

A FREE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE

Under the Word: Field Guide

A Confessional Field Guide for Sunday School Teachers

By Larry Herzog Jr.

Ordinary Means

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Introduction

Why this exists

You have been asked to teach, and you said yes. That was the right answer.

But you did not arrive empty. You came from somewhere — a Baptist youth group, a non-denominational church that met in a school gym, a Catholic parish, a Lutheran congregation that had quietly stopped teaching the Catechism, or a childhood of Sunday school flannelgraphs whose theology nobody ever named out loud. Whatever you were given there came with you, and some of it is worth keeping, and some of it will quietly work against the very thing you are now trying to teach.

That is not an accusation. It is the ordinary situation of nearly every volunteer teacher in an American Lutheran congregation, and it is the situation this guide was written for.

Most of the errors in this book are not held by bad teachers. They are held by earnest ones, who learned them from people who loved them, in churches that meant well. That matters for how you use what follows. **The purpose of this guide is not to catch anyone.** It is to give a teacher a way to recognize a familiar sentence, understand what it is actually teaching, and know what to put in its place — starting with the sentences he has said himself.

Read your own entries first. Almost everyone has one.

What each entry does

Every entry has the same seven parts, and they are meant to be used in that order.

What you may hear — the error in a real teacher's mouth, in the words it actually shows up in. If you don't recognize it here, the entry probably isn't your problem.

Why it matters — what the sentence is teaching underneath, and what it costs the person who believes it. Usually the cost is assurance.

What to do instead — the practical move, numbered, in the moment.

One line you can actually use — a single sentence you could say out loud on Sunday without preparing.

If the student asks — the same error arriving from the other direction, as a question rather than a claim. This is the form you will meet most often, and it is often the more urgent one.

The confessional citation — the ground you are standing on, and where to find it.

What not to do — the overcorrection. This section exists because most of these errors have an opposite, and a teacher who avoids one by falling into the other has not helped anyone.

What this guide cites, and why

This guide was written from within the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, and it cites under the AFLC's standard. That standard is defined by what an AFLC congregation subscribes to in its constitution: the three ecumenical creeds, Luther's Small Catechism, and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, together with the AFLC's *Fundamental Principles and Rules for Work*.

Notice what is on that list and what is not. There is no unqualified subscription to the whole Book of Concord.

So the entries cite the creeds, the Augustana, and the Small Catechism as **binding**. The Apology, the Formula of Concord, the Large Catechism, the Smalcald Articles, and the Treatise appear where they are useful, always marked **supplementary**, and never as though they settle a question. They are frequently richer and more detailed than the binding texts. They are still not this standard, and this guide will not quietly upgrade them.

If your congregation subscribes more broadly — many Lutheran congregations subscribe to the entire Book of Concord without qualification — then the texts marked supplementary here are binding for you, and you should use them freely. Nothing in this guide is weakened by that. The marking exists so that a reader always knows which ground he is standing on, not to fence anyone off from the Confessions.

Two practical notes. Quotations are from the Kolb-Wengert edition, and the entries **paraphrase with locators rather than quote** — the translation is under copyright even though the confessional texts themselves are not, and paraphrase keeps a free congregational resource free of permissions questions. Scripture is the NET, marked (NET), for the same reason.

One thing you may find surprising as you read: the binding texts are usually enough. Several entries turn on a single article — Augsburg XVII rejects the millennial scheme by name, Augsburg II settles the age of accountability, the Small Catechism's *daily* answers re-dedication in one word. You will rarely need to reach past the Catechism you already own.

Where to take it

Every entry ends up sending a teacher somewhere. Two rules govern that, and they hold across all eighteen.

Teaching problems go to whoever carries oversight of teaching in your congregation. In some congregations that is the pastor alone. In others he shares it with a board — in the congregation this guide was written from, the deacons carry Sunday school oversight as an extension of the pastoral office, so a teaching matter may go to the pastor or to the deacon board.

Find out which it is where you are, and find out now. This is not a technicality. Pastors take sabbaticals and congregations go through vacancies, and a guide whose only route runs through a pastor who is not currently in the building would fail at exactly the moment it was needed.

Confession and absolution do not travel with that oversight. They belong to the office of the ministry. Where an entry sends someone to confess a sin, it sends them to the pastor, and the deacon board is not a substitute. You may — and should — say the gospel to anyone: *Christ died for that, and your sins are forgiven for his sake.* That is yours by baptism, and no one needs a call to say it. What you may not do is receive a confession and absolve as one holding the office.

A caution about the room. Nearly every entry says some version of *not in front of the class*. Correcting a fellow teacher publicly, or correcting a child publicly, produces a memory of the conflict and no memory of the doctrine. Let the hour end.

One word about reach. Where this guide describes a congregation's actual practice, it is describing one congregation's — the author's. AFLC polity says free congregations have no right to demand that others submit to their judgment — and a congregation that acknowledges no ecclesiastical authority above itself cannot coherently claim authority over another. This guide will not do in print what that freedom forbids. Doctrine is another matter: where an entry cites the creeds, the Augustana, or the Catechism, it is not offering a local opinion. It is repeating what the church has confessed, and you may lean on it.

A note on the examples

The teachers quoted in these entries are not real. Every scenario, every sentence attributed to a teacher, and every student question is a composite — written to make a situation recognizable, not reported from a particular classroom.

That is deliberate. Correcting a fellow teacher is delicate work, and a guide that drew its examples from real congregations would be doing in print the thing it tells you not to do in the hallway. Nobody here is being described.

It also means you cannot read these entries as being about anyone in particular — including, if you are wondering, about you. If you recognize yourself in one, that is because the errors are common, which is the entire reason the guide exists.

What is not here

The office of the ministry. This guide does not carry an entry on the priesthood of all believers, the pastoral office, or what distinguishes a lay teacher from a pastor. That is not an oversight and it is not because the question is unimportant — it is the most important question a lay teacher faces, and it needs a chapter rather than an entry. It is treated at length in *Under the Word*, and if that question is what brought you here, go there instead.

Anything requiring a diagnosis. Several entries touch grief, fear, and long private struggle. The guide tells you where the doctrinal line is; it does not equip you to counsel anyone, and it repeatedly tells you not to try.

A verdict on other churches. Almost every error here is the settled teaching of some congregation nearby, taught sincerely by people who read their Bibles. Correct the doctrine. Leave the grandmother out of it.

One last thing

If you read this guide and come away mainly with a list of things other people get wrong, it has done you harm rather than good.

The teacher this book is for is the one who reads an entry, recognizes his own sentence in it, and changes what he says next Sunday. That teacher is not a liability to his congregation. He is the most valuable person in the building — someone willing to be taught while he teaches, which is the only kind of teacher the church has ever safely had.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Conversion and Assurance

Where most of the errors in this guide actually live.

1 — The Sinner's Prayer

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

A teacher closes the third-grade hour like this:

"Now, if you want Jesus to be your Savior, I want you to bow your head and pray this after me. Dear Jesus, I know I'm a sinner. I ask you to come into my heart and be my Savior. Amen. If you prayed that and you meant it, you're saved, and you can write today's date in the front of your Bible."

Or, more quietly, in a hallway afterward: "I just wanted to make sure they'd all made a decision."

WHY IT MATTERS

The prayer is not wrong because it is a prayer, or because it asks something of Jesus. It is wrong because of where it puts the child's confidence. Every clause of it locates salvation in something the child did in the last ninety seconds — the asking, the meaning it, the date in the front of the Bible. When the child is fifteen and cannot remember whether he meant it, he has nowhere to look but inward, and inward is exactly where assurance is not.

The teacher is almost never trying to teach a false doctrine. He is trying to make sure no child is left out. That instinct is good, and the correction should honor it rather than shame it. What he has not seen is that the children in front of him have already been given the thing he is trying to give them, and it was given from outside them, by name, with water and a promise.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Point them to their baptism.

Not as a topic. As a fact about each child in the room, spoken in the past tense and the passive voice: *God put his name on you*. The grammar is the correction. The sinner's prayer is something the child does; baptism is something that was done to the child, and can be told back to him for the rest of his life.

Concretely, in the moment:

1. **Do not correct the teacher in front of the class.** Let the hour end.

2. **Close the hour on the promise, not the decision.** If you are the teacher: end with what is already true — Christ died for you, you were baptized into his death, you are his.
3. **If a child asks how to be saved,** answer with what God has done and where he has put it: the cross, the font, the Word he keeps hearing. Never send a child looking for a feeling to verify.
4. **If children have already been led in the prayer,** do not tell them the prayer was worthless. Tell them the better news: they did not have to get that right, because God had already claimed them, and he did not do it on the strength of how well they prayed.
5. **Take it to the pastor or the deacon board,** not to the parking lot. Use whoever your congregation has charged with oversight of teaching; in the congregation this guide was written from, the deacons carry Sunday school oversight as an extension of the pastoral office, so either route is right. A teacher using an evangelical formula usually learned it in a church that loved him. He needs that oversight, and it needs to know this happened.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You don't have to remember the day you chose Jesus. You get to remember the day he chose you — and that one is written down."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

This is the same error arriving from the other direction, and it is the form you will meet most often. A child or an adult asks:

"How do I know I'm really saved? What if I didn't mean it when I prayed?"

Do not answer by helping them examine the sincerity of the prayer. That is the trap the question is already inside; a better-inspected feeling is still a feeling. Move the ground:

"That's the wrong place to look, and I'm glad you asked, because you can stop looking there. You weren't saved by meaning something hard enough. You were baptized. God said your name and put his promise on you, and he has not taken it back. When you doubt, don't check your feelings — go back to that."

Then, if it keeps coming up, hand it to the pastor. Persistent anxiety about assurance is not a curriculum problem, and it is not yours to resolve alone. This one goes to the pastor rather than the deacon board — a conscience in that condition needs the office, not oversight.

THE CONFSSIONAL CITATION

AFLC congregations subscribe, in their constitutions, to the three ecumenical creeds, Luther's Small Catechism, and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Entries cite those three first; anything beyond is marked supplementary. If your congregation subscribes to the whole Book of Concord, the supplementary texts are binding for you — see the introduction.

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession V** — the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted so that we may obtain this faith; through the Word and sacraments as instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith where and when it pleases God. The article then rejects those who hold that the Spirit comes to people without the external Word, through their own preparations and works. This is the decisive article. The sinner's prayer is a preparation and a work; AC V says the Spirit does not come that way.
- **Augsburg Confession IX** — baptism is necessary to salvation; by baptism the grace of God is offered; children are to be baptized.
- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Second Part** — what benefits baptism gives: forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Apology IV and Formula of Concord II treat conversion and the bound will at length and are useful to the teacher who wants to go deeper. Do not cite them as the congregation's standard.

Edition: Kolb-Wengert. Confessional summaries here are paraphrase, not quotation, cited by article and part; see the Kolb-Wengert note in the Entries 2–5 file.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5; John 15:16.

WHAT NOT TO DO

The overcorrection is real and does its own damage. Do not:

- **Tell a child his baptism means he is fine regardless of whether he believes.** Baptism is not a charm. The Catechism ties the benefit to faith in the promise, and the answer to a child who does not believe is to keep preaching the promise, not to reassure him that the water did it mechanically.
- **Treat every mention of a decision as heresy.** A teacher saying "I want you to trust Jesus" is not teaching decision theology. Reserve the correction for where confidence is actually being relocated.
- **Make baptism into a new work.** "Remember your baptism harder" is the sinner's prayer wearing a Lutheran coat.
- **Correct in front of children.** They will remember the conflict and forget the doctrine.

2 — The Altar Call and the Invitation

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

The Sunday school hour ends and a teacher says:

"With every head bowed and every eye closed — if you want to give your heart to Jesus this morning, I want you to slip your hand up. I see that hand. Now, if you raised your hand, come on up here and we'll pray together."

Or in a children's class, gentler and harder to name: "Who wants to ask Jesus into their heart today? Come stand up here with me."

WHY IT MATTERS

The altar call is not a neutral method with a theological problem attached. The method *is* the theology. Everything in it — the bowed heads, the raised hand, the walk to the front — teaches that the decisive moment is a movement the person makes toward God, in public, under mild pressure, on a schedule set by the teacher.

