

DISPENSATIONALISM & AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

Week Six

Practical Apologetics

Equipped for the Conversations You'll Actually Have

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Session Overview

For five weeks we have built a comprehensive understanding of dispensationalism and American evangelicalism: its history, its hermeneutic, its eschatology, its soteriology, and its sacramental consequences. This final session puts all of that knowledge to work. We're not adding new doctrinal content today. We're practicing—taking what we've learned and applying it to the conversations you will actually have with friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors.

The goal is not to win arguments. It is to confess clearly, speak charitably, and point people toward the richness of what we have in the Lutheran confession—especially the means of grace, which are the antidote to everything the sacramental vacuum has taken away.

Session Goals

- 1:** Practice responding to the most common questions and challenges Lutherans face from evangelical friends and neighbors
- 2:** Learn to listen for the theological assumption behind the question, not just the surface words
- 3:** Develop responses that are charitable, clear, and grounded in Scripture and the Confessions
- 4:** Walk away equipped to confess the faith in everyday life—not just in a classroom

I. Three Principles Before We Start

1. Listen for the Assumption, Not Just the Question

Every question from an evangelical neighbor has a theological assumption behind it. “Are you saved?” assumes that salvation is a past-tense event tied to a decision. “Why do you baptize babies?” assumes that Baptism requires a prior act of the human will. “Do you believe in the rapture?” assumes that the rapture is a settled biblical doctrine. The most helpful response begins by gently surfacing the assumption before offering the Lutheran alternative.

2. Lead with What You Believe, Not What You Reject

It is always more effective—and more charitable—to state your own confession positively rather than beginning with a critique. Instead of “Lutherans don’t believe in the rapture,” try: “Lutherans confess that Christ will return once, visibly, in glory, to judge the living

and the dead—and that He comes to us now every Sunday in Word and Sacrament.” The positive confession is more compelling and less combative than the negation.

3. A Question Is Better Than a Correction

As we noted in the Week 2 supplement, a question invites a conversation; a correction ends one. When your neighbor says something you disagree with, the most productive move is often to ask a question: “That’s interesting—where does that idea come from? Have you ever looked at how the early church understood that passage?” Questions show respect, create dialogue, and often lead the other person to discover the answer for themselves.

II. Conversations About Salvation

“Are you saved?”

What’s behind it: This question assumes that salvation is a past-tense, datable event—a moment of decision. The expected answer is a personal testimony: “Yes, I accepted Jesus on June 14, 1987.” If you can’t name the date, your salvation is in doubt.

A charitable response: Yes, I am saved—I was saved in my Baptism, I am being saved through Word and Sacrament every week, and I will be saved when Christ returns on the Last Day. My assurance doesn’t rest on a date I can name but on God’s promise spoken over me in Baptism. He claimed me before I could do anything at all.

“When did you accept Jesus as your personal Savior?”

What’s behind it: The phrase “personal Savior” does not appear in Scripture. It implies that the decisive act in salvation is the human decision to “accept” or “invite” Jesus. This is the synergism we examined in Week 4.

A charitable response: I didn’t accept Jesus—He accepted me. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit created faith in me and united me with Christ’s death and resurrection. My confidence doesn’t come from something I did but from something God did. And He keeps doing it—every time I hear the Gospel preached, every time I receive the Lord’s Supper, every time I hear the words of forgiveness.

“Have you been born again?”

What’s behind it: In evangelical usage, “born again” usually refers to the moment of conversion—the decision event. The question assumes you can pinpoint when it happened.

A charitable response: Yes—I was born again in Baptism. Jesus Himself connects new birth with water and the Spirit in John 3:5: ‘Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’ Titus 3:5 calls Baptism ‘the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.’ My new birth is an objective fact grounded in God’s act, not a subjective experience I have to validate.

III. Conversations About Baptism

“Why do Lutherans baptize babies? Babies can’t believe.”

What’s behind it: This assumes that faith is a decision—something the human will produces before Baptism. If you can’t decide, you can’t believe, and if you can’t believe, you can’t be baptized.

