

DISPENSATIONALISM & AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

Week Five

The Sacramental Vacuum

What Happens When the Means of Grace Disappear?

Student Handout · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Session Overview

Over the past four weeks, we have traced dispensationalism's history, hermeneutic, eschatology, and soteriology. This week we arrive at what may be the most practically consequential result of the entire system: the sacramental vacuum. When dispensational theology's low ecclesiology ("the Church is a parenthesis") combines with revivalism's decision theology ("faith is a human choice"), the result is a Christianity stripped of the very means through which Christ has promised to be present with His people. Baptism becomes a testimony. The Lord's Supper becomes a memorial. The Church becomes optional. And the Christian is left alone with a subjective inner experience that has no anchor outside the self.

Session Goals

- 1: Understand how dispensational ecclesiology produces a low view of the sacraments
- 2: Examine the evangelical understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and see where it departs from Scripture and the Confessions
- 3: Present the Lutheran confessional theology of the sacraments as the biblical and pastoral antidote
- 4: Show how the sacraments provide what decision theology cannot: objective assurance anchored outside the self

I. The Ecclesiological Root: Why the Church Doesn't Matter Much

To understand why the sacraments have been emptied of their content in American evangelicalism, we need to return to a point from Week 1: Darby's doctrine of the Church. In the dispensational system, the Church is a *parenthesis*—a temporary arrangement inserted into God's prophetic timetable because Israel rejected the Messiah. The Church is not the fulfillment of God's promises. It is an interruption. God's real program is with national Israel, and once the Church is raptured, that program will resume.

If the Church is a parenthesis, it cannot be the body of Christ in any ultimate sense. It cannot be the place where God's promises are delivered and received. It is a waiting room—a holding pattern until the real action resumes. This has enormous downstream consequences for the sacraments.

If the Church is temporary, its rites are temporary. Baptism and the Lord's Supper become human acts within a provisional institution, not divine acts through which the eternal God delivers eternal gifts.

If the Church is invisible, its marks are invisible. Many evangelicals hold a doctrine of the “invisible church”—the true church is not any visible institution with its sacraments and ministry but the spiritual fellowship of all true believers known only to God. This makes the visible church and its visible sacraments secondary at best, optional at worst.

If the Church is a human gathering, the sacraments are human acts. In a low ecclesiology, the church is essentially a voluntary association of believers who come together for encouragement and teaching. It is not the divinely instituted body through which Christ distributes His gifts. If the church is a human organization, then Baptism is a human ceremony and the Supper is a human memorial.

II. Baptism Emptied: From God’s Act to Your Testimony

The evangelical understanding of Baptism is, for confessional Lutherans, perhaps the most painful departure from Scripture. In the vast majority of American evangelical churches, Baptism is understood as follows:

Baptism is an ordinance, not a sacrament. The word “ordinance” is deliberately chosen to avoid the word “sacrament,” which implies that God does something in the act. An ordinance is something the believer does in obedience to Christ’s command—a human act of compliance, not a divine act of grace.

Baptism is a public testimony of faith already present. You get baptized to tell the world that you have already been saved. Baptism does not create faith, deliver forgiveness, or unite you with Christ. It publicly declares what has already happened inside you through your decision.

Baptism is for believers only. Since Baptism is a testimony of a decision already made, infants cannot be baptized. They have not decided. They cannot testify. Infant Baptism is dismissed as a meaningless ritual or, worse, as a dangerous practice that gives false assurance to people who have not truly “accepted Christ.”

Baptism does not save. This is stated as a point of pride. “We don’t believe in baptismal regeneration.” The phrase “baptismal regeneration” is used as a term of reproach—a marker of theological error that separates enlightened evangelicals from superstitious Catholics and confused Lutherans.

What Scripture Actually Says

The New Testament’s teaching on Baptism is strikingly different from the evangelical summary above. Consider the following passages:

Acts 2:38 — “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Peter does not say

“be baptized as a testimony of forgiveness you have already received.” He says be baptized *for the forgiveness* of your sins.

Acts 22:16 — “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Baptism washes away sins. This is not metaphorical language appended to a merely symbolic act.

Romans 6:3–4 — “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in newness of life.” Baptism unites us with Christ’s death and resurrection. Paul does not say we are united with Christ through our decision and then symbolize that union in Baptism.