That is a claim about how the Holy Spirit works, and the Confession rejects it by name. It also does something the teacher never intends: it makes salvation an event with witnesses, and a child who did not raise his hand now knows something about himself that his baptism flatly contradicts.

The pressure matters, too, and should be said plainly. Children comply. A nine-year-old in a room where hands are going up will raise his hand because the adults want him to, and the teacher will read that as fruit. It is not fruit. It is a child being agreeable.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

The invitation is not wrong; the direction is. God does the coming, and he does it through means. So invite them to the means.

1. **End the hour with a promise, not a summons.** "Jesus died for you. You were baptized into him. That is settled, and it was settled before you got here."
2. **If a child does want to talk**, talk with him — gladly, and without the room watching. Never make a spiritual conversation a public performance for other children.
3. **Point to what recurs, not to what happened once.** He will hear the Word next Sunday, and the Sunday after. The Christian life is a life of receiving, not a moment of deciding.
4. **Never ask a child to make a public spiritual commitment in front of peers.** If a teacher is doing this, it goes to the pastor or the deacon board promptly. This one is not a matter of taste.
5. **If hands have already gone up**, do not shame anyone. Tell them the better news: God's hand was up first.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You don't have to come to the front. Christ already came to you — and he'll be here next week, doing the same thing."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But how do I come to Jesus? Don't I have to do something?"

The question is honest and deserves a straight answer rather than a lecture on synergism.

"You do — you're doing it. You came to hear his Word. That's not a small thing, and it isn't nothing. But you didn't get yourself here first; he came and got you at the font, and he keeps coming every time you hear this. Coming to Jesus mostly looks like showing up where he's promised to be."

An adult version arrives as: *"So Lutherans don't believe in conversion?"* Answer that we believe in it so strongly that we will not credit it to the convert.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Third Article** — I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and kept me in the true faith. This is the entry's decisive citation, and it is the one a Sunday school teacher is most likely to have memorized as a child. Use that.
- **Augsburg Confession V** — the Spirit is given through the Word and sacraments as instruments; those who hold that the Spirit comes without the external Word, through our own preparations and works, are rejected.
- **Nicene Creed** — the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life. The giving is his.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Formula of Concord II on the bound will develops this at length and is the best further reading for a teacher who wants it.

Scripture: John 6:44; John 15:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not make refusing the altar call into the badge.** A congregation that mostly defines itself by what it does not do at the end of a service has traded one performance for another.
- **Do not treat a child's interest as a symptom.** A child who wants to talk about Jesus is not infected with evangelicalism. Talk with him.
- **Do not correct this in front of the children.** Especially not this one — the children in the room raised their hands, and a public correction tells them the thing they did was shameful.
- **Do not assume bad faith in the teacher.** Most teachers who give invitations were given one, and it is the only shape of caring for souls they have ever been shown.

3 — "Ask Jesus into Your Heart"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Not from the front, usually. In passing, as the ordinary way of speaking:

"Has anybody here asked Jesus into their heart yet? Because that's all it takes — you just open the door and let him in."

Or to one child, kindly, at the craft table: "Do you want to ask Jesus into your heart? You can do it right now, in your head. He's waiting."

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the phrase, not the ritual. Entries 1 and 2 handle the prayer and the invitation; this one handles the sentence that survives after both have been dropped, because it sounds like nothing at all.

Three things are wrong with it, in ascending order.

It makes Christ passive and the child active. He is waiting outside; the child opens; the transaction completes. Every arrow points the wrong way.

It has no means attached. Christ arrives by an act of imagination, in a place nobody can inspect. Ask a child afterward whether Jesus is in his heart and he has nothing to check but a feeling, which is where this whole family of errors always lands.

And children take it literally. A seven-year-old told that Jesus lives in his heart will believe exactly that, and the belief will not survive an anatomy lesson. What replaces it, usually, is a private suspicion that the whole thing was a story for children.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Speak of Christ arriving from outside, at places you can point to.

1. **Use the external language the Catechism uses.** He comes in the Word you are hearing. He came in the water with your name in it. He comes in the Supper, given for you.
2. **Point at things in the room.** The font is in the building. The book is on the table. A child can be walked to a font; he cannot be walked to his own heart.
3. **Keep the indwelling, lose the invitation.** Scripture does say Christ dwells in us by faith. The error is not the dwelling; it is making the dwelling something the child arranges.
4. **When a child asks whether Jesus is in his heart,** do not audit him. Answer with what is outside: "You're baptized. He said so himself, and he doesn't take it back."

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You don't have to let him in. He came and got you, and he brought water."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"So Jesus isn't in my heart?"

Do not answer no. The child is not asking a doctrinal question; he is asking whether he has been left out.

"He is. But not because you asked him in — because he came for you and made you his own at your baptism. That's why you can be sure of it. If it depended on you asking right, you'd never stop wondering whether you did."

An adult asks it differently: *"Isn't this just semantics?"* It is not. Ask them where they would send a doubting person to check — and let them notice that the phrase gives them nowhere to send him.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Third Article** — I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; the Holy Spirit calls by the gospel. Decisive, and the plain contradiction of an invitation model.
- **Augsburg Confession V** — the Spirit is given through the Word and sacraments as instruments; the article rejects the notion that the Spirit comes apart from the external Word. "Ask him into your heart" is precisely a coming apart from the external Word.
- **Small Catechism, the Sacrament of the Altar** — given and shed *for you*, for the forgiveness of sins. The direction of the whole sacramental grammar: toward us.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Formula of Concord II on the bound will.

Scripture: John 6:44; Ephesians 3:17 — the dwelling is real, and it is by faith rather than by invitation.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not police the phrase in ordinary conversation.** Correcting a grandmother at a potluck for saying it about her grandson will cost you the classroom and gain nothing.
- **Do not deny that Christ dwells in believers.** Overcorrecting into pure externalism leaves the class with a Christ who is nearby but not theirs.

- **Do not make the correction a vocabulary rule.** The goal is that children know where to look, not that a banned sentence goes unspoken.
 - **Do not tell a child his earlier asking was pointless.** He prayed to Jesus. Jesus heard him. The problem was never the child's prayer.
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4 — "When Were You Saved?"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, warmly, going around the room:

"Why don't we each share our testimony — when you got saved, and what your life was like before."

Or one-to-one, with concern: "You've been in church your whole life, but do you know the day you were actually saved? Because a lot of people go their whole lives thinking they're Christians."

WHY IT MATTERS

Here the error is not a formula but a form of evidence. Salvation is being verified biographically: a date, a before, an after. Anyone whose life supplies those has assurance. Anyone whose life does not is under suspicion — including, especially, the person raised in the faith who was baptized as an infant and cannot remember not believing.

That person is the whole point of this entry. He is sitting in your class. He has heard this question for years, has no answer, and has quietly concluded that his faith is second-rate — or worse, has invented a date to keep the conversation moving.

The form also flatters. A testimony with a dramatic before makes a better story, which means the quiet lifelong Christian learns that his life is the boring version of the thing. It is not. It is the ordinary shape of covenant faithfulness, and Scripture is full of it.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Give the date that exists.** Almost everyone in the room has one, on a certificate, in a church register: the day they were baptized. That is a public, external, verifiable date, and it is God's act rather than theirs.
2. **Reframe the sharing exercise** rather than banning it. Ask what God has done, or where they have been carried, instead of when they decided.
3. **Name the lifelong Christian's story as a story.** "I was baptized as a baby, catechized by my grandmother, and I have never known a time when Christ was not mine" is a testimony. Say so out loud, in front of the class, so the person who needed to hear it does.

4. **Watch for the invented date.** Someone who produces a suspiciously tidy answer under pressure may be complying. Do not press.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"I can tell you the day I was saved — it was a Friday, outside Jerusalem. And I can tell you the day I got it: it's on my baptism certificate."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But shouldn't a Christian be able to say what God has done for them?"

Yes, and this is the good instinct inside the bad form. Do not crush it.

"Absolutely — and you just did. The difference is whether the story is evidence you're producing or news you're reporting. Tell me what Christ has done. You don't have to prove anything with it."

The harder version, from the person with no date: *"So am I saved?"* Answer without hesitating and without inspecting him: *"You're baptized. Yes."*

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Third Article** — the Spirit calls by the gospel, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps. The verbs are all his and none of them is dated.
- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism** — the benefits, and the daily return. The one date the Catechism cares about is the one God made.
- **Augsburg Confession V** — faith is worked where and when it pleases God, through Word and sacrament. *Where and when it pleases God* is the direct answer to a demand for a date.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Apology IV on faith as trust rather than experience.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 3:15.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not forbid testimony.** Christians telling each other what God has done is good, ancient, and worth keeping. The form is the problem, not the speech.
- **Do not sneer at the dramatic conversion.** Someone in the room genuinely was rescued from something at twenty-six, and his story is true. Both stories are true.
- **Do not tell someone their remembered conversion did not happen.** Say instead that it does not have to carry the weight they are putting on it.

- **Do not make baptism-as-date into a new proof.** A certificate examined anxiously is a decision date wearing different clothes. The point is the promise, not the paperwork.
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5 — Re-dedication

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

An adult class, or a teacher's aside to a teenager who has been away:

"It sounds like you've drifted. What you need to do is re-dedicate your life to Christ. Just get alone with God this week and give it all back to him — really mean it this time — and start fresh."

Or from the front: "Some of you were on fire once. Maybe today's the day you come back and re-commit."

WHY IT MATTERS

Re-dedication sounds like repentance and is nearly its opposite. Repentance turns away from the self toward a promise outside the self. Re-dedication turns toward the self, inspects the sincerity found there, and tries again harder.

It also quietly teaches that the first dedication failed and must be redone, which locates the whole Christian life on a ladder of renewed commitments. The pastoral result is predictable: a person who has re-dedicated four times knows exactly one thing about himself, and it is that he cannot be trusted to stay dedicated. He is right. That is not a reason for a fifth attempt.

The Catechism has a better answer, and it is a daily one rather than an occasional one.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Return them to their baptism — not as a memory, as a present tense.

1. **Name the drift honestly.** Do not minimize it. Sin is sin, and pretending otherwise gives the gospel nothing to do.
2. **Preach the daily shape.** The old Adam is drowned daily and the new man rises daily. Not once at a camp altar. Daily, and mostly unfelt.
3. **Send them to where forgiveness is actually delivered** — the Word preached, the absolution, the Supper. Confession and absolution is the pastor's office and the concrete answer to a conscience that wants to do something.
4. **Refuse the fresh-start framing.** There is no fresh start on offer. There is a promise that never lapsed.
5. **If the drift involves anything the teacher is not equipped to carry,** hand it to the pastor rather than prescribing a spiritual regimen. Note that this is one of the few escalations that

goes to the pastor specifically: confession and absolution belong to the office, and the deacon board is not a substitute for it.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You don't need to give your life back to God. You need to hear again that he hasn't given you back."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But I really did walk away. Doesn't that have to be dealt with? It feels too easy."

The instinct is not wrong, and flattening it is a mistake. Something does need dealing with — but it is dealt with by absolution, not by resolve.

"It does have to be dealt with, and that's why you go to the pastor and say it out loud and hear him say Christ forgives you. That's not easy — it's the hardest thing in the Christian life. What's easy is promising God you'll do better, because nobody has to hear it and nothing has to be said back."

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Fourth Part** — what such baptizing with water indicates: that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. This is the entry's decisive citation, and it is the whole answer in one sentence: *daily*, not again.
- **Small Catechism, Confession** — what confession is, and the instruction to receive the absolution as from God himself.
- **Augsburg Confession XII** — repentance consists properly of two parts: contrition, and faith which is born of the gospel and believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. Note what is not in the two parts: a promise of future performance.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Apology XII treats contrition and faith at length and is the best further reading here.

Scripture: Romans 6:3–4; 1 John 1:9.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not tell a drifting person that nothing has happened.** Baptism does not make sin harmless, and a person who senses real damage should not be told he is imagining it.
- **Do not turn baptism into the new work.** "Remember your baptism harder" is re-dedication in a Lutheran accent, and a conscience can be crushed by it just as easily.

