

GUARDING THE CONFESSION

Where Non-Lutheran Assumptions Creep In

A Practical Guide for Lay Teachers

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From *Ordinary Means* — newsletter.larryherzogjr.com

Introduction: The Drift You Don't See Coming

The companion guides in this series have laid out what confessional Lutheranism teaches about the authority of the Confessions, justification and the Law/Gospel distinction, Holy Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Confession and Absolution. Each one has identified specific errors to watch for. This final guide steps back to address a broader and more insidious problem: the quiet, often unintentional absorption of non-Lutheran theological assumptions into our teaching, our language, and our thinking—assumptions drawn from the evangelical, Reformed, and dispensational traditions that dominate American Protestant culture.

This is the most dangerous kind of doctrinal error—not the kind that announces itself with a banner and a trumpet, but the kind that slips in through familiar-sounding phrases, popular Christian books, widely used curriculum materials, and the ambient theology of American Protestant culture. Most of the people who carry these assumptions into a Lutheran congregation are not heretics. They are sincere Christians who have simply been formed by traditions that teach differently than ours, and they do not realize that what sounds *Christian* and what sounds *Lutheran* are not always the same thing.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher, you need to recognize these assumptions—in curriculum materials, in the language of those you teach, and in your own thinking—so that you can gently and clearly redirect the conversation back to the Lutheran confession of Scripture's teaching.

1. Why This Happens

Before we catalog specific areas of drift, it is worth understanding why non-Lutheran assumptions are so pervasive in Lutheran congregations. Several factors contribute:

- **The American religious marketplace.** American Christianity is dominated by broadly evangelical Protestantism. Christian radio, bestselling books, popular podcasts, and the most visible megachurches are overwhelmingly Baptist, non-denominational, or Reformed in orientation. Lutherans live and breathe in this atmosphere. When a member of your congregation reads a popular devotional, listens to a Christian radio station, or attends a women's

or men's Bible study that uses non-Lutheran material, they are absorbing theology that may conflict with our confession—often without realizing it.

- **Church-hopping and mixed backgrounds.** Many adults in your class have not spent their entire lives in a Lutheran church. They may have grown up Baptist, attended a non-denominational church in college, married someone from a different tradition, or joined a Lutheran congregation without extensive instruction in what Lutherans actually confess. They bring the theology of their previous experiences with them, and it surfaces in the questions they ask, the assumptions they make, and the language they use.
- **Non-Lutheran curriculum materials.** Not all curriculum marketed to Lutherans is confessionally Lutheran. Some materials produced by broadly “Lutheran” publishers reflect the theology of generic American Protestantism rather than the confessional Lutheran tradition. Other materials come from explicitly evangelical publishers and are adopted because they are attractive, well-produced, or inexpensive—without being evaluated for doctrinal content. Every curriculum must be measured against the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism before it is used in your congregation.
- **The desire to “fit in” with broader Christianity.** There is a natural and understandable desire to emphasize what we share with other Christians rather than what divides us. This is not entirely wrong—we do share the ecumenical creeds, the authority of Scripture, and the centrality of Christ with many other traditions. But the desire to minimize differences can easily become a willingness to abandon distinctives, and Lutheran distinctives exist for a reason: they protect the Gospel.
- **Insufficient catechesis.** Many lifelong Lutherans have never been taught *why* Lutherans believe what they believe. They can recite the Catechism from memory but cannot explain why the Lutheran understanding of Baptism differs from the Baptist one, or why the real presence matters, or what “justification by faith alone” actually means in contrast to decision theology. Without this deeper understanding, Lutheran distinctives feel like arbitrary traditions rather than vital protections of the Gospel—and they are easily surrendered.

2. The Root Issue: Who Is the Actor?

If you want a single diagnostic question that will reveal whether a given teaching is Lutheran or has drifted into non-Lutheran territory, it is this: ***Who is the actor?***

In confessional Lutheran theology, **God is always the primary actor in salvation and the Christian life.** God justifies. God baptizes. God feeds us with Christ's body and blood. God speaks absolution. God creates faith through His Word and Sacraments. The human being is the *recipient*, not the initiator. Faith itself is a gift, not a decision.