Galatians 3:27 — “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” To be baptized into Christ is to be clothed with Christ.

Titus 3:5 — “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” The “washing of regeneration” is Baptism. It regenerates. The term “baptismal regeneration” is not a Lutheran invention—it is Paul’s own language.

1 Peter 3:21 — “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Peter says Baptism saves. The evangelical position must explain this away. The Lutheran position simply believes it.

What the Small Catechism Confesses

“Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word. It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”

— Small Catechism, Part Four

Luther’s catechetical formulation is a masterpiece of clarity. Baptism is not plain water—it is water combined with the Word of God. It is not a human act—it is God’s act. It does not merely symbolize—it works forgiveness, rescues from death, and gives eternal salvation. And the ground of this confidence is not the water itself but the Word and promise of God attached to the water.

III. The Lord’s Supper Emptied: From Christ’s Gift to Our Memorial

The same pattern that emptied Baptism has emptied the Lord’s Supper. In most American evangelical churches, the Supper is understood as follows:

The Supper is a memorial. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Evangelicals read “remembrance” as a purely mental act of recollection. The bread and wine (usually grape juice) are symbols that help us remember what Jesus did on the cross. Christ is not present in, with, or under the elements. He is present in the believer’s heart through faith—but not in the bread and cup.

The Supper is an occasional observance, not a central act. Many evangelical churches celebrate Communion monthly, quarterly, or even less frequently. The sermon is the center of the service. The Supper is appended when the schedule permits. In some churches, it is actively minimized to avoid making visitors uncomfortable.

The Supper is a human act of obedience. Like Baptism, the Supper is an ordinance—something we do in response to Christ’s command, not something Christ does for us through physical means. The focus is on the believer’s attitude (reverence, self-examination, gratitude) rather than on Christ’s action (giving His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins).

What Scripture Actually Says

Matthew 26:26–28 — “Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Jesus says “this is my body” and “this is my blood.” He does not say “this represents my body” or “this symbolizes my blood.”

1 Corinthians 10:16 — “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” Paul’s word is *koinonia*—communion, participation, sharing. The bread is a participation in Christ’s body. The cup is a participation in Christ’s blood. This is not the language of memorial. It is the language of real presence.

1 Corinthians 11:27–29 — “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord... For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” If the bread is merely a symbol, how can eating it unworthily make you “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord”? Paul’s warning only makes sense if Christ’s body and blood are truly present.

What the Small Catechism Confesses

“It 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, Luke, and St. Paul write: Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me.”

— Small Catechism, Part Five

Luther’s question “What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?” receives the answer: “Forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words.” The Supper is not our act of remembering Christ. It is Christ’s act of giving Himself to us—body, blood, forgiveness, life, and salvation—through bread and wine.

IV. The Invisible Church and the Visible Means

Underlying the evangelical evacuation of the sacraments is a particular doctrine of the Church: the “invisible church.” In this view, the true Church is the spiritual fellowship of all genuine believers, known only to God. The visible church—the congregation with its pastor, its font, its altar, its liturgy—is a helpful but ultimately secondary human institution.

The Lutheran Confessions take a different approach. The Augsburg Confession, Article VII, defines the Church as “the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” Notice: the Church is defined by its marks—the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. These marks are visible, external, tangible. You can hear the Gospel. You can see the water of Baptism. You can taste the bread and wine of the Supper. The Church is not an invisible, ethereal reality. It is a concrete community gathered around concrete means.

This matters because if the Church is invisible, the means of grace are optional. You can be a “real Christian” without being baptized, without communing, without belonging to a congregation, without hearing the preached Word. Your faith is a private, interior possession. But if the Church is defined by its marks—Word and Sacrament—then the means of grace are not optional extras. They are where the Church is. To absent yourself from Word and Sacrament is not merely to miss a meeting. It is to remove yourself from the place where Christ has promised to be.

V. The Pastoral Cost: What the Vacuum Looks Like

The sacramental vacuum is not a merely theoretical problem. It shapes the lived experience of millions of American Christians in concrete, painful ways.

