

A FREE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE

Under the Word

*A Confessional Lutheran Handbook for the Lay Bible
Teacher*

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Ordinary Means

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A Note on the Examples

You will meet a number of people in this book. A man folding a chair after class. A woman who asks how you know that. A teacher two years in who has begun enjoying his own reading a little too much. A class that learned something wrong for six weeks before anyone noticed.

None of them is real. Every scene, every classroom moment, and every conversation in these pages is a composite — assembled to show a situation clearly, not drawn from a particular person or congregation. Where a teacher makes a mistake, no one made it. Where a class asks a hard question, no class asked it.

That is deliberate, and there are two reasons for it.

The first is simple: real people in real congregations did not consent to appear in a book, and their difficult moments are not mine to spend.

The second matters more. This book argues that a teacher's authority is borrowed from the text rather than generated by his own experience — that what makes a claim true in a Bible class is Scripture and the church's confession of it, not the credentials of the man at the end of the table. A book making that argument should not lean on its author's stories to carry its weight. So it does not.

Which means you should check it the way this book asks you to check everything. Not against my experience. Against the Word.

L.H.

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Chapter 1 — You Were Asked to Teach

The pastor catches you by the coat rack after the late service, coffee in hand, and asks whether you would take the adult class in the fall.

The class meets in the fellowship hall at nine, between services, at the long tables with the folding chairs that never quite face the same direction. Eleven people come most weeks, fourteen at Christmas. They are finishing Acts now. That takes six weeks. After that, he says, the class is yours, and he wonders whether you would consider working through James.

You say you will think about it, which is true, and you think about it all afternoon.

What you think about is not James. What you think about is the room. Harold has been a Lutheran for sixty-one years and can still recite the Fourth Commandment's meaning without a book. The woman by the window reads more theology in a month than you have read this year, and says almost nothing. Two who come are not members and are not sure what they believe. And in the third row is a widow whose husband died in March, who will be sitting there when the text says something about death, looking at you.

You are not a pastor. You have no degree in this. You have an ordinary job, a family, and about four hours a week that could hold preparation if something else gives. You have read James. You are not sure you have understood it.

Somewhere in the afternoon the thought arrives that has stopped a great many people here:
Who am I to stand in front of that room and say what God's Word means?

Hold onto that question. It is better than the confidence that would replace it. But it is not the last question, and it is not an answer.

The weight is real

James is blunt about it. Not many should become teachers, he writes, because those who teach will be judged more strictly.

Notice first what he does not say. He does not say *no one*. He does not say *only the ordained*. He does not tell his readers that teaching is reserved for the credentialed few and that everyone else should keep quiet. He says *not many*, which means *some*, and he says it in the first person plural — *we* will be judged — which puts himself inside the warning rather than above it. This is a teacher warning teachers.

Notice second what the warning is about. The next several verses are about the tongue: how small it is, how much it sets on fire, how no one masters it. James is not worried that lay Christians will be insufficiently impressive. He is worried about what a man says when a room is listening.

That is the weight, and it is worth feeling. When you stand at the end of the table and say *what this means is*, you are doing something with consequences in people's actual lives. The widow in the third row will carry home what you say about suffering. If you teach that assurance rests on the sincerity of a man's own faith, several people will believe you, and some will be awake at two in the morning measuring their sincerity. Words do that. James knows.

So the sobriety is right. What the sobriety should produce, though, is preparation — not paralysis, and not performance.

There is a distinction here worth getting straight at the beginning, because the rest of this book depends on it. **Serious preparation is not credentialism.** Preparation means you read the text before the class does, more than once, slowly. It means you find out what the hard verse actually says, and check what the Church has confessed about it, and write down the one claim you intend to make. It means you know what you are going to do when someone asks the question you cannot answer. Credentialism means you believe none of that counts until a school certifies it. The first is a duty every teacher owes his class. The second is a way of avoiding the duty by declaring yourself exempt from it.

Two things belong inside that preparation, and neither is impressive. The first is prayer, which is not a pious addition to the work. It is the work; a teacher who has read carefully and prayed carelessly has prepared the smaller half. The second is a book on the table. Put the Confessions where the class can see them — not to quote all hour, but to make visible what is happening in the room. You are teaching under something. A layman with the Catechism open in front of him is in a stronger position than a man with a degree and nothing on the table.

James 3:1 commands the first. It does not license the second.

Two equal and opposite errors

Almost everyone asked to teach fails in one of two directions, and the two look nothing alike.

The first is fearful refusal. It sounds humble. *I'm not qualified. I'd get something wrong. Somebody who really knows this should do it.* Sometimes that is honesty about a particular class at a particular time, and the right answer is no. But often it is something else wearing humility's coat.

Underneath it is a feeling most churchgoers will recognize: that reading Scripture is reading someone else's mail, and the people who really understand it went to seminary. That feeling is common. It is also wrong. These texts were written to be read aloud in ordinary congregations, to fishermen and tentmakers and household servants, and they have not stopped being for you.

Consider the woman asked to lead the Tuesday morning women's Bible study, who has read Ruth through eleven times and taught her own children out of it, and says no because she has no training. Her congregation loses a teacher it needed. She does not lose her fear; she keeps it, and has now confirmed it. What she has decided is that the Word cannot be taught by someone like her — a claim about the Word, not only about herself, and not true.

Fearful refusal treats teaching as a performance you must be good enough to give. On that standard nobody qualifies, and the people who imagine they do are the ones who should worry.