- **Do not administer absolution yourself.** The boundary is settled: a lay teacher may and should speak the gospel — Christ died for you, your sins are forgiven for his sake. He may not receive private confession or present himself as the office to which it is made. Say the gospel freely; when someone begins to confess, take them to the pastor.
 - **Do not prescribe a program.** Devotional plans given to a guilty conscience become a ladder within a week.
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6 — "Once Saved, Always Saved"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

An adult class, usually kindly, about someone absent:

"Well, he made a profession of faith when he was seventeen, so he's saved. He's living however he wants now, but you can't lose it. Once saved, always saved."

Or the mirror image, from someone frightened: "So I could lose my salvation? Then how could anyone ever be sure of anything?"

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the one entry where the correction has to run in two directions at once, and a teacher who only runs it one way does harm.

The doctrine as stated is false: the Confession says plainly that those once justified can lose the Holy Spirit. Faith is not a deposit made at seventeen. It is a living trust that is given, sustained, and capable of being abandoned.

But the reason the doctrine is attractive is not carelessness. It is that people want assurance, and they are right to want it. Take away "once saved, always saved" and put nothing in its place and you have manufactured a room full of anxious people checking their own pulse — which is decision theology's other face and does more pastoral damage than the error you corrected.

The Lutheran answer is not *less* assurance. It is assurance relocated: not in a past decision, and not in present performance, but in a promise God is still making.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Say the doctrine is wrong, and say why in one sentence:** faith can be abandoned, and Scripture warns the baptized about it because the warning is real.
2. **Immediately give them where assurance does sit** — never leave a gap between the two. God's promise, attached to his name at the font, delivered again every time the Word is preached.

3. **Change the question.** The useful question is not *am I still saved* but *where has God promised to be, and am I going there*.
4. **Do not adjudicate the absent person.** The class is speculating about someone's salvation who is not in the room. Redirect. That conversation has no faithful ending.
5. **Watch the room while you say it.** Someone present is not asking academically.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You can walk away from Christ. What you can't do is walk somewhere he stops offering himself."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"Then how can I ever be sure? If I could lose it, I'll spend my whole life worrying."

This is the question that matters, and the answer must not be a qualification.

"You'd be right to worry if it depended on you holding on. It doesn't. Look at where God has actually said something to you — your baptism, the words you hear preached, the Supper. He's not being coy. He's saying it out loud, to you, over and over, and he doesn't say it to people he intends to drop. Certainty isn't something you generate. It's something you go and receive."

THE CONFSSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession XII** — condemning those who deny that a person once justified can lose the Holy Spirit; and defining repentance as contrition and the faith born of the gospel.
- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Third Article** — the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and *keeps* in the true faith. The keeping is his work, which is why the warning does not become terror.
- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Second Part** — the benefit is given to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. The benefit is tied to faith and to God's promise, not to a remembered date.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Formula of Concord XI addresses election as comfort rather than speculation and is the right further reading for anyone who leaves this conversation anxious.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:12 with Philipians 1:6 — the warning and the promise, and the teacher should never quote one without the other.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not win the argument and leave the wound.** Refuting the slogan without relocating assurance is the single most damaging thing this entry can produce.

- **Do not make it a denominational fight.** The person repeating the slogan is usually quoting a Baptist grandmother he loved. Correct the doctrine; leave her alone.
 - **Do not encourage self-examination as the remedy.** "Examine whether you're truly saved" sends a doubting conscience to the one place with no answer in it.
 - **Do not speculate about the absent person's salvation,** in either direction. Nobody in that room knows, and the guessing is itself the problem.
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7 — Carnal and Spiritual Christians

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, or a men's group:

"There are really three kinds of people — the natural man, the carnal Christian, and the spiritual Christian. A lot of folks get saved and then stall out. They're going to heaven, but they're carnal. What they need is to surrender fully and let the Spirit take over."

Sometimes with a name attached: the second blessing, the deeper life, full surrender, getting victory.

WHY IT MATTERS

The scheme creates two classes of Christian and puts a second event between them. Whatever it is called — surrender, filling, victory — it functions as a second conversion, and the first one is thereby demoted to insufficient.

It also mislocates the Christian's actual experience. The believer who finds sin still in himself is told he has stalled, when in fact he is describing what the Christian life is: the old Adam and the new man in the same person until death. Diagnosed as a stall, that experience produces either despair or pretending, and congregations that teach this get plenty of both.

And it relocates assurance again — this time onto the second event. A man who cannot remember surrendering fully now has two dates to be unsure about instead of one.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Refuse the two tiers outright.** There is one kind of Christian: a baptized sinner who lives by forgiveness. Say it plainly; the relief in the room is often visible.
2. **Name the experience correctly.** Finding sin still present is not failure to advance. It is the accurate diagnosis the Catechism assumes when it prescribes drowning the old Adam *daily*.
3. **Put growth where it belongs** — in the ordinary means, over a long time, mostly unfelt. Not in a crisis, not in a decision, not in a conference.

4. **Ask what the person is actually struggling with.** "Carnal Christian" is frequently the language someone reaches for when they mean a real and specific sin. Deal with the sin. Take it to the pastor if it needs him.
5. **Do not offer a technique.** Every fix for this problem that comes in steps recreates it.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"There's no advanced class. There's the font, the Word, and the Supper, and you'll need all three until they bury you."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But some Christians obviously are more mature. Isn't that real?"

It is, and denying it makes you sound foolish.

"Of course it's real — some people have been carried further and it shows. What isn't real is that maturity comes from a second event you have to unlock. It comes from years of hearing the same gospel. The most mature person you know didn't surrender harder than you. He's just been fed longer."

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession XVI** — the gospel does not overturn ordinary callings and civil life; the article rejects locating Christian perfection in forsaking them. The two-tier scheme is the same instinct in a modern accent.
- **Augsburg Confession XXVII** — against the claim that a special state or discipline constitutes a higher Christian perfection. Written about monastic vows; it lands squarely on the deeper-life scheme.
- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Fourth Part** — daily contrition and repentance; the old Adam drowned daily, the new man daily rising. Decisive: *daily* is a description of every Christian, not of the stalled ones.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Formula of Concord VI on the third use of the law; Luther's *simul iustus et peccator* is the phrase people find most useful once they have this.

Scripture: Romans 7:15–25; Galatians 3:3.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not deny that sanctification is real.** Overcorrecting into "nothing changes" is its own error and leaves the class with a gospel that makes no difference.

- **Do not use *simul iustus et peccator* as permission.** A man justifying a persistent sin by quoting Luther needs the pastor, not a Latin tag.
 - **Do not mock the vocabulary.** "Full surrender" is often the language of someone who is genuinely serious about God and has been handed the wrong map.
 - **Do not diagnose anyone's tier while refuting tiers.** The temptation to say "that's just carnal-Christian thinking" is the scheme reasserting itself.
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The Sacraments

The same errors, arriving as practice rather than as speech.

8 — The Age of Accountability

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Usually offered as comfort, in an adult class after a hard question:

"Babies who die are fine — they're under the age of accountability. They can't really sin yet, and they can't understand enough to believe, so God covers them until they're old enough to decide."

And the same doctrine, doing different work: "That's why we don't baptize infants. Wait until she's old enough to know what it means."

WHY IT MATTERS

The age of accountability is not in Scripture and is not a minor speculative add-on. It is the load-bearing wall under believer's baptism, and most people holding it have never seen it as a doctrine at all — it arrived as an obvious fact about children.

It requires two claims. First, that small children are not really sinners yet, which the Confession denies flatly and by name. Second, that faith requires comprehension, which makes faith a function of intelligence and quietly disqualifies the profoundly disabled along with infants.

The pastoral effect is the reverse of what the teacher intends. Comfort is being offered to grieving parents on the basis of a child's innocence — that is, on the basis of the child not needing Christ. That comfort collapses the moment anyone thinks about it, and it has nothing to say to the parents of a baptized infant who died.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Say what the Confession says about original sin**, gently and without hedging: we are born in sin, all of us, from the beginning. This is not cruelty toward children; it is the reason they are given the same Savior everyone else gets.
2. **Locate a child's standing where it actually is** — in baptism, where God named him and made a promise, without waiting for him to be old enough to be interesting.
3. **Answer the grief question directly if it is asked**, because it usually is what is underneath: we commend children to the mercy of God in Christ, and that mercy is not stingier than our theories. Do not manufacture a doctrine to make the answer feel firmer than it is.

4. **Separate the two uses.** As comfort in bereavement, treat it pastorally and take it to the pastor. As an argument against infant baptism, answer it doctrinally, and take the teaching problem to the pastor or the deacon board.
5. **Do not let it pass as harmless.** It sounds like kindness and functions as an argument.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"Children aren't safe because they're too little to sin. They're safe because they're not too little for Christ."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"Are you saying a baby who dies without baptism is lost?"

The question is asked with real weight and deserves an answer that neither flinches nor overclaims.

"No — I'm saying I don't get to answer that, and neither does anyone else. God binds us to baptism; he doesn't bind himself. What I can tell you is that his mercy is bigger than the rule he gave us, and that the reason we baptize children as soon as we can isn't fear. It's that there's a promise available and no reason to make a child wait for it."

Then take a grieving parent to the pastor. This question is almost never academic.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession II, Original Sin** — all are born with sin, without fear of God and without trust in him; the article condemns those who deny that original sin is truly sin. Decisive: the age of accountability requires exactly the denial AC II names.
- **Augsburg Confession IX, Baptism** — baptism is necessary to salvation; the grace of God is offered by it; children are to be baptized; the article rejects those who reject infant baptism.
- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Second Part** — the benefits given, to all who believe the words and promises of God.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Large Catechism on Baptism develops the infant-faith question at length and is the best further reading.

Scripture: Psalm 51:5; Mark 10:14.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not use AC II as a club at a graveside.** The doctrine is true and the funeral is not the hour for it.

- **Do not claim more certainty about unbaptized infants than the Confessions give you.** They do not answer it, and pretending otherwise damages your credibility on everything else in this guide.
 - **Do not let "children are sinners" land as "children are wicked."** The point is that they are ordinary human beings who need what everyone needs.
 - **Do not turn it into an argument about the neighbors' church.** The person in front of you is asking about a child, not about Baptists.
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9 — Believer's Baptism and Re-baptism

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, from someone recently arrived:

"I was baptized as a baby, but that didn't mean anything to me — I wasn't the one deciding. So when I got saved at nineteen I got baptized for real, and that's the one that counts."

Or from a teacher, gently, about a family: "They're waiting until she's old enough to make it her own decision."

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the richest entry in the guide and the one you are most likely to need, because the doctrine underneath it is invisible to the people holding it. They are not arguing against baptismal regeneration. They have simply never heard that baptism does anything, and so it looks to them like an act of obedience the believer performs after the fact — a public statement of what he has already decided.

Everything turns on direction. If baptism is something the believer does, then an infant's baptism is a category error and the nineteen-year-old was right to redo it. If baptism is something God does, then redoing it is not a stronger commitment but an implicit judgment that God's first word did not take.

That is the pastoral heart of it, and it is why re-baptism is the sharper problem of the two. A person who is re-baptized has been taught, without anyone intending it, that God's promise is only as good as the recipient's understanding. Which means the promise is now resting on him, and it always was — and that is the assurance problem this whole guide keeps circling.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Reverse the arrow, and do it concretely.** Baptism is not a statement you make. It is a name God put on you. Ask the class who did the acting in their baptism and let the silence work.

2. **Answer the comprehension objection directly**, because it is the real objection: a baby cannot understand. Neither could any of us at our own conversion understand what was happening; faith is a gift the Spirit gives through the Word and the water, not a competence the recipient brings.
3. **Do not argue infant baptism from silence**. The strongest ground is what baptism *is* and *does*. Establish that, and the age question mostly answers itself.
4. **With someone already re-baptized, be careful**. Do not tell them the second baptism was invalid and leave it there. Tell them the first one was already good — that God had claimed them long before they knew it, and their nineteen-year-old faith did not create that; it recognized it.
5. **Take the pattern to the pastor or deacon board**, not the individual case. Whether a re-baptized member needs anything further is not a Sunday school teacher's call.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You weren't baptized because you decided. You were baptized because God did."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But if my baptism as a baby was real, why did I feel nothing for twenty years?"