Assurance has no anchor. We covered this in Week 4, but it bears repeating. When Baptism is merely a testimony and the Supper is merely a memorial, the Christian has no objective, external ground for assurance. Assurance rests entirely on the subjective inner experience of having “accepted Christ.” On good days, this feels sufficient. On bad days—in seasons of doubt, suffering, depression, or spiritual dryness—it collapses. The pastor of a sacramental vacuum has nothing to offer the doubting Christian except “try harder to believe.” The Lutheran pastor can say: “You are baptized. Christ’s body and blood were given to you last Sunday. You are forgiven.”

Worship becomes entertainment. When the sacraments are removed from the center of worship, something must fill the space. In most evangelical churches, that something is music and preaching. The “worship experience” is evaluated by its emotional impact: Did the music move me? Did the sermon inspire me? Did I feel close to God? Worship becomes a performance to be consumed rather than a divine service in which God serves His people through Word and Sacrament.

Church-shopping becomes normal. If the church is a voluntary association rather than the body of Christ gathered around the means of grace, then choosing a church is like choosing a gym—you go where the programs suit your preferences, and you switch when something better comes along. The idea that you are committed to a specific congregation because that is where your Baptism, your Communion, your pastoral care, and your community of mutual confession are located—this is foreign to the evangelical paradigm.

The faith of children is neglected. If Baptism doesn’t do anything and the Supper is for adults who can properly discern, then children occupy a theological no-man’s land. They are not yet full participants in the faith because they have not yet “made a decision.” Many evangelical churches have robust children’s programs, but the underlying theology treats children as pre-Christians rather than as baptized members of Christ’s body.

VI. Side-by-Side: The Sacraments in Two Traditions

American Evangelical Position	Lutheran Confessional Position
Baptism is a human act of obedience / testimony	Baptism is God’s act that delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation
Baptism does not save; “baptismal regeneration” is an error	Baptism saves (1 Pet. 3:21); “washing of regeneration” is Paul’s own term (Titus 3:5)

Only believers may be baptized; infants are excluded	Infants are proper recipients; Baptism creates the faith it requires
The Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ's death	The Lord's Supper is Christ's true body and blood given for forgiveness
"This represents my body"	"This is my body" (Matt. 26:26)
The Supper is an occasional, optional observance	The Supper is the center of the Divine Service, offered frequently
The Church is the invisible fellowship of all true believers	The Church is the assembly where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments administered (AC VII)
Assurance rests on the sincerity of your decision	Assurance rests on God's objective promise in Baptism, Supper, and Absolution

VII. Discussion Questions

1. If someone says "Baptism is just a symbol," how would you respond using the passages we examined today? Which text do you find most persuasive?
2. Why do you think the Lord's Supper has moved from the center of Christian worship to an occasional appendage in many American churches? What is lost when this happens?
3. How does the doctrine of the "invisible church" undermine the importance of belonging to a specific congregation? What would you say to someone who says "I don't need to go to church to be a Christian"?
4. In what ways have you experienced the sacramental vacuum—either in your own background or in conversations with friends from evangelical churches? What did it look like?
5. How would you explain the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper to someone who has only ever known the "memorial" view? What is the most important thing to communicate?

Looking Ahead to Week 6

Next week is our final session. We put everything together with practical apologetics—equipping you for real conversations with real people. What do you say when your Baptist neighbor asks if you've been "saved"? When a coworker brings up the rapture? When

someone questions infant Baptism? We'll develop concrete, charitable, confessional Lutheran responses for the situations you actually encounter.

Recommended Resources

For the Instructor:

Luther's Large Catechism, Parts Four and Five (Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar). Luther's most extended treatments of the sacraments, written for pastors and teachers. Rich, pastoral, and polemically sharp.

Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Concordia Publishing House, 1959). The definitive historical and theological treatment of the Real Presence controversy.

Augsburg Confession, Articles VII (The Church), IX (Baptism), X (The Lord's Supper), and XIII (The Use of the Sacraments). The confessional baseline.

For the Class:

Read the Small Catechism, Parts Four and Five, slowly and carefully. Luther's questions and answers are designed for exactly the kind of conversation you will have with evangelical friends and neighbors.

Read Acts 2:38–42. Note Peter's connection between repentance, Baptism, forgiveness, and the ongoing life of the community (the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer). How does this picture compare with the evangelical model?