In much of evangelical, Reformed, and dispensational theology, the emphasis shifts—sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly—to **the human being as the primary actor**. The person decides to follow Jesus. The person accepts Christ. The person chooses to be baptized. The person makes a commitment. The person invites Jesus into their heart. The person dedicates their child to God. The person has a quiet time. The person surrenders their life. In this framework, God is certainly involved, but He is waiting for the human being to act first—to open the door, flip the switch, make the decision.

This shift may seem minor, but it is seismic in its consequences. If the human being is the primary actor, then salvation ultimately depends on the quality, sincerity, and persistence of human action. If God is the primary actor, then salvation depends on God's promise, God's faithfulness, and God's gifts—and the terrified conscience can rest in something far more reliable than its own decisions.

Every time you evaluate a lesson, a curriculum, a phrase, or an assumption, ask: *Who is the actor here? Is this something God does for us, or something we do for God?* That question will expose more drift than any other.

3. Specific Areas Where the Drift Shows Up

The following sections identify the most common areas where non-Lutheran assumptions infiltrate our teaching. For each, we describe the assumption, explain why it conflicts with the Lutheran confession, and suggest how to correct it. These have been addressed individually in the companion guides; here we gather them into a single reference.

3.1 Decision Theology and Conversion

The drift: Salvation is presented as the result of a personal decision to “accept Christ” or “make Jesus your Lord and Savior.” Altar calls, the “sinner’s prayer,” and the language of “inviting Jesus into your heart” are the characteristic markers. The emphasis falls on the moment of human decision as the decisive event in salvation.

Why this is a problem: Decision theology makes the human will the hinge of salvation. If your decision saves you, then your salvation is only as secure as your decision. The terrified conscience asks: “Did I really mean it? Was my faith sincere enough? Did I pray the prayer correctly?” Decision theology cannot answer these questions because it has placed the foundation of salvation on the shifting sand of human experience rather than on the solid rock of God’s promise in Baptism and the Word.

The Lutheran correction: The Holy Spirit creates faith through the means of grace—the Word, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution. Conversion is God’s work, not ours. We do not “decide” for Christ; the Holy Spirit calls us through the Gospel and brings us to faith (see the Small Catechism’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed). Personal faith is real and necessary, but it is God’s gift, not our contribution.

Watch for this language: “Accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.” “Invite Jesus into your heart.” “Make a decision for Christ.” “Give your life to Jesus.” “When did you get saved?” (implying a specific datable moment of human decision).

Replace with: “The Holy Spirit brought you to faith through your Baptism and the Word.” “Christ gave His life for you.” “God claims you as His own.”

3.2 The Sacraments as Symbols

The drift: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are treated as outward symbols of inward realities—things we do to express or demonstrate our faith, not things through which God delivers His gifts. Baptism becomes a public declaration of a decision already made. The Lord’s Supper becomes a memorial meal, a moment of personal reflection, or a community bonding experience.

Why this is a problem: If the sacraments are merely symbols, they deliver nothing. They become human works directed toward God rather than God’s works directed toward us. The entire sacramental life of the church is emptied of its content. Baptism becomes a nice ceremony. The Lord’s Supper becomes a nice tradition. Neither one actually gives you anything you did not already have. And if that is the case, then God has left us with nothing tangible, nothing concrete, nothing we can point to and say, “There—God gave me that, and it is real.”

The Lutheran correction: Baptism delivers forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation (Small Catechism, Part IV). The Lord’s Supper is the true body and blood of Christ, given for the forgiveness of sins (Small Catechism, Part VI). These are not symbols of what God has done; they are means through which God is doing it—right now, for you.

Watch for this language: “Baptism is an outward sign of an inward change.” “Baptism is your public profession of faith.” “The Lord’s Supper is a way to remember what Jesus did.” “The bread and wine represent Christ’s body and blood.”

Replace with: “In Baptism, God washes away your sins and makes you His child.” “In the Lord’s Supper, Christ gives you His true body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.”

3.3 Moralism and the Old Testament

The drift: Bible stories—especially Old Testament narratives—are reduced to moral lessons. David and Goliath teaches courage. Noah teaches obedience. Abraham teaches faith (understood as a human virtue to emulate rather than a gift of God). Moses teaches leadership. The result is a Christianity that is essentially moralism with a biblical veneer: “Be good like the Bible heroes.”

