

DISCUSSION GUIDE

For You

A Seven-Session Discussion Guide

For adult instruction, new-member classes, and small groups

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Before you begin: a note to the leader

This guide is built backwards from most study guides, and the difference is deliberate.

The seven sessions are keyed to **four short confessional texts**, not to the chapters of the book. The texts are printed in full at the back of this guide. The book is the commentary — useful, and not the point. If your class reads the four texts and never finishes the book, the class has still worked.

Three things to know before the first night.

This is not a study about how the participants are doing. The book's whole argument is that a Christian's standing before God is not located in his interior, and that examining it there produces a verdict that changes daily. A class that turns into a weekly self-assessment has reproduced the disease in a circle of folding chairs. Watch for it in the questions people ask each other, and steer back to the text.

Nobody should be asked to confess anything to the group. This matters especially in Session Four, which is about private confession. That session is about a practice conducted in a room with one pastor and a closed door — not in a class. A group where someone is drawn into saying more than they meant to has done real harm, and it will be the last honest thing anyone says there. Specific guidance is in that session.

Your class contains at least two kinds of people, and they need different things from the same material. Some came from revivalism and are carrying a decision they cannot verify. Some have been Lutheran since infancy and are carrying the suspicion that they have only ever attended. Both are in the book, both are in these questions, and neither should be treated as the default.

A note on the translation. The texts printed here are from the 1921 *Triglot Concordia*, which is in the public domain. The book quotes the Kolb-Wengert edition, which renders some phrases differently — the Triglot's *brethren* where the book has *brothers and sisters*, its *remission of sins* where the book has *forgiveness of sins*. Both translate the same German. If a class member notices, that is a good thing to notice, and the short answer is that translations differ and the underlying text does not.

Session One — The List

Text: Smalcald Articles III.4 (§1 of *The four texts*, at the back of this guide). It is one short paragraph. Read it aloud twice, slowly, before discussing anything.

Book: Chapters One and Two.

Opening

Read the article aloud. Then, before any discussion, ask everyone to count the items in it.

Most people expect two, or maybe three. The article names five, and the fifth one surprises nearly everybody — Luther sets two Christians talking down beside baptism and the altar without appearing to think he has changed the subject.

For discussion

1. Luther calls these ways God gives “counsel and aid against sin.” Not ways we express our faith, or mark our belonging. What difference does that make to what the list is *for*?
2. Which of the five had you never thought of as one of these? Why do you think that one drops out of view?
3. The book claims that most of us were taught to look for assurance in one of two places: a decision behind us, or evidence of growth in front of us. Does that description fit your own experience, or not? (*Leader: let people say no. Some were formed differently and their honesty is useful to the room.*)
4. Both of those two places are inside a person. What goes wrong when the evidence for the most important question in your life is evidence only you can see?
5. The article locates the help outside — in preaching, water, bread and cup, a spoken sentence, a brother’s voice. On first hearing, does “outside” sound like comfort or like coldness? Say which and why.

Leader’s note

Question 5 is the session’s hinge and it will divide the room. Do not resolve it. The whole book is an argument that “outside” is the warm answer, and the class will get there over seven weeks; forcing it in week one costs you the honesty of the people who find it cold.

If the discussion drifts toward the failures of other churches, bring it back. This book is not a critique of anybody’s former congregation, and a class that becomes one has stopped being useful.

Before next time

Find out the date you were baptized. Call the church, ask a parent, look in the front of a family Bible. Bring it — or bring the fact that you could not find it, which is worth discussing too.

Session Two — The Preached Word

Text: Smalcald Articles III.4 again, first item only (§1 of *The four texts*). (*This is one of two gifts in the list with no catechism section of its own — the fifth, a brother's voice, is the other — which is itself worth a minute of the class's attention.*)

Book: Chapters Three and Four.

Opening

Ask: what do we normally say to each other in the car on the way home from church?

Let it be funny. It usually is. Then ask what kind of sentence those are — and whether anyone has ever heard a person walk out of a church building and say *I was forgiven this morning*.

For discussion

1. The book names two common accounts of what a sermon is: information, and advice. Which one were you taught? Which one do you default to when you evaluate a sermon?
2. Read Romans 10:17 aloud. What has to be true about preaching for that sentence to make sense?
3. The book's test is to listen for the pronouns — whether the preacher is talking *about* people in the text, telling *you* what to do, or saying that Christ died *for you*. Try it on a sermon you remember. What did you find?
4. What is lost when the sermon is treated as the whole service — when a congregation's life depends on one man being good at talking?
5. A layman can tell his pastor what he most needs to hear on a Sunday, without evaluating the sermon at all. What is the difference between that conversation and a critique? Why does the difference matter?