The question is honest and the answer must not be a rebuke.

"Because it was never about the feeling. That's the good part. God gave you something that didn't depend on whether you were paying attention — and when you came back, you weren't starting from zero. You were coming home to a promise that had been sitting there the whole time with your name on it."

The adult version — *"then does the second baptism count for nothing?"* — should be answered honestly: the church does not re-do what God has done once. Then take it to the pastor.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, First Part** — what baptism is: not simply water, but water used with God's command and connected with God's word. Decisive. The whole entry is contained in *connected with God's word*.
- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Third Part** — how water can do such great things: it is not the water that does them, but the word of God with the water and faith trusting that word. This is the direct answer to the comprehension objection and the guard against treating baptism mechanically.

- **Augsburg Confession IX** — baptism is necessary to salvation, the grace of God is offered by it, and children are to be baptized; the article rejects those who reject infant baptism.

Supplementary, not binding here: the Large Catechism on Baptism handles infant faith at length and is the single best further reading for a teacher who wants more.

Scripture: Titus 3:5; Acts 2:38–39; Colossians 2:11–12.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not make baptism work without faith.** The Catechism ties the benefit to trusting the word. A person who says "I was baptized" while despising the Word has not been given a charm.
- **Do not attack the sincerity of the second baptism.** The person meant it, and mocking it ends the conversation before the doctrine arrives.
- **Do not settle a member's status.** Whether anything needs to be done about a re-baptism belongs to the pastor.
- **Do not overrun the parents in the room** who are waiting to baptize a child. Say what baptism is and let it work; a public correction of a family's decision is not a Sunday school teacher's business.

10 — Baby Dedication Instead of Baptism

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Announced from the front, warmly, with the family standing:

"This morning we're dedicating little Emma to the Lord. Mom and Dad are promising to raise her in a Christian home, and when she's old enough to decide for herself, we hope she'll follow Jesus in baptism."

Or in a class, as a plan: "We're doing a dedication now and letting her choose later."

WHY IT MATTERS

This is entry 9's doctrine made into a liturgy, and it is more dangerous in that form because it occupies the slot baptism would have filled. A family that has dedicated a child feels that the churchly thing has been done. It has not.

Look at what the two rites actually deliver. In a dedication, the parents promise. In a baptism, God promises. Every verb points the wrong way: the family gives, resolves, commits; the child receives nothing, and leaves the service exactly as she arrived.

There is nothing wrong with parents vowing to raise a child in the faith — that vow is part of the baptismal rite anyway. The problem is the substitution. A child who has been dedicated has a family's intentions attached to her. A child who has been baptized has God's name attached to her, and the difference will matter enormously at two in the morning twenty years from now.

And the delay is not neutral. The reasoning is always that the child should choose. But the thing being withheld is a gift, and no one asks an infant to consent to being fed.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Name the substitution gently.** Not *dedication is wrong* — the vow is fine. The question is what the child receives.
2. **Put the two side by side and ask who acts.** This teaches faster than any argument. Parents promise; or God promises. Let the class see the grammar.
3. **Answer the choice objection.** She will choose, for the rest of her life, and every choice she makes will be a return to something already given rather than a leap from nothing. That is a better starting place, not a worse one.
4. **If a family in your class is planning a dedication, do not ambush them.** Teach what baptism is, and take the pastoral conversation to the pastor.
5. **If a dedication has already happened,** the answer is not shame. The answer is that the gift is still available and there is no expiration on it.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"A dedication is a promise your family makes. A baptism is a promise God makes. Only one of those will still be true when she's forty and doesn't want to hear about it."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"Didn't Hannah dedicate Samuel? Didn't Mary and Joseph present Jesus at the temple?"

Yes, and the question deserves a straight answer rather than a deflection.

"They did — and neither one was a substitute for anything, because baptism didn't exist yet. Presenting a child to God is a good and old instinct. The question isn't whether we can do that. It's whether we'd stop there when Christ has commanded something that actually gives her something."

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession IX** — children are to be baptized; by baptism the grace of God is offered. Decisive: the Confession does not treat infant baptism as permissible but as what is done.

- **Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Second Part** — the benefits: forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, eternal salvation, to all who believe this as the words and promises of God declare. Set this beside the content of a dedication and the comparison makes itself.
- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Third Article** — the Spirit calls by the gospel; faith is not generated by the one who has it. The answer to *let her decide*.

Supplementary: the Large Catechism on Baptism.

Scripture: Mark 10:13–16; Acts 2:39.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not sneer at dedication services.** They are usually the practice of a church that loved these families and had nothing better to offer.
- **Do not tell parents they have failed their child.** They have delayed a gift. Say the gift is still there.
- **Do not turn a class into a referendum on a family's plans.** Teach the doctrine; leave the family to the pastor.
- **Do not imply the unbaptized child is lost.** The guide does not claim more than the Confessions give — see entry 8.

11 — The Supper as a Symbol

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, stated as the obvious reading:

"The bread and the cup are symbols — they remind us of what Jesus did. He said 'do this in remembrance of me,' so it's a memorial. He couldn't have meant his actual body; he was sitting right there holding it."

WHY IT MATTERS

Once the Supper becomes a symbol, it stops being something Christ gives and becomes something we do — an act of remembering, performed with the right sincerity. The direction reverses exactly as it does with baptism, and the same consequence follows: the value of the Supper now depends on the quality of the communicant's reflection.

That is why this matters pastorally rather than just doctrinally. A symbol cannot forgive anyone. A person who comes to the rail carrying a sin he cannot shake needs something *handed to him*, and a memorial has nothing in its hands.

The words themselves are the argument, and they are unusually plain. This is my body. This is my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Paul draws the conclusion the church has always drawn: the cup of blessing is a participation in the blood of Christ, and the bread a participation in his body.

For teachers from a Roman Catholic background, note the opposite error briefly and only if it appears: Christ's sacrifice was made once. The Supper does not repeat it. What is given here is the fruit of that one sacrifice, delivered to individual people — which is why *for you* is the important phrase in the words of institution.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Read the words and stop.** Do not explain the words of institution before the class has simply heard them. Most people have never heard them read as a claim.
2. **Ask what the Supper is for.** A symbol is for remembering. Christ says his body is given and his blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Those are different jobs.
3. **Refuse the mechanism question.** *How* is not answerable and the Confession does not attempt it. Christ says what it is; we receive it.
4. **Keep *for you* central.** The Supper is not a general truth about the atonement. It is delivery, to named people, one at a time.
5. **Do not turn it into a fight about other churches.** Teach what is given here.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"A symbol can remind you that you're forgiven. Only a gift can forgive you."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But how can it be his body? That doesn't make sense."

Do not defend a mechanism you do not have.

"It doesn't make sense, and we don't explain it — that's not evasion, it's honesty. We don't know how. We know what he said it is, and we know what he said it's for. When somebody hands you a gift, the useful question isn't how it got in the box."

The other version — *"isn't 'remembrance' right there in the text?"* — should be granted immediately. It is right there. Remembrance and gift are not alternatives; the remembering happens while something is being handed over.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, the Sacrament of the Altar, First Part** — what it is: the true body and blood of Christ under the bread and the cup, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink. Decisive, and the words a teacher should be able to say from memory.
- **Small Catechism, the Sacrament of the Altar, Second Part** — the benefit: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, given through these words *for you*. The direct refutation of the memorial reading.
- **Augsburg Confession X** — the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat in the Supper.

Supplementary, not binding here: the Large Catechism and Formula of Concord VII treat the presence at length; the Formula in particular is where the mechanism question is properly refused rather than answered.

Scripture: Matthew 26:26–28; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not attempt an explanation of the mode.** A teacher who starts explaining how is about to teach something the Confessions do not.
 - **Do not use the doctrine to fence the rail from the front of a Sunday school class.** Admission to the Supper is the pastor's, not the teacher's.
 - **Do not turn *for you* into a demand for worthiness.** The Catechism says the one who believes these words is worthy and well prepared. Self-examination that ends in staying away has misfired.
 - **Do not make a symbol-holder feel stupid.** He was taught it, usually by people who loved him, and usually with a Bible open.
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How the Lesson Is Built

Errors of method rather than content, and the easiest to miss.

12 — "Dare to Be a Daniel"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Children's class, closing the lesson:

"So what do we learn from Daniel? Daniel was brave. He prayed even when it was against the law. So this week, when it's hard to do the right thing, be like Daniel!"

Or with any hero: be like David, be courageous like Esther, have faith like Abraham, be a friend like Jonathan.

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the most common error in the guide and the least likely to be recognized as one, because nothing false has been said. Daniel was brave. Children should be brave. Every sentence is true and the lesson is still wrong, because of what was left out and what the child now believes the Bible is.

A child taught this way learns that Scripture is a collection of admirable people and that his job is to match them. Two things follow, and both are predictable. He will fail — he is not braver than Daniel — and he will conclude that the Bible is mainly about his performance. When he is fifteen and has stopped succeeding, the book will have nothing to say to him, because he was taught it as a standard and never as a gift.

It also loses the actual point of the passage. Daniel in the den is not primarily a story about Daniel's courage. It is a story about a God who shuts the mouths of lions and delivers his people, told to exiles who needed to know their God was still God in Babylon. That is gospel. *Be brave* is not.

Moralism is not the opposite of Christianity. It is Christianity with the Christ removed and the imperative left standing, and it is the default setting of nearly every children's curriculum in print.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Ask what God is doing in the passage.** Not what the human character is doing. This one question, asked every week, will fix most of it.

2. **Let the text be about the rescue.** Then, if the character's faithfulness is genuinely part of the passage, teach it as the *fruit* of trusting that God — never as the lesson's point.
3. **End on what has been given, not on what is owed.** A children's lesson that ends with a command has ended in the wrong place.
4. **Watch the curriculum.** Most published children's material is moralistic by default. The application box at the end of the lesson is where it usually lives, and you may replace it.
5. **Do not strip out obedience.** The answer to moralism is not that behavior does not matter. It is that behavior follows the gift rather than earning it.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"The story isn't 'be like Daniel.' It's 'look what God did for Daniel — and he's your God too.'"

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

A child asks: > "So I don't have to be brave?"

Do not answer with a paragraph about law and gospel.

"You'll get to be brave sometimes, and God will help you. But the reason you can be brave isn't that you're strong. It's that God is holding onto you, the way he held onto Daniel. He doesn't let go when you're scared."

An adult asks: "Aren't we supposed to imitate the saints? Hebrews 11 does exactly that." Grant it, and note what Hebrews 11 says about them — they were commended for faith, and what they trusted was a promise they had not yet received. The chapter is about the object of their faith, not their character.

THE CONFSSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, the Ten Commandments** — every explanation begins with *we should fear and love God*. Even the law, in the Catechism, is taught inside a relationship God established. A children's lesson that gives the command without the God who gives it has not even taught the law correctly.
- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Second Article** — that I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom. The order: redemption first, then the living under.
- **Augsburg Confession VI** — faith should produce good fruits, and we must do the good works commanded by God — but not in order to merit justification. Decisive: fruit, not root, and the article says both halves.

Supplementary: Formula of Concord VI on the third use of the law.

Scripture: Luke 24:27; Hebrews 11:39–40.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not overcorrect into no application at all.** Children can be told what to do. They must not be told that doing it is the point.
 - **Do not force Christ into every verse artificially.** A strained typology teaches children that the Bible is a puzzle only clever people can solve. Follow the connections Scripture itself draws.
 - **Do not humiliate the teacher who does this.** Every children's curriculum in the building probably does it too.
 - **Do not make the correction abstract.** "Avoid moralism" means nothing to a volunteer. "Ask what God is doing" is portable and can be used next Sunday.
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13 — Proof-texting and "The Bible Clearly Says"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, ending a discussion:

| *"Well, the Bible clearly says it right here." (reads one verse, closes the discussion)*

Or in a chain: three verses from three books, none of them read in context, assembled into a position the class is now expected to accept.