Why this is a problem: Moralism is Law without Gospel. It tells people what to do but offers no power to do it and no forgiveness when they fail. It also fundamentally misreads the Bible, which is not a collection of moral fables but the unfolding story of God’s rescue of sinners through Christ. Every Old Testament narrative points

forward to Christ—His sacrifice, His deliverance, His kingdom. When we reduce these stories to moral lessons, we obscure the very thing the Scriptures exist to reveal.

The Lutheran correction: Jesus Himself taught the Old Testament this way: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). David and Goliath is about God delivering His people through an unlikely substitute—a foreshadowing of Christ. The Passover is about the blood of the lamb that turns away the angel of death—a foreshadowing of Christ. Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac is about God providing the sacrifice Himself—a foreshadowing of Christ. Teach the moral implications, but always *first* show how the story points to Christ and His work.

Watch for this language: “What can we learn from David’s courage?” “How can we be more like Abraham?” “Joseph teaches us to forgive.”

Replace with: “How does this story show us what God is like?” “Where is Christ in this passage?” “What does this teach us about God’s faithfulness to His promises?”

3.4 Enthusiasm and the Means of Grace

The drift: The Holy Spirit is understood to work directly and immediately in the heart, apart from the external Word and Sacraments. Personal experience, feelings, inner promptings, and subjective impressions are treated as authoritative guides for faith and life. “God told me,” “I felt led,” and “I have a peace about it” function as trumps that override the objective Word of God.

Why this is a problem: Luther called this *Schwärmerei* (enthusiasm) and considered it one of the most dangerous errors in the church. When personal experience becomes the authority, there is no check against self-deception. Anyone can claim “God told me” to justify anything. The result is doctrinal chaos, spiritual manipulation, and—most tragically—the loss of the very thing that gives the Christian certainty: the objective, external Word and Sacraments through which the Spirit actually works.

The Lutheran correction: The Holy Spirit works through means: the preached Word, the written Word, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution. He does not bypass these means to work directly in the heart apart from them. Personal feelings and experiences are real, but they are not the basis of doctrine, the ground of assurance, or the test of truth. The test of truth is always Scripture—the external, objective Word of God.

This is a particularly sensitive area in traditions with a pietist heritage, which rightly value personal faith and the work of the Spirit in the believer’s life. But there is a crucial difference between the genuine, Spirit-worked personal faith that trusts God’s promises (which is thoroughly Lutheran and thoroughly biblical) and the subjectivism that treats inner feelings as a source of authority alongside or above Scripture (which is enthusiasm). The former is anchored in the Word; the latter floats free of it.

Watch for this language: “God told me.” “I felt the Spirit leading me.” “I just have a peace about it.” “God put it on my heart.” “The Spirit moved me to...” (without any connection to Word or Sacrament).

Replace with: “The Scriptures teach...” “In my Baptism, God promised...” “The Word of God says...” “I believe this because God’s Word tells me so.”

3.5 The Prayer of Salvation and Assurance

The drift: Assurance of salvation is grounded in a past subjective experience—typically the moment you “prayed the prayer,” “walked the aisle,” or “gave your heart to Jesus.” When doubts arise, the evangelical response is: “Remember that moment. You were sincere. God heard your prayer.” Assurance is anchored in the quality of a past human experience.

Why this is a problem: Human experiences are unreliable. Memory fades. Feelings change. The question “Was I sincere enough?” has no satisfying answer, because sincerity is not quantifiable and the human heart is, as Jeremiah says, “deceitful above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9). Grounding assurance in a past experience is grounding it in sand.

The Lutheran correction: Assurance is grounded in the objective promises of God, delivered through the means of grace. When the devil whispers, “Are you really saved?” the Lutheran answer is not “I remember the day I prayed the prayer” but “I am baptized. God has claimed me. Christ’s body and blood are given for me. My sins are forgiven because the pastor spoke absolution to me in Christ’s name.” These are not subjective experiences that may or may not have been sincere; they are objective acts of God that do not depend on my feelings.

Watch for this language: “Remember the day you accepted Christ.” “You need to know the exact moment you were saved.” “Your testimony is the foundation of your faith.”