Leader's note

This session has one live hazard: it can turn into an evaluation of your own pastor, with him absent. Name that at the start and shut it down if it starts.

The book's three questions — did he preach the Law, did he give me Christ, was any of it addressed to me — are a tool for *finding the gift*, never a rubric for ranking a man. If someone in the room starts scoring sermons, that is the moment to say so plainly.

Before next time

Read Small Catechism IV before the session, not after. It is two pages.

Session Three — Water

Text: Small Catechism, Part IV — Holy Baptism (§2 of *The four texts*).

Book: Chapters Five and Six.

Opening

Read all four questions and answers aloud, with different people taking parts.

Then ask the question the whole session turns on: **in these four answers, who is doing the acting?**

For discussion

1. The first answer says baptism is “not simple water only” but water “comprehended in God’s command and connected with God’s Word.” What is being denied there, and what is being claimed?
2. The second answer says baptism “works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this.” Compare that with how you have heard baptism described elsewhere. Where do the two accounts differ most?
3. The fourth answer says the old Adam is drowned “by daily contrition and repentance,” and that a new man daily comes forth and arises. The event happened once; the use of it is every day. How does something that happened decades ago get used *today*?
4. Luther’s counsel to a troubled conscience was two words: *I am baptized*. Present tense. What does the present tense do that “I was baptized” does not?
5. If baptism is God’s act rather than our testimony, what follows for infants? And what does *not* follow — what does baptism never promise?

Leader’s note

Question 5 will be the longest, and your class may contain people who were baptized as infants, people baptized as adults, people baptized twice, and people not baptized at all. All four are ordinary and none should be treated as a problem in front of the group.

Two things to have ready, because they will come up and they are wounds rather than debates. Someone will ask about a family member who was baptized and wants nothing to do with the faith. Someone will be thinking about a child who has walked away. The book addresses both near the end of Chapter Five; read that section yourself before the session. The short answers are that a gift can be despised without becoming false, and that baptism was never a warranty against a child’s choices.

If a class member says they have never been baptized, do not make it a discussion. Talk to them afterward, and get them to the pastor.

Session Four — The Spoken Sentence

Text: Small Catechism, Part V — Confession (§3 of *The four texts*).

Book: Chapter Seven.

Opening

Ask, and let the silence sit: **has anyone here ever had another person say to your face, “I forgive you all your sins”?**

Do not require answers. The question does its work either way.

For discussion

1. The catechism says confession embraces two parts — that we confess, and that we “receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself.” Which of those two halves gets forgotten? Why do you think that is?
2. Read the paragraph about which sins to confess: those we “know and feel in our hearts.” Not everything. What is the difference between that and an inventory, and why does it matter for a person with a sensitive conscience?
3. The book argues that being *told* you are forgiven differs in kind from *concluding* that you are — that a verdict is not a verdict until it is pronounced. Do you find that persuasive? Where else in life does a pronouncement do something a private conclusion cannot?
4. What keeps people from ever asking a pastor for this? Name the reasons out loud. (*Leader: keep this on reasons in general, not on anyone’s own reasons.*)
5. What would you actually say to a pastor to ask for it? Compose the email as a group.

Leader’s note — read this before the session

This session is about a practice that happens privately. It must not happen here.

There is a real hazard in a class like this: the material is moving, someone feels the pull to be honest, and they say something in front of eleven people that they intended for one. They will regret it, the room will not know what to do, and it will be the last honest thing anyone says in that class.

Say this at the start of the session, in your own words: *We are going to talk about private confession tonight. We are not going to do it here. If something comes up in you during this hour, that is what the pastor’s door is for, and he will make time this week.*

Question 4 is where the drift happens. Keep it general. If someone begins to move from *why people don’t* to *why I haven’t*, and *here’s what it’s about* — interrupt gently and offer to talk afterward. That is not unkindness. It is the same instinct the seal of confession exists to protect.

Question 5 is the most practical thing in this entire guide. Actually write the email. People do not ask because they do not know what to say.

Session Five — Bread and Cup

Text: Small Catechism, Part VI — The Sacrament of the Altar (§4 of *The four texts*).

Book: Chapters Eight and Nine.

Opening

Read the Words of Institution aloud from the catechism text. Then read them again, and ask the class to raise a hand at every verb that belongs to *us*.

There are three: take, eat, drink. Everything else is his.

