third Article, which our children memorize, says: *I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel. The Augsburg Confession says God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments, and that through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills (AC V). Paul says faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ (Romans 10:17).*

Faith is not the conclusion of a sound argument. It is created by the Holy Spirit through the Word and the sacraments. A child who believes because the evidence for a global flood convinced her has a faith exactly as strong as the next argument she hears. She will meet a cleverer professor someday. A child who believes because God baptized her, because Christ's absolution was spoken to her, and because the Word was preached into her ears has something no professor can take away, because it never rested on her reasoning in the first place.

So the Lutheran diagnosis of why children leave is different, too. They do not leave chiefly because they lacked answers. They leave because they were never taught what they had been given, and because the Christianity they learned was a set of positions to defend rather than a Christ who comes to them in his means. A curriculum that treats the problem as an information gap will tend to train children in the wrong place. It teaches them to look to the strength of the case rather than the strength of the promise.

Psalm 23, Read Two Ways

The 2026 program, *Emerald Crossing*, is a good test case because its text is one every Lutheran child should know by heart. The publisher describes the week as helping children cross from anxiety to peace, from fear to faith, and from uncertainty to a firm

foundation in God's Word, *through a relationship with the Good Shepherd*. The theme reveals promised answers to questions like whether the Bible is a trustworthy guide and why we have hard times.

Nothing in that is false. But notice where the Shepherd is found. He is found in a relationship, in a feeling of peace replacing a feeling of anxiety, and in a firmer confidence that the Bible is reliable. The movement is inward, from one state of the child's heart to a better one.

Now listen to the psalm itself. *He takes me to lush pastures, he leads me to refreshing water* (Psalm 23:2). *You prepare a feast before me in plain sight of my enemies. You refresh my head with oil; my cup is completely full* (23:5). The early church heard water, anointing, a table, and a cup, and did not think those were accidents. Cyril of Jerusalem, lecturing the newly baptized in the fourth century, pointed them to this psalm to explain what had just happened to them at the font and what they now received at the altar. Christians have prayed it at the bedsides of the dying ever since, for the same reason.

Read that way, Psalm 23 is not mainly about how a child feels. It is about where the Shepherd has promised to be. He is at the font, where he led her to still water and made her his own. He is at the table, where he spreads a feast in front of her enemies, sin and death and the devil, and fills her cup. He is in the house of the Lord, where she will dwell forever. When she is anxious, and she will be, the answer is not to manufacture a better feeling or a stronger argument. The answer is to go where the Shepherd is: back to her Baptism, back to the preached Word, and in time to the Lord's Table.

Answers in Genesis cannot teach the psalm that way, not because its writers are careless, but because their confession has no place for it. A confession that can describe salvation, the new birth, and the church without once mentioning Baptism or the Supper will read the still water and the overflowing cup as pleasant pictures. Lutherans read them as promises. A week of VBS will teach one reading or the other.

“We'll Just Skip Those Parts”

The most common response to all of this is practical. The crafts are wonderful, the music is catchy, the decorations come ready-made, and the volunteers already know the format. Why not buy the kit, leave the booklet in the box, and have the pastor look over the lessons?

There are three problems with that.

First, VBS is an integrated system. The daily lesson, the memory verse, the closing assembly, the take-home journal, and the follow-up materials are written to arrive at the same place. Remove the booklet and the invitation is still built into the lessons the volunteers teach. The volunteers, who are faithful people giving up a week of their summer,

will teach what is printed in front of them. That is what a teacher's guide is for. Asking them to translate a decision-shaped gospel into a Lutheran one on the fly, in front of twenty six-year-olds, is asking more than any curriculum should require.

Second, once the theology is removed, what is left is not neutral. A program that never mentions Baptism, never speaks absolution, and never points to the Lord's Supper is not teaching an incomplete Lutheranism. It is teaching children that those things are not where the action is. Silence catechizes, too.

Third, the money and the endorsement matter. A congregation that buys the kit, hangs the banners, and plays the music in the sanctuary is commending the publisher to its families. Some of those families will go to the website, order the books, and visit the Ark Encounter. They will be catechized there in a confession that is not ours, with our recommendation attached.

“Then What Do We Use?”

This is the harder question, and it deserves an honest answer. The Lutheran options on the market are fewer and often less polished. Some congregations will find a Lutheran publisher's program they can use well. Others will decide that a simpler week, built around the Small Catechism, a handful of Bible narratives, the church's hymns, and a visit to the font where the children were baptized, is worth more than a professional theme with a weaker confession.

That is not a step down. Children are not harmed by fewer decorations. They are harmed by being taught to look for God in the wrong place. A week where every lesson ends at the cross and the font, where children sing hymns they will still know at eighty, and where the pastor stands in front of them and tells them *you are baptized*, is better VBS than anything that arrives in a box with a theme song.

You Already Are

The 2027 Answers in Genesis program is titled *Spy U*, and its promise is that children will learn to uncover counterfeits and discover the one true God. That is a worthy goal. Children do need to learn to tell the true God from the false ones, and the true gospel from its imitations.

The test for any gospel is where it sends the troubled conscience. One sends the child inward, to ask whether she has repented enough, recognized enough, received enough. The other sends her outward, to a promise God made her with water and his name, to a word of forgiveness spoken by Christ's called servant, and to a table where the Shepherd feeds her with his own body and blood. Only the second can bear the weight of a child's doubt, because only the second does not depend on the child.

Answers in Genesis has defended the first chapters of the Bible faithfully. But a confessional Lutheran congregation does not need help telling its children that God made the world. It needs to tell them what God did for them in the water, and keep telling them until they are old. On that point, the booklet in the box asks the wrong question.

The right answer is still three words long. *You already are.*

Sources

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- Scripture quotations from the NET Bible

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