Replace with: “Remember your Baptism.” “Your assurance rests on God’s promises, not your memory.” “Christ’s work for you — not your experience of Him — is the foundation of your faith.”

3.6 Worship as Performance and Experience

The drift: Worship is conceived primarily as something we offer to God—our praise, our enthusiasm, our emotional engagement. The success of a worship service is measured by how it made people *feel*: inspired, moved, uplifted, emotionally connected to God. Music becomes the centerpiece. The sermon becomes a motivational talk. The sacraments, if present at all, are an afterthought.

Why this is a problem: This framework reverses the direction of the Divine Service. In the Lutheran understanding, the primary direction of the Divine Service is not from us to God but from God to us. God serves us through His Word and Sacraments. He speaks to us in the readings, the sermon, and the absolution. He feeds us with Christ’s body and blood. Yes, we respond with praise, prayer, and thanksgiving—but these are *responses* to what God has first given, not the main

event. When worship becomes primarily about our emotional experience, the means of grace are marginalized, and the congregation is trained to evaluate worship by the wrong criteria.

The Lutheran correction: The Divine Service is God’s service *to us*. He is the host; we are the guests. He forgives our sins in the absolution. He speaks to us in the readings and sermon. He feeds us at the Table. Our hymns, prayers, and praises are the grateful response of people who have received these gifts. The question after a worship service is not “Did I feel something?” but “Was the Gospel preached and the sacraments administered?”

3.7 The “Personal Relationship with Jesus” Framework

The drift: Christianity is framed primarily as a “personal relationship with Jesus”—a phrase so ubiquitous in American Christianity that it feels almost heretical to question. The emphasis is on subjective intimacy, conversational prayer (“talking to Jesus like a friend”), and the individual’s emotional connection to Christ. Church, sacraments, and the broader community of faith become optional supports for this fundamentally private, individual relationship.

Why this is a problem: The phrase “personal relationship with Jesus” does not appear in Scripture. This does not mean it is entirely wrong—faith is indeed personal, and Christ does know His sheep by name (John 10:3). But the framework is misleading in several ways. First, it makes Christianity primarily about subjective experience rather than objective truth. Second, it privatizes faith, detaching it from the church, the means of grace, and the body of believers. Third, it leads inevitably to the question, “How is my relationship with Jesus going?”—a question that invites constant navel-gazing and spiritual anxiety, because relationships are measured by feelings, and feelings fluctuate.

The Lutheran correction: Christ relates to you through concrete, objective means: His Word, His Baptism, His Supper, His Absolution. He does not ask you to generate a subjective experience of intimacy. He gives you His gifts and says, “Trust the promise.” The Christian life is not primarily about how you *feel* about Jesus but about what Jesus has *done* for you—and continues to do for you through the means of grace. This is far more reliable than a “relationship” that depends on the fluctuations of human emotion.

3.8 The Prosperity Gospel and “God’s Plan for Your Life”

The drift: God is presented as primarily concerned with your personal happiness, fulfillment, and success. “God has a wonderful plan for your life” is treated as a summary of the Gospel. Health, wealth, and personal blessing are presented as signs of God’s favor, while suffering is presented as evidence of insufficient faith or hidden sin.

Why this is a problem: The prosperity gospel is not the Gospel at all. The Gospel is not “God wants you to be happy and successful”; the Gospel is “Christ died for your sins and rose for your justification.” The theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*)—

which is central to Lutheran theology—teaches that God works through suffering, weakness, and apparent defeat, not through visible glory and success. The cross itself is the supreme proof that God’s ways are not measured by human standards of success. Christians are promised not exemption from suffering but the presence of Christ in the midst of it (Romans 8:28–39).

The Lutheran correction: God’s primary concern is not your temporal happiness but your eternal salvation. He gives good gifts in this life—and we give thanks for them—but these gifts are not the Gospel. The Gospel is forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Christ. Suffering is not evidence of God’s absence or displeasure; it is the normal condition of life in a fallen world, and God is present in it, working through it, and sustaining His people by His Word and Sacraments in the midst of it.