WHY IT MATTERS

The problem is not citing Scripture. It is treating a verse as a ruling rather than as a sentence in a document — and the damage is to the reader, not just to the argument.

A class taught by proof-text learns that the Bible is a reference work of detachable statements, searchable by topic. That reading habit will hold up until the student meets a verse that says something he does not expect, and then he has no equipment at all: no sense of who was being addressed, no argument to follow, no way to tell a promise from a warning from a description of what somebody wrongly did.

The Bible clearly says also ends conversations, which is usually its function. It is a claim to have finished thinking. Sometimes Scripture is clear and saying so is right. But the phrase is most often deployed at exactly the point where a text is contested, and the teacher who reaches for it is closing a door he cannot actually hold shut.

And it works both ways. A verse can be weaponized against a student sitting three feet away. That has happened to somebody in your room.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Read the surrounding paragraph aloud. Every time.** This single habit corrects more than any explanation.
2. **Ask three questions of any verse someone quotes:** who is being addressed, what came before it, and what is the writer arguing? A class that learns those three has learned to read.
3. **Say the clear things clearly, and say the contested things honestly.** Some doctrines really are plain and the teacher should not manufacture doubt. Where honest readers differ, say so — it costs nothing and buys enormous trust.
4. **Model being stopped by a text.** Let the class watch you say "that verse is harder than I want it to be."
5. **When a verse is used as a weapon, intervene.** Redirect to the passage, and follow up privately with the person it landed on.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"Let's back up and read the paragraph. Verses don't come with the numbers; somebody added those later."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"So we can't just take the Bible at face value? Doesn't that mean anybody can make it say anything?"

The fear is legitimate and the answer should honor it.

"The opposite, actually. Taking a verse by itself is what lets people make it say anything — you can find a sentence for almost any position. Reading the whole argument is the discipline that stops it. And we're not on our own: the church has confessed what these texts mean, and we teach under that."

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession, the whole shape of it** — every article states a doctrine and then argues it from Scripture read as a whole. The Confession itself is the model: a proof-text is not how the Lutheran church has ever argued.
- **Small Catechism, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer** — each part is explained rather than merely cited. Luther's whole method is that a text has to be unfolded before it can be used.
- **Nicene Creed** — the church confesses *according to the Scriptures*, that is, according to their whole witness.

Supplementary: nothing needed. This entry is about method, and overloading it with citations would demonstrate the error it corrects.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15; Luke 24:27; Acts 17:11.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not teach that everything is complicated.** A teacher who answers every question with *well, it's contested* has disarmed his class as thoroughly as the proof-texter did.
 - **Do not use context as an escape hatch.** "You have to understand the culture" is sometimes true and sometimes a way of not obeying a plain command.
 - **Do not shame the proof-texter.** He is usually a serious Christian who was taught that this is what taking the Bible seriously looks like.
 - **Do not replace his verses with your verses.** The correction is a way of reading, not a better list.
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14 — "God Told Me"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, offered as the end of a discussion:

"I was praying about it and God told me to take the job. I just had this overwhelming peace about it, so I knew it was him."

Or from a teacher, in a children's class: "If you get real quiet, God will speak to your heart and tell you what he wants you to do."

WHY IT MATTERS

Start with what is not wrong. God does govern our lives. Christians do pray about decisions and often come away settled. Wisdom, counsel, and a quiet conscience are real gifts and it would be foolish to sneer at them.

The problem is the promotion. An impression gets described as a word from God, and once that happens three things follow that the speaker never intended.

It cannot be tested. A word from God is not open to correction. If the peace was the message, then anyone questioning the decision is questioning God, and the conversation is over.

It outranks Scripture in practice, no matter what the person says about Scripture in principle. The written Word is public, checkable, and sometimes unwelcome. The inner impression is private and congenial. When they conflict, you can guess which one bends.

It leaves people with no answer when nothing comes. Teach a class that God speaks in impressions and you have created a room where the ones who hear nothing conclude God is not speaking to them — while he is, out loud, in the book on the table, every Sunday.

With children this is sharper still. Tell an eight-year-old that God will speak to her heart if she gets quiet enough, and she will get quiet, and she will hear her own thoughts, and she will either manufacture something or decide that God talks to everyone but her.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Relocate the speaking, do not deny it.** God speaks. He does it in a way you can point at: the Word read, preached, and applied. That is not a lesser form of speech. It is the form he promised.
2. **Give the impression its real name and keep it.** "I prayed, I thought about it, I felt settled, so I decided" is honest, useful, and unobjectionable. Nothing is lost but the claim.
3. **Teach the test.** Anything that contradicts Scripture is not from God, whatever it felt like. Say this before it is needed, calmly, when nobody's decision is on the table.
4. **Protect the ones who hear nothing.** Say out loud, in class, that many faithful Christians never have such experiences and are not missing anything.
5. **Escalate when an impression is directing someone somewhere harmful.** If a person is making a serious decision — about a marriage, a job, a child, their own safety — on the strength of a private message, that goes to the pastor promptly. This is one of the few entries where the doctrinal problem can become an urgent pastoral one.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"God does speak to you. He does it in a book, out loud, where somebody else can check it."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"So God doesn't guide us personally? That feels cold."

The objection is fair and the answer should not be a lecture on enthusiasm.

"He guides you constantly — through the Word, through wisdom, through the people he put around you, through circumstances you didn't arrange. What I'm not going to do is tell you your feelings are his voice, because the day they're wrong, you'd have to decide whether God lied to you. I'd rather you have something you can go back and read."

The children's version — *"how do I know what God wants me to do?"* — has a plain answer: he has told you, in the commandments, and everything he hasn't told you is yours to decide with the mind he gave you.

THE CONFSSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession V** — the Spirit is given through the Word and sacraments as instruments; the article rejects those who hold that the Spirit comes to people without the external Word, through their own preparations and works. Decisive, and worth noticing that the Confession names this error rather than merely disagreeing with it.
- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Third Article** — the Spirit calls by the gospel, enlightens with his gifts, and keeps in the true faith. The instrument is named.
- **Small Catechism, the Ten Commandments** — what God requires is published, not intuited.

Supplementary, not binding here: the Smalcald Articles on enthusiasm are the classic Lutheran treatment and the best further reading.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19; Deuteronomy 29:29.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not ridicule the experience.** Something real happened to this person; you are correcting the label, not the event.
 - **Do not deny providence.** A God who no longer governs anything is not the Lutheran alternative to enthusiasm.
 - **Do not make Scripture into a decision-vending machine.** "The Bible tells you which job to take" is the same error in a different costume.
 - **Do not press someone in front of the class.** A person defending an impression publicly will dig in. Say the principle; take the case aside.
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The Hard Questions

What arrives from the class rather than from the curriculum.

15 — "God Has a Wonderful Plan for Your Life"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Children's class, closing:

"God has a special plan for each one of you! If you follow him, he'll take care of you and everything will work out."

Adult version, to someone in trouble: "God's got a plan. He won't give you more than you can handle, and everything happens for a reason."

WHY IT MATTERS

The claim is that God's providence guarantees favorable outcomes, and it is false in a way that will be discovered at the worst possible moment. Someone in your class will bury a child. When they do, they will remember what they were taught, and this teaching gives them two options: God failed, or they did.

It also teaches the wrong direction of glory. The plan on offer is a good life; the cross appears, if at all, as an obstacle on the way to it. But God's actual dealing with his Son ran through abandonment, and his dealing with us is not a different shape.

With children specifically, "everything will work out" is a promise the teacher cannot keep and the child will test. Some of them are already living in houses where it is visibly not working out.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Promise what God actually promised.** He will be with them. He will forgive them. He will raise them. Not that things will go well.
2. **Give providence its true shape.** God works all things for good for those who love him — and Scripture says that in a chapter that also mentions being killed all day long. Do not quote the first half alone.
3. **Teach the daily-bread frame.** The Catechism's providence is God giving what is needed today, to the grateful and ungrateful alike, without contracting to make life pleasant.
4. **With a suffering person, stop teaching and start delivering.** Christ died for you. Your sins are forgiven. You are baptized. Then be quiet and stay in the room.

5. **Retire "everything happens for a reason."** There is a reason; you do not know it; saying so out loud claims more than an apostle would.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"God never promised it would work out. He promised he'd be there when it doesn't, and that he'd raise you afterward."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"So God doesn't have a plan for me?"

Do not answer with the theology of the cross. Answer the child.

"He does — and here it is: he wants you to be his, forever, and he already did the hard part to make sure of it. What he never said is that nothing sad would happen to you. When sad things happen, that isn't him forgetting his plan. He's still in it, and so are you."

The adult version — *"then what's the point of praying?"* — is worth a full answer: we pray because he told us to and promised to hear, not because prayer steers outcomes.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, the Creed, First Article** — God gives body, soul, food, home, and all I need for this life, out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. Providence as sheer gift, not as contract.
- **Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Third Petition** — God's good and gracious will is done even without our prayer; we pray that it be done among us too. Decisive: the will being done is *his*, not the one we had in mind.
- **Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Fourth Petition** — daily bread, given to all people even without our asking.
- **Apostles' Creed** — suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried. Whatever plan God has, it went through that first.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: Luther's Heidelberg Disputation on the theologian of the cross is the classic further reading and the source of the distinction under this entry.

Scripture: Romans 8:28 with Romans 8:36; John 16:33.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not strip children of comfort.** The correction is not "bad things will happen to you." It is that God is with them when they do.
 - **Do not make suffering into a badge.** A theology of the cross that starts sounding pleased about hardship has become its own kind of glory story.
 - **Do not deliver this entry to someone in fresh grief.** It is a teaching correction, not a graveside speech. At a graveside, say only the gospel.
 - **Do not correct "everything happens for a reason" in the moment someone says it about their own loss.** They are not teaching. They are coping. Let it go and take it up another week.
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16 — "A Loving God Wouldn't Send Anyone to Hell"

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, sometimes as an argument and sometimes as a plea:

"I just can't believe a loving God would send people to hell forever. Everybody's going to be fine in the end — he's not going to lose anyone."

Or the version that matters more, said quietly after class: "My brother died and he didn't believe. What am I supposed to do with that?"

WHY IT MATTERS

Find out which of those two you are hearing before you say anything. They sound alike and they are not the same. The first is a doctrinal position and can be answered. The second is grief wearing a doctrinal costume, and answering it with an argument is a serious pastoral failure.

Taking the first on its own terms: the position collapses the judgment into the love and thereby empties both. If no one is ever finally lost, then nothing was ever finally at stake, and the cross becomes a gesture rather than a rescue. Christ did not die to demonstrate an attitude. He died to save people from something.

The Confession is unusually direct here, and it is binding: Christ will return to judge, giving eternal life to the godly and condemning the ungodly — and the article specifically rejects those who teach that the punishments of the condemned will come to an end. The universalist hope is not an open question in this confession; it is named and rejected.

But hold that together with the other half, which the same gospel insists on: God does not desire anyone to perish. The judgment is real and it is not something he is eager for.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Diagnose first.** Argument or grief? Ask a question rather than answering: *is there someone you're thinking of?*
2. **If it is grief, stop teaching.** Say the true things: you do not know what passed between God and your brother at the end; God's mercy is not smaller than your hope; Christ died for him too. Then take it to the pastor and stay with the person.
3. **If it is a position, answer it plainly and briefly.** Judgment is real; the Confession says so; so does the Lord in more than one place. Do not soften it into a metaphor and do not dwell on it.
4. **Keep the cross in front.** The reason hell can be spoken of at all in a Christian class is that there is a rescue. A lesson that leaves hell standing alone has preached half a God.
5. **Never speculate about a named individual,** living or dead, in either direction. Nobody in the room knows, and the guessing is cruelty with a doctrinal face.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"He isn't willing that anyone should perish. That's exactly why he did something about it — and why it matters that he did."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"Then why did God make people he knew would be lost?"

You do not have this answer, and pretending otherwise damages you.