For discussion

1. The catechism asks what the benefit of such eating and drinking is, and answers from the words themselves: “Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins.” Why does it keep the purpose clause attached every time?
2. What is the difference between remembering something and being given something? (*Leader: the biblical sense of “remember” — God remembering his covenant — is worth raising here. It means acting on a promise, not recalling a fact.*)
3. The last answer says the worthy communicant is the one “who has faith in these words: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins.” Notice what is *not* required. What is not on that list that you expected to be?
4. The catechism grants that “fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training.” Not nothing — but not the qualification either. How do you hold both?
5. Someone stays in the pew because he knows what he did this week. What would you say to him? (*Leader: this is the session’s real question.*)

Leader’s note

The fence around this table is usually built out of 1 Corinthians 11, and the book argues the fence is misread — that Paul writes about eating *in an unworthy manner*, which describes the eating, not the eater, and that his instruction ends at the table rather than away from it. Have Chapter Nine’s argument in hand.

Two cautions.

If the practice of closed communion comes up — and in a confessional Lutheran class it may — do not run it in this session. It is a question about how a congregation administers the gift, not about whether the promise is for the person asking, and mixing them will leave someone feeling weighed and found wanting. Route it to the pastor and move on.

And watch for the participant who is quietly the man in question 5. He will not identify himself. Ask the question anyway; he needs to hear the room answer it.

Session Six — A Brother's Voice, and What to Expect

Text: Smalcald Articles III.4 once more, final item — “the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.” (§1 of *The four texts*.)

Book: Chapters Ten and Eleven.

Opening

Read the final clause of the article aloud on its own. Then ask: why do you think this one is never preached?

For discussion

1. The book names four things Christians offer each other instead of the gospel: sympathy, advice, encouragement, and “I’ll be praying for you.” Which is your default? Which do you receive most often?
2. Prayer runs one direction — you speaking to God about someone. This gift runs the other. What can you give a person that a prayer, by itself, cannot?
3. James tells ordinary Christians to confess to *one another*. What has to be true about a congregation for that to be possible? What has to be true about you?
4. Half of Luther’s phrase is *conversation* — listening. What makes a person someone that things can be said to?
5. When the trouble is not guilt but affliction — a diagnosis, a job lost, a child in trouble — what do you say? What should you refuse to say, however much you want to?
6. Chapter Eleven describes a man who did everything the book said — found the date, made the confession, came to the table — and felt nothing. What would you say to him? What would you refuse to say?
7. The book argues that feelings are real information about *you* and no information at all about God’s disposition toward you. Where else in life do you already believe something you do not currently feel?

Leader’s note

Question 5 is where a class does the most good or the most damage. The instinct to supply a reason for someone’s suffering is nearly irresistible, and it is almost always wrong — Job’s friends had reasons, several of them, and God said at the end that they had spoken falsely. Let the class arrive at that.

Questions 6 and 7 exist because by week six, somebody in the room *is* that man. He has done what the class discussed in weeks three and four, and it has not produced what he expected, and he has not said so. Ask the questions in the third person and let him answer them that way.

One caution on Chapter Eleven. That chapter says plainly that months of feeling nothing about anything — not just about God, but about work, food, and one’s own children — may be depression or grief rather than a spiritual condition, and that the answer is a pastor *and* a doctor. That paragraph belongs in a book, where one person reads it alone.

It does not belong to a group. **Do not let this class diagnose anyone**, including sympathetically, and do not let it become a place where people trade what worked for them. If someone describes that condition in the room, receive it without comment and follow up privately afterward. In that conversation the book’s own words are the right ones: tell your pastor, and tell a doctor. Both. They are not competing options.

Session Seven — Answering, and an Ordinary Week

Text: Smalcald Articles III.4, read whole one last time (§1 of *The four texts*). The study opened on this paragraph; end on it.

Book: Chapters Twelve and Thirteen.

Opening

Read the article aloud. Then ask what has changed in six weeks about how it sounds.

For discussion

1. Chapter Twelve answers the objection that this is all just magic. What is the difference between a technique and a promise? Why does the book say people who believe in magic are anxious people?
2. “Doesn’t this put the church between me and God?” — the book grants the instinct behind that question is a good one. What is the instinct, and where does the answer go?
3. If nothing we do is where forgiveness comes from, what happens to obedience? What did the book say happens to it?
4. Each of Chapter Twelve’s answers ends in one sentence short enough to say out loud at work. Pick the objection you are most likely to be handed and say your sentence to the person next to you.
5. Look at the ordinary week in Chapter Thirteen. Thursday is the day nothing happens. Why is that day in the chapter at all?
6. Which day of that week is the one you most need? Not the one you found most interesting — the one you need. You do not have to say it out loud.

Leader’s note

Question 4 will feel awkward and is worth doing anyway. The point is not to win an argument in a break room; it is that a person who has language for what he believes stops being embarrassed by it, and a great deal of what keeps people from these gifts is not doubt but a vague social sense that it is all a bit much.