3.9 Dispensationalism and Speculative Eschatology

The drift: The Bible—especially the prophetic and apocalyptic literature of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation—is read through the framework of dispensationalism: a system that divides redemptive history into distinct “dispensations” or eras in which God deals with humanity under different arrangements. Key features include a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church as two separate peoples of God with separate destinies, a pretribulational “rapture” of the Church before a period of tribulation, a literal future millennial reign of Christ on earth centered in Jerusalem, and a detailed prophetic timeline that maps current events onto biblical prophecy. This framework was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, Hal Lindsey’s writings, the Left Behind novels, and countless prophecy conferences and Christian media programs. Its influence is enormous—many Christians assume it is simply “what the Bible teaches” without realizing it is a specific interpretive system developed in the 19th century.

Why this is a problem: Dispensationalism conflicts with confessional Lutheran theology at several fundamental points:

- **It divides the one people of God.** The Lutheran confession, following Scripture, teaches that there is one Church—one people of God across both Testaments, united by faith in the promised Messiah (Galatians 3:7–9, 26–29; Ephesians 2:11–22). The Old Testament believers looked forward to Christ; we look back to Him. But it is the same Christ and the same faith. The dispensational separation of Israel and the Church into two distinct peoples with two distinct programs undermines this biblical unity and can distort the reading of both Testaments.
- **It replaces Gospel comfort with speculative timelines.** The book of Revelation was written to comfort suffering Christians with the assurance that Christ reigns, that evil will not triumph, and that God’s people will be vindicated. Dispensationalism transforms Revelation from pastoral comfort into a prophetic puzzle to be decoded—a blueprint for predicting future events rather than a proclamation of Christ’s victory for the persecuted Church. When Revelation becomes a code to crack, its actual Gospel content is lost.

- **It introduces an unbiblical rapture doctrine.** The pretribulation rapture—the idea that Christ will secretly remove the Church from earth before a period of tribulation—has no basis in the Lutheran Confessions or in historic Christian teaching. It was developed in the 1830s by John Nelson Darby and has no precedent in the first 1,800 years of church history. The Scriptures and the Creeds teach one visible, bodily return of Christ at the last day to judge the living and the dead—not a secret rapture followed by a separate second coming.
- **It distorts the Law/Gospel distinction.** Some forms of dispensationalism teach that the Sermon on the Mount and other portions of the Gospels apply to a future dispensation, not to the Church today. This carving up of Scripture into applicable and non-applicable sections undermines the unity of God’s Word and can lead to a selective reading of the Bible that ignores passages which do not fit the dispensational scheme. The Lutheran hermeneutic reads all of Scripture through the lens of Law and Gospel, not through a dispensational grid.
- **It fosters enthusiasm and speculation.** Dispensational prophecy teaching frequently involves mapping current geopolitical events onto biblical prophecy—“newspaper exegesis.” This speculative approach has produced a long history of failed predictions and date-setting. Each failed prediction should serve as a warning that this hermeneutical approach is fundamentally flawed. Jesus Himself said, “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matthew 24:36).

The Lutheran correction: Lutheran eschatology is grounded in the ecumenical creeds and the Augsburg Confession (Article XVII), which teach that Christ will return visibly at the last day to raise the dead and judge all people. The Confession explicitly rejects the idea of a millennium in which the godly will possess a worldly kingdom before the resurrection. Lutheran eschatology is deliberately restrained: it confesses what Scripture clearly teaches—Christ will come again, the dead will be raised, and there will be a final judgment—without speculating about timelines, sequences, or the identity of the Antichrist in current events.

The proper reading of Revelation and Daniel in the Lutheran tradition is Christological and pastoral: these books proclaim Christ’s sovereignty over all earthly powers, comfort the suffering Church with the assurance that God wins, and call believers to patient endurance and faithfulness. They are not roadmaps for predicting the future; they are Gospel proclamations that the future belongs to Christ.

Watch for this language: “The rapture.” “The tribulation.” “God has a separate plan for Israel.” “We’re living in the end times” (spoken as a decoded prediction rather than a general confession that Christ could return at any moment). “Revelation chapter [X] is talking about [current geopolitical event].”

Replace with: “Christ will return visibly on the last day to judge the living and the dead.” “Revelation comforts us with the promise that Christ reigns and evil

will not triumph.” “There is one people of God, united by faith in Christ across all ages.” “We live in hopeful expectation of Christ’s return, without speculating about when or how.”