"I don't know. Nobody does — that one runs past where we've been told anything. What I do know is what he's said out loud: he doesn't want anyone lost, he came and died to prevent it, and he has never turned away anybody who came to him. When I can't see the back of the tapestry, I go stand where he's actually speaking."

For a child who is frightened: do not argue and do not elaborate. *Jesus came to get you, and he has you, and he doesn't let go.* Then tell the parents what was asked.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession XVII** — Christ returns to judge; the godly receive eternal life, the ungodly are condemned; the article rejects the teaching that the punishments of the condemned will end. Decisive, and binding here.
- **Apostles' and Nicene Creeds** — he will come again to judge the living and the dead. The class confesses this most Sundays without hearing it.

- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Second Article** — Christ redeemed *me*, a lost and condemned person. The doctrine is first person before it is ever about anyone else.

Supplementary: Formula of Concord XI treats election as comfort rather than speculation and is the right reading for a person who leaves this conversation anxious rather than satisfied.

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4; John 3:16–18.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not use hell to frighten children into belief.** It is a monstrous pedagogy and it produces adults who cannot hear the gospel.
- **Do not answer a grieving person with AC XVII.** The article is true and the funeral is not the hour.
- **Do not pronounce on the dead.** Not the person's brother, not anyone.
- **Do not let the class hold a general debate about who is in and out.** Redirect to Christ crucified for sinners, which is the only thing anyone in the room actually needs.
- **Do not overcorrect into a God with no judgment.** A God who saves nobody from anything cannot comfort anybody.

17 — Prayer as Leverage

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Loud version, adult class:

"You have to pray believing. If you doubt at all, that's why it didn't happen. Name it and claim it — God's already said yes, you just have to have the faith to receive it."

Quiet version, and far more common:

"I've been praying about this for two years and nothing. I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

WHY IT MATTERS

Both versions rest on the same assumption: prayer is a mechanism, and results indicate whether it was operated correctly. The loud version makes faith the lever. The quiet version has already concluded that the operator is defective.

The second is the one in your room. Somebody has prayed for a marriage, a child, a diagnosis, and nothing came, and has quietly filed it as personal failure. That person will not raise a hand. They will just gradually stop praying, because it turns out they are bad at it.

What the Catechism does with prayer removes the mechanism entirely. It teaches Christians to pray as children to a father, because he has commanded it and promised to hear — not because prayer moves anything into position. And it says something about the Father's will that solves the whole problem: God's good and gracious will is done even without our prayer; we pray that it may be done among us too.

Read that slowly and notice what it costs. Prayer is not how God's will gets determined. It is how his children are brought into it.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Kill the mechanism, keep the promise.** Prayer does not steer God. He commanded it and promised to hear it, and that is a better ground than efficacy.
2. **Go after the quiet version deliberately.** Say from the front, unprompted, that unanswered prayer is not evidence of insufficient faith. Somebody needs to hear it who will never ask.
3. **Teach the shape the Lord actually gave.** The prayer he taught asks for daily bread and for his will — not for outcomes we have specified.
4. **Do not promise outcomes to children.** "If you pray, God will make your grandpa better" is a promise you cannot keep, and the child will hold you to it.
5. **When someone names a long unanswered prayer, do not explain it.** Pray with them. Then take it to the pastor if it is heavy.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"You're not doing it wrong. Prayer was never a lever — it's a child talking to his father, and the father was already good."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"Then what's the point of praying at all, if God's going to do what he's going to do?"

This is the real question and it deserves better than a shrug.

"Because he told you to, and he promised to listen. That's the whole warrant, and it's enough. Prayer isn't how you get things out of God — it's how he gets you. You bring him what you're afraid of, and he doesn't always change the thing, but he changes who's carrying it, every single time."

The prosperity version — *"doesn't the Bible say ask anything in my name?"* — should be granted and read in context: in his name means according to who he is and what he came for, not as a formula appended to a request.

THE CONFSSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Third Petition** — God's good and gracious will is done even without our prayer; we pray that it be done among us as well. Decisive, and the single most useful sentence in the guide for a person crushed by unanswered prayer.
- **Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Introduction** — God tenderly invites us to believe he is our true Father and we are his true children, so that we may ask with confidence. Confidence in the hearer, not in the technique.
- **Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Fourth Petition** — daily bread is given even to those who do not ask, including the wicked; we pray to receive it with thanksgiving. God's giving is not triggered by our asking.

Supplementary: the Large Catechism on the Lord's Prayer is warm and extensive on why we pray at all.

Scripture: Matthew 6:7–13; Matthew 26:39; 2 Corinthians 12:8–9.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not make prayer sound pointless.** Refuting the mechanism without preaching the promise leaves the class with a God who does not listen.
- **Do not diagnose why a particular prayer went unanswered.** You do not know, and every available guess wounds.
- **Do not teach resignation as piety.** "His will be done" said as a shrug is not what the Third Petition means; the same Lord told us to ask.
- **Do not treat the loud version as the main danger.** Name-it-and-claim-it is rare in most Lutheran congregations. The quiet self-blame is everywhere.

18 — Dispensationalism

WHAT YOU MAY HEAR

Adult class, usually mid-lesson and unprompted:

"Of course, that prophecy hasn't been fulfilled yet. That's for Israel in the millennium. The church age is a parenthesis — after the rapture, God goes back to his program with Israel and the temple gets rebuilt."

Or in a children's class, softer: "Jesus is going to come back and take all the Christians away, and then things get really bad for everyone left behind."

WHY IT MATTERS

Two problems, and the second is bigger than the first.

The first is that the scheme is not in the text. It requires a division of God's dealings into distinct programs, one for Israel and one for the church, and a two-stage return of Christ. The Confession addresses the underlying claim directly and rejects it.

The second is what it does to reading. Dispensationalism makes most of the Old Testament a set of promises still awaiting a literal earthly fulfillment, which removes them from Christ. A class taught this way stops hearing Isaiah as gospel and starts hearing it as a schedule. That is a far greater loss than getting the millennium wrong, and it will quietly undo everything else the teacher is trying to build.

With children, add the third problem: the version they receive is mostly fear. "Left behind" is a threat, and it lands on a child as a question about whether he will be taken.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

1. **Read the promise into Christ, not into a calendar.** The temple promises are fulfilled in him — he said so about his own body. Show it from the text rather than asserting the framework.
2. **Return to the creed the class confesses.** He will come again to judge the living and the dead. Once, visibly, to judge — not twice, not secretly.
3. **Give them the better reading of the passage in front of you** rather than a lecture on eschatology. Dispensationalism is usually defeated by a good reading of one text, not by a survey.
4. **Refuse the timeline conversation.** "What's the order of events?" has no faithful answer and will consume the hour.
5. **With children, do not correct fear with argument.** Say the true thing: Jesus is coming back, and he is coming back for you, and you belong to him already.

ONE LINE YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE

"The prophets aren't a schedule waiting to happen. They're a portrait, and we know who it's of."

IF THE STUDENT ASKS

"But doesn't the Bible say a lot about Israel? Are you saying those promises just don't matter?"

The question is fair and should not be brushed aside.

"They matter enormously — they're the promises we live on. The question is who receives them. The New Testament keeps taking Israel's promises and handing them to people in Christ, Jew and Gentile together. That's not cancelling them. That's the fulfillment being larger than the original hearers could have guessed."

Then stop. Do not proceed into a full account of Israel and the church; it is not a Sunday school hour's work, and the honest answer to "what about the Jewish people" involves things the Confessions do not settle.

THE CONFESSIONAL CITATION

Binding:

- **Augsburg Confession XVII** — Christ will return at the consummation of the world to judge, raising all the dead; and condemning those who spread Jewish opinions that before the resurrection of the dead the godly will take possession of an earthly kingdom, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.
- **Apostles' and Nicene Creeds** — he will come again to judge the living and the dead; one return, one judgment, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting.
- **Small Catechism, the Creed, Second Article** — Christ's redemption of *me*, a lost and condemned person, that I may be his own. The Catechism's eschatology is possession, not chronology.

Supplementary, not binding under the AFLC standard: nothing needed. AC XVII is unusually complete on this point.

Scripture: John 2:19–21; Luke 24:27; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 read as the one public return rather than a secret removal.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Do not ridicule the novels.** Someone in the room read them and was genuinely moved, and mockery ends the teaching.
- **Do not overclaim AC XVII's reach.** It rejects an earthly millennial kingdom before the resurrection. It does not settle every question about Israel, and pretending it does invites a fair objection you cannot answer.
- **Do not replace one chart with another.** A Lutheran timeline is still a timeline. The correction is that the prophets point to Christ, not that we have a better schedule.
- **Do not make a frightened child argue eschatology.** Answer the fear. The framework can wait years.

The Second Layer — What the Class Will Ask

The eighteen entries above are organized around errors a teacher may say. This section is organized around questions a student will ask — the same problems arriving from the other direction, and the form in which you are far more likely to meet them.

Forty-four questions, drawn from what actually came up often enough while teaching Genesis, Isaiah, the Minor Prophets, the Psalms, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, and 1–3 John that it was worth anticipating them in print.

Part One — Assurance

Why this section exists differently

The eighteen entries in this guide are organized around **errors a teacher may say**. This section is organized around **questions a student will ask** — and the two are the same problem arriving from opposite directions.

Nobody in your class will announce that he holds decision theology. He will ask *how do I know if I'm really saved*. Nobody says he has located his assurance in his own performance. He says *what if I didn't mean it*.

Fourteen questions follow, drawn from the author's own published studies — which is to say, from questions that came up often enough while teaching Genesis, Isaiah, James, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and 1–3 John that they were worth anticipating in print.

One pattern governs all fourteen, and it is worth seeing before you read them. Every one begins with *how do I know* or *can I lose*. Every one, therefore, is a question about where a person should look. And in every case the wrong answer is available, sincere, and inward.

The single move that answers all fourteen: change where they are looking. Not by refusing the question — the question is honest — but by declining the premise that the evidence is inside them.

The fourteen

1. "HOW DO I KNOW I'M REALLY SAVED?"

The root question. Every other item is a variation.

Do not help them assess. Any answer that sends a person to examine the quality of his faith has accepted the premise that his faith is the evidence.

Do say: *You're baptized. God said your name and attached a promise to it, and he has not withdrawn it. That's not a feeling you have to sustain — it's a thing that happened to you, on a date, in front of witnesses.*

Confessional ground: Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Second Part; Third Article of the Creed — the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and *keeps*.

2. "WHAT IF I DIDN'T MEAN IT WHEN I PRAYED?"

The specific form assurance-anxiety takes in someone catechized by evangelicalism.

Do not relitigate the prayer. Whether he meant it is unanswerable and the asking is the injury.

Do say: *You weren't saved by meaning something hard enough. That's the good news in this — if it depended on the quality of a prayer you prayed at fourteen, you'd be right to worry.*

Cross-reference: entry 1.

3. "CAN A TRUE CHRISTIAN FALL AWAY FROM FAITH?"

Hebrews, Session Four

Yes — and say so plainly. Softening it makes the warnings in Hebrews decorative, and the reader will notice.

Then immediately: the warning is real *and* the keeping is God's work. Both are taught, and a teacher who states one without the other has handed over half a doctrine.

And add the clarification that does the pastoral work: this is not something that happens by accident, and it does not hover over every anxious Christian. **A believer worried about falling away is not falling away.** That sentence should be said out loud in the room, because the person who most needs it will not ask for it.

Confessional ground: AC XII condemns the denial that the justified can lose the Holy Spirit. Third Article: he *keeps* me in the true faith. *Cross-reference: entry 6.*

4. "CAN SOMEONE WHO GENUINELY BELIEVED AT ONE POINT REALLY FALL AWAY?"

1–3 John, Session Three

Same doctrine, sharper edge, and usually asked about a specific person who is not in the room.

Do not adjudicate the absent person, in either direction. Nobody present knows, and the guessing is the actual problem.

Do say: *Yes, it's possible — which is why we don't build anyone's assurance on a remembered moment, including our own. And I don't know about him. What I know is that Christ has never turned away anyone who came back.*

5. "IF I'M GUARDED BY GOD'S POWER, CAN I LOSE MY SALVATION?"