Question 5 is the closing note of the whole study. If the Christian life runs on your attention to it, an ordinary distracted Thursday is a debt. If it runs on what God has handed over, Thursday is simply Thursday, and nothing was lost.

If closed communion has not come up before now, it may come up here. Route it the same way: it is a question about how a congregation administers the gift, not about whether the promise is for the person asking. That conversation belongs with the pastor.

To close

Read the last two paragraphs of the book aloud, and end there. Do not add anything.

The four texts

From the 1921 Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House). Public domain. Reproduced complete and unaltered, except that a period has been added at the close of the final sentence of Part VI, which the 1921 printing omits. Square brackets are the Triglot's own.

1. The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article 4 — The Gospel

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached [He commands to be preached] in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18, 20: Where two or three are gathered together, etc.

(Triglot p. 495. The brackets are the Triglot's own, marking the Latin text's alternate reading.)

2. The Small Catechism, Part IV — Holy Baptism

IV. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, as the Head of the Family Should Teach It in a Simple Way to His Household.

First.

What is Baptism?—Answer.

Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word.

Which is that word of God?—Answer.

Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Matthew: Go ye into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Secondly.

What does Baptism give or profit?—Answer.

It works 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.

Which are such words and promises of God?—Answer.

Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Mark: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned.

Thirdly.

How can water do such great things?—Answer.

It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is simple water and no baptism. But with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost, as St. Paul says, Titus, chapter three: By the washing of

regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that, being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying.

Fourthly.

What does such baptizing with water signify?—Answer.

It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written?—Answer.

St. Paul says Romans, chapter 6: We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

(Triglot pp. 551–552.)

3. The Small Catechism, Part V — Confession

V. How the Unlearned Should Be Taught to Confess.

[What is Confession?]—Answer.]

Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?—[Answer.]

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?—[Answer.]

Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, a man-servant or maid-servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful; whether you have grieved any one by words or deeds; whether you have stolen, neglected, or wasted aught, or done other injury.

Pray, Propose to Me a Brief Form of Confession.

Answer.

You should speak to the confessor thus: Reverend and dear sir, I beseech you to hear my confession, and to pronounce forgiveness to me for God's sake.

Proceed!

I, a poor sinner, confess myself before God guilty of all sins; especially I confess before you that I am a man-servant, a maidservant, etc. But, alas, I serve my master unfaithfully; for in this and in that I have not done what they commanded me; I have provoked them, and caused them to curse, have been negligent [in many things] and permitted damage to be done; have also been immodest in words and deeds, have quarreled with my equals, have grumbled and sworn at my mistress, etc. For all this I am sorry, and pray for grace; I want to do better.

A master or mistress may say thus:

In particular I confess before you that I have not faithfully trained my children, domestics, and wife [family] for God's glory. I have cursed, set a bad example by rude words and deeds, have done

my neighbor harm and spoken evil of him, have overcharged and given false ware and short measure.

And whatever else he has done against God's command and his station, etc.

But if any one does not find himself burdened with such or greater sins, he should not trouble himself or search for or invent other sins, and thereby make confession a torture, but mention one or two that he knows. Thus: In particular I confess that I once cursed; again, I once used improper words, I have once neglected this or that, etc. Let this suffice.

But if you know of none at all (which, however, is scarcely possible), then mention none in particular, but receive the forgiveness upon the general confession which you make before God to the confessor.

Then shall the confessor say:

God be merciful to thee and strengthen thy faith! Amen.

Furthermore:

Dost thou believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Answer.

Yes, dear sir.

Then let him say:

As thou believest, so be it done unto thee. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive thee thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Depart in peace.

But those who have great burdens upon their consciences, or are distressed and tempted, the confessor will know how to comfort and to encourage to faith with more passages of Scripture. This is to be merely a general form of confession for the unlearned.

(Triglot pp. 552–554.)

4. The Small Catechism, Part VI — The Sacrament of the Altar

VI. The Sacrament of the Altar, as the Head of a Family Should Teach It in a Simple Way to His Household.

What is the Sacrament of the Altar?—Answer.

It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself.

Where is this written?—Answer.

The holy Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and St. Paul, write thus:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread: and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and gave it to His disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me.

After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Take, drink ye all of it. This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins. This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me.

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?—Answer.

That is shown us in these words: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?—Answer.

It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them, but the words which stand here, namely: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins. Which words are, beside the bodily eating and drinking, as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins.

Who, then, receives such Sacrament worthily?—Answer.

Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins.

But he that does not believe these words, or doubts, is unworthy and unfit; for the words For you require altogether believing hearts.

(Triglot pp. 554–555.)

This guide accompanies For You: Where God Hands Over Forgiveness by Larry Herzog Jr. It may be copied and distributed freely. The confessional texts are in the public domain.