4. A Practical Checklist for Evaluating Curriculum and Materials

When evaluating any teaching material—whether a published curriculum, a book, a video series, or your own lesson plan—run it through these diagnostic questions:

- **Who is the actor?** Does the material present God as the primary actor in salvation and the Christian life, or does it place the emphasis on human decision, effort, or experience?
- **Are the sacraments treated as means of grace?** Does the material teach that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper actually deliver God’s gifts, or does it reduce them to symbols, memorials, or human acts of obedience?
- **Is there a proper distinction between Law and Gospel?** Does the material clearly distinguish between what God demands (Law) and what God gives (Gospel)? Or does it mix them—turning the Gospel into a new set of demands, or softening the Law into suggestions?
- **Where is Christ?** Does the material point to Christ and His work as the center of every lesson, or does it focus primarily on human moral effort, personal experience, or practical life application?
- **What is the basis of assurance?** Does the material ground assurance in God’s objective promises (Baptism, the Word, the Supper, Absolution), or does it ground assurance in subjective experience (a moment of decision, a feeling of peace, the quality of one’s commitment)?
- **Is the language precise?** Does the material use language consistent with our confessional commitments, or does it import the language of decision theology, memorialism, or enthusiasm?
- **Does it pass the Catechism test?** If you compared this material to the relevant section of the Small Catechism, would it agree, or would it contradict or silently omit key teachings?

No curriculum is perfect, and you may sometimes need to use materials that are imperfect. The point is not to reject everything that is not explicitly Lutheran but to know where the problems are so you can supplement, correct, or reframe as needed. When in doubt, consult your pastor.

5. Practical Guidance for Teachers

- **Be charitable but clear.** People who hold non-Lutheran assumptions are not your enemies. They are often sincere Christians who have simply been taught differently. Correct gently, explain clearly, and always show from

Scripture and the Confessions *why* the Lutheran teaching is what it is. The goal is not to win arguments but to deliver the Gospel faithfully.

- **Teach positively, not just negatively.** It is not enough to say “Don’t say that.” You must also say “Say this instead—and here’s why.” People need to understand not just what is wrong with the evangelical framework but what is right about the Lutheran one. The Lutheran confession is not a collection of negations; it is a positive proclamation of the Gospel in its fullness.
- **Listen to the language in your class.** Pay attention to how people in your class talk about their faith. The phrases they use will reveal the theological framework they are operating from. When you hear decision language, memorial language, or enthusiasm language, gently redirect. Use it as a teaching opportunity, not a moment of correction.
- **Watch your own language.** You may be surprised to discover how much evangelical vocabulary has seeped into your own speech. The phrases are so pervasive in American Christianity that even lifelong Lutherans use them without thinking. Check your own language against the Catechism. Are you saying what the Catechism says, or have you drifted?
- **Use the other guides in this series.** They exist to give you a reference point. When a question arises about Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, justification, or confession, pull out the relevant guide. The “Teach This / Not This” tables on the summary sheets are designed to be quick-reference tools for exactly these moments.
- **Always consult your pastor.** If you encounter a situation where you are unsure how to handle a doctrinal question—especially in an adult class where people may have strong opinions and deep roots in other traditions—ask your pastor. That is exactly what the pastoral office is for. Better to pause and seek guidance than to teach something that contradicts our confession.
- **Pray for those you teach.** Pray that the Holy Spirit would use your faithful teaching to create and sustain faith in the hearts of those who hear it. You are not responsible for the results—that is the Spirit’s work—but you are responsible for faithfulness. Teach what the church confesses. Trust the Spirit to do the rest.

Conclusion: Why This Matters

The drift we have described in this guide is not merely an academic concern. It is a pastoral one. When decision theology replaces the means of grace, people lose the objective anchor of their salvation. When the sacraments are reduced to symbols, people lose the tangible gifts God gives them. When moralism replaces Christ-centered teaching, people are burdened with demands they cannot meet and deprived of the forgiveness they desperately need. When enthusiasm replaces the external Word, people are set adrift on the sea of their own subjective experience with no compass and no shore.