1 Peter, Session Two

The mirror of item 3 — asked by someone who has heard the comfort and is testing it against the warnings.

Do say: *Both are in the same letter, and Peter didn't think they were in tension. The guarding is God's doing, and it's the reason you can look at the warnings without panic instead of not looking at them at all.*

6. "IS THE WRITER SAYING THAT IF I KEEP SINNING, I LOSE MY SALVATION?"

Hebrews, Session Eleven

Almost always asked by someone with a particular sin in view.

Do not answer the general question and stop. The general answer is easy and will not reach him.

Do say the general thing — the passage is not a ledger, and a Christian fighting a sin is not the person these warnings describe — **and then get him to the pastor.** A persistent sin plus a conscience under accusation is beyond a classroom, and this question is often the only signal you will get.

7. "HOW IS THIS PASSAGE COMPATIBLE WITH THE ASSURANCE LUTHERANS TEACH?"

Hebrews, Session Six

The most theologically self-aware version, and the easiest to answer well.

Do say: *Assurance was never grounded in our confidence about our own perseverance. It is grounded in Christ's promises attached to the means of grace — baptism, the Word, the Supper. We have assurance because we have the promises.*

And then the sentence that answers the anxious reader completely:

The warnings do not undermine the assurance. They protect it. They warn against the one thing that would destroy the means by which assurance comes — turning away from Christ. They are written for the Christian tempted to abandon those means. They are not written for the Christian who is still using them.

Which is to say: if this passage frightens you, notice where you are sitting. You are still here.

8. "HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE GENUINE TRUST RATHER THAN MERE ASSENT?"

James, Session Five

Do not supply a diagnostic he has to score himself against; it becomes the new thing to fail.

But there is one thing to say, and it settles the question without sending him inward: *The demons do not ask whether they trust Christ. They know they do not. The fact that you are asking is itself evidence that the trust is real — a man with no faith does not lie awake worrying about the quality of his.*

Then move him outward: *faith isn't a substance you check the purity of. It's a hand receiving something. Look at what's being handed to you, not at the hand.*

9. "HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M ONE OF THE CHOSEN? THIS MAKES ME ANXIOUS."

Genesis, Session Nineteen

Do not teach election as a topic to someone asking it this way. He is not asking a doctrinal question.

Do say: *Then stop looking there — that's not where God told you to look. He told you to look at Christ crucified for sinners, and at the water and the words that were given to you specifically. Election is meant to be a comfort you arrive at, never a question you interrogate.*

Supplementary further reading, if he wants it: Formula of Concord XI treats election as comfort rather than speculation — not binding under the AFLC standard, but the right thing to hand this person.

10. "HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M COMPLACENT OR TENDER? WHAT IF I'M BOTH?"

Hebrews, Session Two

Do say: *You're both. Everyone is both, all the time — and noticing it is a sign of life rather than a diagnosis. The old man doesn't retire until the grave, and the fact that you can see him at work means something in you is objecting.*

11. "HOW DO I KNOW IF A GOOD THING HAS BECOME AN IDOL?"

Isaiah, Session Seventeen

Different in kind from the others — a question about sanctification rather than about standing, and worth distinguishing out loud.

Do say: *Useful question, and worth asking. But notice it's a different question from whether you're saved. Answer it honestly — where would losing this thing feel like losing God? — without letting the answer decide your standing, which was settled elsewhere.*

12. "HOW DO I KNOW IF SOMETHING IS GOD'S DISCIPLINE OR JUST SUFFERING?"

Hebrews, Session Thirteen

Do not speculate about the cause. This is the *perhaps* discipline: God's hidden dealings are not open to our reading.

Do say: *I don't know, and neither does anyone else. What I know is that nothing in this can separate you from him, and that he has never used suffering to get even.*

If it is a live grief, stop teaching and route it.

13. "HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M A LIVING STONE IN THE SPIRITUAL HOUSE?"

1 Peter, Session Four

Do say: *Same answer as the others, and it's a short one — you were built in, you didn't climb in. If you're wondering whether you belong here, notice that the wondering is happening in church.*

14. "HOW DO I KNOW I'M IN THE APOSTOLIC FELLOWSHIP?"

1–3 John, Session One

Do say: *John answers that in the letter itself, and the answer is external: what you have heard, what was proclaimed to you. If you're holding to what the apostles taught and receiving what Christ gives here, you're in it. It isn't a feeling of belonging; it's the thing being handed to you.*

The teacher's own note

Two things to hold while working through these.

Every one of these questions is better than its absence. A person asking *how do I know* is a person still looking. The dangerous room is the one where nobody asks, and the reason to answer well is that you may get one chance.

And you may be the person asking. If several of the fourteen sound like your own two-in-the-morning questions, that is not a disqualification from teaching. It is the reason you will teach them well — and it is a reason to take item 1's answer for yourself, in the second person, from someone whose office it is to say it.

Part Two — Baptism

Why these ten run differently

The assurance questions in Part One were all one question wearing ten faces — *where should I look?* These are not. Baptism questions come in three distinct kinds, and answering the wrong kind is the most common failure.

Some are arguments. *Didn't Jesus say believe and be baptized?* The person wants the case answered.

Some are memories. *I was baptized as a baby but it didn't mean anything to me.* The person is describing twenty years of feeling nothing, and an argument will not touch it.

And some are about someone else. *What about my sister, baptized in a church that teaches nothing about it?* The person is asking whether to say something at Thanksgiving.

Diagnose before answering. The same doctrine serves all three; the same sentences do not.

One thing governs all ten. Every baptism question is a question about direction — who did what to whom. If your answer does not make the direction unmistakable, it has not answered the question, however true it was.

The ten

1. "HOW DOES INFANT BAPTISM WORK IF THE INFANT DOESN'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING?"

The kind: argument, usually sincere and not hostile.

Do not argue that infants have a special capacity for faith, or that they somehow understand at a level we cannot see. That defends the practice by conceding the premise — that comprehension is what makes baptism work.

Do say: *Nobody knows what's happening, including the adults. Baptism isn't a transaction that requires an informed party on our end. It's God putting his name on someone. The infant's not understanding is a picture of the whole thing, not an exception to it.*

Confessional ground: Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Third Part — it is not the water that does it, but the word of God with the water, and faith that trusts that word. AC IX.

2. "DIDN'T JESUS SAY WE NEED TO BELIEVE AND BE BAPTIZED? DOESN'T FAITH HAVE TO COME FIRST?"

1 Peter, Session Seven

The kind: argument, and a fair one — the text does say it.

Do not minimize the verse. Concede it fully; it costs nothing.

Do say: *He did, and the order in that sentence isn't a schedule. Notice what he doesn't say — he doesn't say whoever isn't baptized is condemned; he says whoever doesn't believe. Baptism and faith belong together, and Scripture never treats one as the precondition the other has to wait behind. Faith is given, and this is one of the places God gives it.*

3. "WHAT ABOUT SOMEONE BAPTIZED WHO THEN FELL AWAY? DOES THEIR BAPTISM STILL COUNT?"

1 Peter, Session Seven

The kind: almost always about someone specific. Ask before answering.

Do say: *God's promise doesn't expire because someone walked away from it. That's exactly why this matters — if he comes back, he isn't starting over. He's coming home to something with his name already on it, and it was there the whole time he was gone.*

Do not turn it into a discussion of whether that person is saved. Nobody in the room knows. See Part One, item 4.

4. "IF BAPTISM SAVES, WHY DO BAPTIZED CHRISTIANS STILL SIN?"

1 Peter, Session Seven

The kind: argument, often raised by someone testing whether the doctrine survives contact with reality.

Do say: *Because the old Adam doesn't drown quietly. The Catechism doesn't say baptism made you unable to sin — it says the old man is drowned daily and the new man rises daily. Present tense, every day, until the grave. You're still fighting is what the doctrine predicts, not a problem for it.*

Confessional ground: Small Catechism, Holy Baptism, Fourth Part. Cross-reference: entry 5, re-dedication.

5. "WHEN DOES THE NEW BIRTH HAPPEN? AT BAPTISM? AT A MOMENT OF CONVERSION?"

1 Peter, Session Two

The kind: argument in form, anxiety in substance about half the time. Listen for which.

Do not supply a timeline. The question assumes one and the assumption is the problem.

Do say: *Scripture ties the new birth to the Word and to baptism and doesn't hand us a stopwatch. If you're asking which moment to trust, that's the wrong axis — trust the promise, which is dated and public, rather than the moment, which isn't.*

6. "DOES CIRCUMCISION — OR BAPTISM — SAVE? ISN'T THAT WORKS-RIGHTEOUSNESS?"

Genesis, Session Fourteen

The kind: argument, and often from someone genuinely protecting grace. Honor that.

Do say: *You're guarding the right thing, and Abraham's own life answers it. He was counted righteous by faith in Genesis 15 — and circumcised two chapters later. The sign sealed a righteousness he already had; it did not produce it. Paul makes that the centerpiece of Romans 4: he received the sign as a seal of the righteousness he had by faith while still uncircumcised.*

Then the direction, as a second sentence: *a work is something I do to God; baptism is something God does to me. Calling it works-righteousness gets the arrow backwards.*

Note the chronology move. It appears again in Part Three, item 4, on the same question from the other side. When a class can check a sequence in the text, that beats an argument they have to take your word for.

7. "IS HEBREWS 10:22 TEACHING BAPTISMAL REGENERATION?"

Hebrews, Session Eleven

The kind: argument, from a reader who has noticed something and wants to know if he is allowed to notice it.

Do say: *Yes — and let me say what we mean by it and what we don't. We mean that baptism is a means of grace by which God actually washes and gives new birth, rather than merely picturing something he did elsewhere. We do not mean that the water works mechanically apart from faith. Water alone saves nobody; water with God's word, received in faith, does what God says it does.*

Then read the verse and let it stand: hearts sprinkled clean and bodies washed with pure water, in one sentence — the inward and the outward held together rather than opposed. That is the New Testament's ordinary way of speaking about baptism, and it only sounds startling because we have been taught to keep the two apart.

Do not dodge the term. If someone asks whether this is baptismal regeneration, answering the word rather than the question makes the class think there is something to be nervous about.

8. "DOES BAPTISM REPLACE CIRCUMCISION?"

Genesis, Session Seven

The kind: argument, usually good-faith and often from someone who has read carefully.

Do say: *Paul draws that line himself in Colossians — buried with him in baptism, a circumcision made without hands. So the connection isn't ours. What it shows is that God has always worked this way: a sign given to people who could not yet consent, attaching a promise to them before they could ask for it. The eighth-day infant and the baptized infant are the same picture.*

Careful: do not press the parallel further than Scripture does. Circumcision and baptism are not identical and the differences matter.

9. "WHAT ABOUT THE HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS — DOES THAT PROVE INFANTS WERE INCLUDED?"

Genesis, Session Seven

The kind: argument, and the one where teachers most often overclaim.

Do not say the households prove infants were present. They do not, and a class member who knows that will discount everything else you said.

Do say: *It doesn't prove it, and I won't say it does. What the household baptisms show is the shape — God dealing with families as units, which is how he has worked since Abraham. The case for infant baptism doesn't rest on those texts. It rests on what baptism is and what it does, and that case doesn't need them.*

Note: this is the entry's best demonstration of the guide's whole method. A teacher who concedes a weak argument is trusted on the strong ones.

10. "IS BAPTISM THE SAME AS BEING BORN AGAIN?"

The Twelve, Session Twenty-Two

The kind: definitional, and easy to over-answer.

Do say: *Scripture connects them closely — washing of regeneration, born of water and the Spirit. What Scripture doesn't do is make them a puzzle we have to solve. God gives new birth, and he has told us where he does it. The question worth asking isn't when did it happen — it's where did God say he would be, and did I go there.*

A note for the teacher

1 Peter, Session Seven is the densest baptism passage in the corpus — four of these ten come from it. A teacher facing a class with several of these questions live in the room should work that session first.