A charitable response: We baptize babies precisely because faith is not a decision—it’s a gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not our act of testifying to a faith we already have. It’s God’s act of creating faith through water and His Word. A baby can’t decide to believe, but God can give faith to a baby through Baptism—just as He gave faith to John the Baptist in the womb (Luke 1:41–44). Infant Baptism is the purest expression of grace: God does everything, and the recipient contributes nothing.

“Baptism doesn’t save—only faith saves.”

What’s behind it: This creates a false opposition between Baptism and faith. It assumes that Baptism and faith are separate things—that faith is internal and Baptism is merely external.

A charitable response: We agree that we are saved by grace through faith—Ephesians 2:8–9 is clear. But where does faith come from? Romans 10:17 says faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ. Baptism is the Word of Christ applied to water. It doesn’t compete with faith—it delivers faith. Peter says ‘Baptism now saves you’ (1 Peter 3:21), and Paul calls it ‘the washing of regeneration’ (Titus 3:5). We don’t set Baptism against faith. God uses Baptism to create and deliver faith.

“But what about the thief on the cross? He wasn’t baptized.”

What’s behind it: This is probably the most common objection to baptismal theology. It assumes that the thief’s case is normative rather than exceptional.

A charitable response: The thief was saved by the direct spoken word of Christ: ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’ That’s completely consistent with what we believe—the Word of God creates and delivers faith. We don’t limit God. He can save however He chooses. But He has told us where to find Him with certainty: in Baptism, in the

preached Word, in the Supper. We don't build our theology on the exception. We build it on where God has promised to be.

IV. Conversations About the End Times

“Do you believe in the rapture?”

What's behind it: The question assumes that the pretribulational rapture is a settled biblical doctrine. Most people who ask have never heard that it was invented in the 1830s.

A charitable response: I believe Christ will return—visibly, in glory, to judge the living and the dead. That's what Christians have confessed since the Apostles' Creed. The rapture as a separate, secret event before a tribulation is a teaching that originated with John Nelson Darby in the 1830s. No one in the history of the Church taught it before then—not the apostles, not the Church Fathers, not the Reformers. I'd rather build my hope on what Christians have confessed for two thousand years than on a system less than two hundred years old.

“Don't you think we're living in the last days? Look at what's happening with Israel and Iran!”

What's behind it: This assumes the dispensational framework: current events involving Israel are prophetic fulfillments. It also assumes that “last days” refers to a specific period just before the rapture.

A charitable response: We have been living in the last days since Pentecost—Acts 2:17 and Hebrews 1:2 say so. Every generation has seen wars, disasters, and upheaval, and every generation has had people confidently mapping those events onto biblical prophecy. The track record of those predictions is zero for two thousand years. I take world events seriously, and I pray for everyone affected by the conflict. But I don't try to decode them as prophetic signs. Jesus told His disciples ‘it is not for you to know times or seasons’ (Acts 1:7). I take Him at His word.

“What about the mark of the beast? What if the government requires some kind of chip or ID?”

What's behind it: This assumes that the mark is a future technology to be identified and avoided. It often comes with genuine anxiety.

A charitable response: The mark of the beast in Revelation is about allegiance, not technology. It echoes Deuteronomy 6, where God's people are told to bind His Word on hand and forehead—symbols of what you believe and what you do. The beast's mark is

the inversion: confessing and living under a false gospel. The real question isn't 'Will I accidentally receive a chip?' but 'Whose am I? Whose gospel do I confess?' God answered that question in your Baptism. He placed His name on you. No beast can undo what God has done.

V. Conversations About the Lord's Supper

“Why do Lutherans believe the bread and wine are actually Jesus’ body and blood? Isn’t it just a symbol?”

What’s behind it: The memorial view assumes that “this is my body” must mean “this represents my body.” It seems like common sense—Jesus was standing there holding bread; of course He didn’t mean it literally.

A charitable response: We believe it because Jesus said it: ‘This is my body. This is my blood.’ We take Him at His word. Paul confirms it in 1 Corinthians 10:16—the bread is a participation in Christ’s body. And Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 11 that eating the Supper unworthily makes you guilty of the body and blood—you can’t be guilty of misusing a symbol. We don’t pretend to fully explain how Christ is present in bread and wine. We simply believe His promise that He is.