The Lutheran Confessions exist to prevent exactly this kind of drift. They are not arbitrary traditions or outdated documents. They are the church's tested, faithful, Scripture-grounded summary of the Gospel in its fullness. When you teach from them, you are not imposing a human system on your students. You are giving them what God Himself has given: His Word, rightly divided, faithfully confessed, and personally delivered.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher, you stand in a long line of faithful confessors who have guarded this treasure through centuries of pressure, opposition, and cultural drift. The pressure today does not come from popes and emperors; it comes from best-selling books, popular podcasts, and the ambient theology of a culture that has replaced the means of grace with the means of human experience. Your task is the same as it has always been: teach what the church confesses, because what the church confesses is what Scripture teaches.

Guard the confession. Deliver the Gospel. Trust the Spirit. And always, *always*, let the last word be Christ.

“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

— 1 Timothy 4:16 (NIV)

QUICK-REFERENCE SUMMARY

Where Non-Lutheran Assumptions Creep In

For Sunday School Teachers — Keep This at Your Desk

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Who is the actor? Is this something God does for us, or something we do for God? In Lutheran theology, God is always the primary actor in salvation.

THE DRIFT AT A GLANCE

Topic	The Drift	The Lutheran Confession
Conversion	You decide for Christ.	The Spirit creates faith through the means of grace.
Baptism	An outward sign of your decision.	God's act: delivers forgiveness, life, salvation.
Lord's Supper	A memorial meal to remember Jesus.	Christ's true body and blood, given for forgiveness.
Assurance	Remember the day you prayed the prayer.	Remember your Baptism. Trust the promise.
Bible stories	Moral lessons: be like the heroes.	Christ-centered: God rescues sinners.
Holy Spirit	Works directly, apart from means.	Works through Word and Sacrament.
Worship	Our performance for God.	God's service to us through Word and Sacrament.
Good works	How you keep your salvation.	The fruit of faith, not its cause.
Eschatology	Rapture timelines and decoded prophecy.	Christ returns visibly; Revelation comforts the Church.

7-POINT CURRICULUM CHECKLIST

Diagnostic Question	The Lutheran Answer
1. Who is the actor?	God acts; we receive.
2. Sacraments as means of grace?	They deliver, not just symbolize.
3. Law / Gospel distinction?	Clearly distinguished, not mixed.

Diagnostic Question	The Lutheran Answer
4. Where is Christ?	The center of every lesson.
5. Basis of assurance?	God's promises, not our experience.
6. Precise language?	Consistent with the Catechism.
7. Catechism test?	Agrees with the relevant Chief Part.

Guard the confession. Deliver the Gospel. Let the last word be Christ.

More from Larry Herzog Jr.

If this guide was helpful, here's where to find more like it.

The Newsletter

Ordinary Means — a weekly confessional Lutheran newsletter for lay teachers, weary evangelicals, and serious laypeople. Free to subscribe at newsletter.larryherzogjr.com.

Books for the Reader Who Wants to Go Deeper

- ***The Hollow Altar: A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals*** — for the reader who has loved Christ inside evangelicalism but kept running into things their tradition couldn't quite explain.
- ***Judeo-Christian Values?: A Confessional Lutheran Reckoning with Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism, and the Gospel They Replaced*** — a timely volume on where modern evangelical eschatology actually came from.
- ***Ad Fontes: Textual Criticism for Lutheran Laity*** — why we can trust the text of Scripture in the first place.
- ***What Horse?: Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says*** — for the reader who has heard things “the Bible says” their whole life and started to wonder.

Bible Study Series for Adult Sunday School and Small Groups

- ***Pauline Captivity Letters*** — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.
- ***Letters to the Church Under Pressure*** — James, 1 Peter, 1-3 John, Hebrews.

All available on Amazon. Each volume includes discussion questions, doctrinal notes, and clear Law/Gospel handling of the text — built for the person who has to teach the lesson on Sunday morning.

About the Author

Larry Herzog Jr. is a confessional Lutheran layman in Valley City, North Dakota — but he got there the long way. He came to Christ as a college-age atheist through an online debate on the reliability of Scripture, then spent over two decades working through North American Baptist, Evangelical Free, Nazarene (where he served as an associate pastor), a Calvinist Baptist church, and Reformed Baptist seminary before finally landing in confessional Lutheranism (AFLC). He teaches adult Sunday school and leads Bible studies at Grace Free Lutheran Church. His weekday job is cybersecurity.