And notice the pattern across all ten. **Every good answer runs in the same direction and every bad one reverses it.** The infant does not understand; God acts. Faith does not qualify you; God gives it. The sin does not disqualify you; God drowns the old man daily. The fallen-away one did not void it; God does not withdraw his name.

If you can only remember one sentence for the whole vein, remember the question: **who is doing what to whom?**

Part Three — Faith, Works, and Justification

Eight items. The vein where a teacher is most likely to be caught, because the objection is a good one and the text really does say what the objector says it says.

Why these are different

The assurance questions were about where to look. The baptism questions were about direction. **These are about a genuine tension in the Bible**, and a teacher who pretends otherwise loses the room.

James says a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. Paul says a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Both sentences are in the Bible. A teacher whose answer amounts to *well, James doesn't really mean that* has not taught anyone anything except that the church is nervous.

The move that works on all eight: concede the words, then ask the question. Not *what does justified mean* in the abstract — but *what question is this author answering?*

1. "VERSE 24 SAYS 'JUSTIFIED BY WORKS AND NOT BY FAITH ALONE.' HOW IS THAT NOT A CONTRADICTION?"

James, Session Five

Do not soften the verse or reach for a translation that blunts it. It says what it says, and the class can read.

Do say: *You've read it right, and it does say that. Now notice what each man is arguing against. Paul is answering someone who thinks he can be right with God by keeping rules — and his answer is faith apart from works. James is answering someone who says he has faith while his life shows nothing at all — and his answer is that such a faith is dead, because it was never faith. Paul is talking about how a man is justified. James is talking about what kind of faith justifies. They aren't answering the same question, and neither is correcting the other.*

Confessional ground: AC IV — we are justified freely on account of Christ through faith. AC VI — this faith is bound to yield good fruits, and it is necessary to do the good works commanded by God, but not in order to merit justification. **Both articles, together, are the answer.**

2. "MY ROMAN CATHOLIC FRIEND SAYS JAMES 2 DISPROVES JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE. WHAT DO I SAY?"

James, Session One

Do not turn this into a case against Rome. The person asking has a friend, not an opponent, and a teacher who supplies ammunition has changed what was asked.

Do say: Give him item 1 — the two questions — and then tell him the honest thing: this is the one place the argument is genuinely hard, and Lutherans have never pretended otherwise. Then notice what you actually agree on. Nobody in the conversation thinks a dead faith saves anyone.

3. "IS JAMES SAYING THAT ROMAN CATHOLICS ARE RIGHT ABOUT JUSTIFICATION?"

James, Session Five

Do say, and name the difference rather than gesturing at it: No. Rome teaches that we are justified partly by faith and partly by works of our own, and that this justification can be increased or lost depending on our performance. James teaches that saving faith always produces works. He does not teach that works contribute to our justification before God. Those are different claims, and the second is not evidence for the first.

Keep the tone flat. This question is often asked by someone hoping the teacher will get exercised.

4. "IF ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH HERE, DOESN'T JAMES SAY BY WORKS? WHICH IS IT?"

Genesis, Session Thirteen

Do say: Both cite Abraham, and they cite different moments. Paul goes to Genesis 15 — Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, before anything was done. James goes to Genesis 22, decades later, when the faith that had been credited showed what it was. The order in Abraham's life is the order in the doctrine: credited first, demonstrated after.

Note: this is the strongest single answer in the vein, because the chronology does the work and the class can check it.

5. "HOW IS ABRAM JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ALONE IF HE'S ALSO CALLED TO OBEY AND BUILD ALTARS?"

Genesis, Session Seven

Do say: *He is called to both, and the altars are not payment. Look at when God made the promise — before Abram had done anything at all. Everything afterward is a response to a promise already given, not a contribution toward getting one. That order never reverses anywhere in Scripture.*

6. "SO DO I HAVE TO HAVE WORKS TO BE SAVED?"

James, Session Five

The bluntest form, and the most pastorally dangerous, because either careless answer wounds.

Do not say *yes*, which relocates his standing onto his performance. **Do not say** a flat *no* and stop, which leaves him thinking the Christian life is optional and contradicts James in the process.

Do say: *You don't do works to be saved. You do them because you are. Faith that has really received something will show it, the way a living thing grows — not to prove itself, and not to earn anything. If you're asking because you've looked at your own life and are worried about what you found, that's a different conversation and I'd like to have it with you and Pastor rather than in the last four minutes of class.*

Route this one if it is asked in earnest. It rarely is not.

7. "WHAT DOES 'THE HOLINESS WITHOUT WHICH NO ONE WILL SEE THE LORD' MEAN? DOESN'T JUSTIFICATION MAKE US HOLY?"

Hebrews, Session Thirteen

Do say: *It does — and that is the holiness the verse means. You are declared holy in Christ, completely, now. Alongside that, God is making you what he has already declared you to be, and that work is real and slow and unfinished. The verse is not setting a bar you have to clear before he will look at you. It is describing the people he has already claimed.*

8. "WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SERVANT FORGIVING US AND JUSTIFYING US?"

Isaiah, Session Twenty-Three

A definitional question, and a good one.

Do say: *Forgiveness cancels the debt. Justification hands you a standing. One clears the record; the other says you are righteous — not neutral, not merely unpunished, but counted as having Christ's own righteousness. The first is enormous. The second is why a Christian can face God rather than merely escape him.*

Part Four — The Supper, Rome, and Other Traditions

Seven items. What arrives when someone in the class has a background, a friend, or a family.

The governing rule

Correct the doctrine; leave the person's grandmother out of it. Nearly every question in this part comes attached to somebody the asker loves. A teacher who wins the point and loses the tone has taught nothing.

9. "IF NO MORE OFFERING FOR SIN IS NEEDED, WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER?"

Hebrews, Session Ten

Do say: *It is not another offering. Christ was offered once and it is finished. The Supper doesn't repeat that sacrifice — it delivers its benefit to you personally, which is why the words are for you. The one sacrifice happened. The Supper is how it reaches your particular mouth on a particular Sunday.*

10. "HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE RELATE TO THE CATHOLIC TEACHING ABOUT THE MASS?"

Hebrews, Session Ten

Do not caricature. State the actual disagreement, plainly and once.

Do say: *The disagreement is over whether the sacrifice is re-presented or applied. We say Christ was offered once, that it cannot and need not be repeated, and that the Supper distributes what that one offering accomplished. That's a real difference and worth naming — and notice what it isn't a difference about: both traditions confess that Christ's body and blood are truly given.*

Confessional ground: AC X on the true presence; Hebrews 9–10 on the once-for-all offering.

11. "WAS THE BREAD AND WINE OF MELCHIZEDEK THE LORD'S SUPPER?"

Genesis, Session Twelve

Do not say yes, even though the resonance is strong. The connection would rest on a shared pair of elements rather than on anything the text or an apostle draws.

Do say: *No — and we should resist saying so, even though it is tempting. The Supper is instituted by Jesus in the upper room, with his own words joining his body and blood to the bread and the cup. Melchizedek's bread and wine is provision and blessing for a returning warrior, brought out by a priest of God Most High.*

Then give the concession, because it is true and it costs nothing: *the church has always heard a foreshadowing here, and rightly — a priest-king who brings out bread and wine, and blesses. Hebrews reads Melchizedek as pointing to Christ for his priesthood. That is the real connection, and it is better than the one we just declined.*

12. "IS THE MEAL AT EMMAUS THE LORD'S SUPPER?"

Genesis, Session One

Do say: *Nobody can say for certain, and the church has read it both ways for a long time. What is certain is the shape — he takes, blesses, breaks, and gives, and they recognize him in it. Whether or not it was the Supper, Luke is telling us where the risen Christ is recognized: in the Word opened and the bread broken.*

A teacher who says *nobody knows here builds credit* for the places where he says a thing is settled.

13. "THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH SAYS PETER WAS THE FIRST POPE. HOW DO WE HANDLE THAT?"

1 Peter, Session One

Do say: *Read what he calls himself in his own letter. Not supreme pontiff — a fellow elder, writing alongside the men he's addressing. Whatever the later office became, the man writing this letter did not describe himself as holding it. That's not an insult to anyone; it's just what the text says.*

Then stop. This question invites a long detour and does not repay one.

14. "IS THE 'SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS' REALLY CHRIST, AND IS ELIJAH REALLY JOHN THE BAPTIST?"

The Twelve, Session Twenty-Two

Do say — and yes to both, on the New Testament's own authority: *Zacharias, filled with the Spirit, calls the Lord Jesus the dayspring from on high who gives light to those in darkness — the Sun of righteousness rising with healing. And Jesus says plainly of John the Baptist that this is Elijah who was to come. Not the old prophet returned in the flesh, but the promised forerunner in his spirit and power.*

Both have apostolic warrant. This is a case where a teacher can be more confident than he expects — the connections are drawn in the New Testament, not by us.

15. "WHEN PETER SAYS 'ELECT,' IS HE TEACHING PREDESTINATION? ISN'T THAT A REFORMED EMPHASIS?"

1 Peter, Session One

Do not cede the word. This is the most common failure in the whole vein — a Lutheran teacher hearing *elect* and treating it as somebody else's vocabulary.

Do say: *It's Peter's word, in Peter's letter, and it was ours long before it was anyone's emphasis. What Lutherans decline to do is turn it into a system that runs both directions. Scripture says the saved are saved entirely by God's choosing, and it says God desires all to be saved, and it never resolves the two for us. We confess both and stop where Scripture stops.*

Part Five — Election, Obedience, and the Christian Life

Five items.

16. "IF GOD CHOSE JACOB OVER ESAU BEFORE THEY WERE BORN, IS THIS CALVINIST PREDESTINATION? DO LUTHERANS BELIEVE THAT?"

Genesis, Session Nineteen

Do say: *We believe in election. What we don't do is complete the symmetry. Scripture teaches that everyone who is saved is saved by God's choice alone, and it teaches that God desires all to be saved and that Christ will never cast out anyone who comes. We hold both without building the bridge, because Scripture didn't build it.*

Then the pastoral point, which matters more: *If you're asking because you're afraid you might not be chosen — that fear is answered, and not by speculation. He has already spoken to you by name at the font, and he does not say one thing at the water and something else in secret.*

Cross-reference: Part One, item 9.

17. "IF ELECTION IS ALL GOD'S CHOICE, HOW CAN ESAU BE BLAMED?"

Genesis, Session Nineteen

Do not solve it. Any solution costs one of the two halves.

Do say: *That's the point where I stop, and I want you to see me stop rather than watch me invent something. Scripture holds a man responsible for his own rejection of God and gives God all the credit for anyone's salvation. Every attempt to make those tidy has dropped one of them, and the one that gets dropped is always the comforting one.*

18. "IF I CAN'T REPAY GOD, DOESN'T THAT MAKE OBEDIENCE POINTLESS? WHY SERVE HIM AT ALL?"

Psalms, Session Twenty-Six

Do say: *Because your neighbor needs it and God doesn't. That's the whole answer. Everything you do for God, he could do without — but the man down the road actually needs a ride to the doctor. Good works were never a payment scheme running upward. They were always deliveries running sideways.*

19. "WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OBEDIENCE AND PASSIVITY?"

Isaiah, Session Twenty-One

Do say: *Passivity waits to feel something before it moves. Obedience does the next thing whether or not the feeling arrives. And notice that neither of them is the source of anything — the Christian who obeys isn't generating his standing, he's living in it. The opposite of passivity isn't striving. It's being carried, and walking anyway.*

20. "WHAT DOES 'ARE BEING SANCTIFIED' ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?"

Hebrews, Session Ten

Do say, concretely, because the question deserves a real answer: *It looks like growing love for God and for the people around you. Increasing freedom from patterns of sin that used to run your life. Prayer becoming more regular. Scripture becoming more nourishing than it used to be. Worship meaning more than it did. The ordinary Christian virtues — patience, kindness, honesty — gradually becoming more natural rather than forced.*

Then the guard, in one sentence: *it is slow, it is mostly visible to other people rather than to you, and the people furthest along are typically the ones most aware of what is left. None of your standing rests on it.*

Cross-reference: entry 7, carnal and spiritual Christians.

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