“How often do you take Communion? We do it once a month / once a quarter.”

What’s behind it: Infrequent Communion reflects a low view of the Supper—it’s an add-on, not the center. The sermon is the main event.

A charitable response: We celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, because Christ instituted it for our ongoing forgiveness and life. The early church ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42)—every time they gathered. When Christ offers His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, we don’t want to say ‘Maybe next month.’ We want to receive it as often as it’s offered.

VI. Conversations About Church and Identity

“Why are you Lutheran? Isn’t it better to just be ‘Christian’ without a denomination?”

What’s behind it: This reflects the anti-institutional impulse we traced to Darby in Week 1: the Church is a human organization that gets in the way of “real” faith. Denominational labels are tribal baggage.

A charitable response: I'm Lutheran because I believe the Lutheran Confessions are the most faithful summary of what Scripture teaches. Being 'just Christian' sounds humble, but everyone reads the Bible through some framework—the question is whether your framework is explicit and accountable or hidden and unexamined. Lutherans are upfront about what we believe and why. Our Confessions are public documents that anyone can read and test against Scripture. I'd rather have a named tradition I can examine than an unnamed one I can't.

"It's not a religion, it's a relationship."

What's behind it: This pits institutional Christianity (creeds, liturgy, sacraments) against a private, subjective inner experience. It echoes Darby's rejection of the institutional church.

A charitable response: I understand the impulse—nobody wants dead formalism. But Christ didn't leave us with just an inner experience. He gave us Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the preached Word, and the community of the Church. My relationship with Christ is mediated through real, tangible means—water, bread, wine, spoken words of forgiveness. If Christ is truly God incarnate—God in the flesh—then it makes sense that He would come to us through physical means, not just through private feelings.

VII. The Big Picture: What We've Learned in Six Weeks

Over six weeks, we have followed a single thread from its origin to its practical consequences. Let's trace that thread one final time:

Week 1: Dispensationalism is historically recent—a 19th-century system that became invisible through institutional success

Week 2: Its hermeneutic is the engine: a "literal" reading that separates Israel and the Church and resists the christological reading of the OT

Week 3: Its eschatology—the rapture, the tribulation, the millennium—is built on that hermeneutic and shifts focus from Christ's gifts to a prophetic calendar

Week 4: Its soteriology—decision theology—turns conversion into a human act and grounds assurance in subjective experience

Week 5: Its ecclesiology empties the sacraments: Baptism becomes testimony, the Supper becomes memorial, the Church becomes optional

Week 6: And today we've practiced confessing the alternative: Christ comes to us in water, Word, bread, and wine—objective, external, tangible gifts that do not depend on the strength of our feelings or the quality of our decisions

VIII. Final Discussion and Commissioning

1. Which of the scenarios we practiced today felt most relevant to your own life? Which conversation are you most likely to have this week?
2. Is there a question or objection you've encountered that we didn't cover today? Let's work through it together as a class.
3. What is the single most important thing you've learned over the course of this six-week study? What has changed in how you understand your own faith?
4. How can this congregation support each other in having these conversations charitably and faithfully? What resources, habits, or practices would help?
5. What topic should we study next?

"But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

— 1 Peter 3:15

Recommended Resources for Continued Study

On Dispensationalism:

Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (P&R Publishing, 1987). The best single-volume treatment for someone who wants to go deeper on the hermeneutical divide.

On the Sacraments:

Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Concordia Publishing House, 1959). The definitive work on the Real Presence.

Luther's Large Catechism, Parts Four and Five. Luther at his pastoral best on Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

On Lutheran Apologetics:

Rod Rosenblatt, "The Gospel for Those Broken by the Church" (lecture, widely available online). The single best introduction to what Lutherans have that evangelicalism lacks.

Gene Edward Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross* (Concordia Publishing House, 1999). An accessible introduction to Lutheran theology and practice for people coming from evangelical backgrounds.

The Lutheran Confessions:

If you have not read the Book of Concord, start with the three Ecumenical Creeds, the Augsburg Confession, and Luther's Small Catechism. These five documents are the foundation of everything we have studied. A good edition is *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (Concordia Publishing House, 2006).