The second error is self-appointment. It sounds nothing like humility, though it borrows humility's vocabulary. *I have a burden for this. God laid it on my heart. Nobody else is teaching what needs to be taught.* Here the felt urgency of a man's own conviction becomes the authorization. He did not need to be asked, because he was called — and the calling was verified internally, by how strongly he felt it.

This is the more dangerous error, because it is self-sealing. Every objection becomes evidence of opposition, and opposition evidence of faithfulness. A teacher like this does not want a supervising pastor; he wants an audience. He is not serving the eleven at the folding tables. He is producing content, and they happen to be in the room.

Which brings out what the two share. They look opposite — one shrinks, one swells — but both put the same thing at the center: *me*. My inadequacy, or my zeal. In both, the decisive question is the state of the teacher's interior life, and the Word being taught, the neighbors being served, and the church doing the asking have moved to the edge of the frame.

Paul cuts across both from one angle. Writing to Rome about the gifts given through the body, he tells no one to think more highly of himself than he ought, but to think with sober judgment. The self-appointed man fails that plainly. Less obviously, the fearful man fails it too: thinking yourself the one Christian whose service God cannot use is not sober judgment. It is the same measurement from the other end.

Peter names what the gift is for: each should use what he received to serve others, and whoever speaks should speak as one delivering the words of God. Not his own words, dressed up. God's. The work is serious, and its seriousness does not rest on the speaker's résumé.

Teaching is not content production and it is not self-expression. **It is service to particular neighbors with names, who need to hear what God actually says.** Harold needs it. The widow needs it. That is the work.

You remain a disciple

There is a word underneath all of this that helps.

The ordinary New Testament word for a follower of Jesus is *mathētēs*. It does not mean *devotee* or *believer* or *supporter*. It comes from the verb *manthanō*, to learn, and it means *learner* — someone under instruction, attached to a particular teacher.

Watch what happens to that word in Acts. Luke uses it more than thirty times for ordinary believers — not as a title for an inner circle who advanced past the rest, but as the plain name for the people in the church. It was what the earliest Christians called themselves before anyone called them Christians.

That is what a Christian is. Not what a Christian starts as and then stops being. When Jesus tells his disciples not to be called *rabbi*, because they have one Teacher and are all brothers, he is not addressing a category of Christians who never advanced. He is describing the permanent condition of everyone who follows him, including the ones who will spend the rest of their lives teaching others.

So fix this in place before you say yes: teaching does not graduate you out of learning. It intensifies the obligation. The teacher of a class is not a disciple who has finished. He is a disciple who now has to sit under the text more carefully than before, because eleven people will hear what he made of it.

This is why the man who reads James for six weeks in order to teach James will end up knowing James better than he knew it as a hearer — and why that is a benefit and not the point. Preparation is not primarily how you become impressive to the class. It is how you stay under the Word while standing in front of it.

Paul puts the same duty to Timothy as workmanship: be diligent, present yourself to God as one approved, handling the word of truth rightly. The image is a worker with nothing to be ashamed of when the job is inspected. Note who inspects. Not the class, and not the teacher's own sense of how it went.

It also settles what to do at the edge of your competence, and it settles it early, before the pressure of a live room makes you improvise.

A man teaching Acts is asked, in week three, whether the Christians in chapter 2 who held everything in common mean private property is sin. He does not know. He can feel the class waiting, and how easy it would be to produce a confident-sounding paragraph.

What he says instead is: *That's a real question and I don't want to guess at it. I need to ask the pastor, and I'll come back to it next week.*

And then he does ask, and he does come back.

Nothing was lost. The class learned something true about how a Christian handles a text he has not mastered — worth more than the paragraph he would have improvised. A teacher who can say *I do not know* is safer to sit under than one who cannot, and a class can tell the difference sooner than you think.

What to clarify before you say yes

Yes is the right answer more often than fearful refusal admits. But it should be a specific yes, to a specific thing, and most of the trouble lay teachers run into traces back to a vague agreement made in a hallway.

Before you commit, get five things clear.

1. What am I teaching, and to whom? Which book, which curriculum, how many weeks, and who is in the room. An adult class working through James is not the same assignment as a class of new members, and neither is the third-grade Sunday school. Ask what has already been taught, and what the pastor hopes the class comes away with.

2. Who is entrusting this to me? Not *do I feel called* — who is doing the asking. A pastor, a board, a congregation, a parent. Teaching in the church is something you are given, not something you take. If the honest answer is *nobody asked me*, that is worth stopping over.

3. Who supervises doctrine, and where do pastoral questions go? Know the answer before you need it. When a question exceeds the class — when it stops being about the text and becomes about a marriage, a deathbed, a guilt that will not lift — you need to already know whose it is and how to hand it over. And when a doctrinal question comes that you cannot settle, you need to already know who settles it. This is the *ask the pastor and come back next week* arrangement, agreed in advance rather than improvised under pressure.

4. What preparation time is real? Not aspirational. Real. Count the hours you actually have in the weeks you will actually have them, including the week your daughter has surgery and the week of the year-end close at work. A teacher who has promised more than he can prepare will start filling class time with something other than preparation, and that something is usually his own opinions.

5. What are the boundaries? What is this class for, and what is it not for? A Bible class is not a counseling session, not a doctrinal court, and not the place to settle a dispute between two families in the congregation. It is also not yours to redirect: if you were asked to teach James, teaching James is the assignment, and a six-week detour into whatever you have been reading lately is a quiet breach of what was agreed. Knowing the edges in advance is what lets you teach freely inside them.

None of these five is a test you can fail. A pastor who is asked them will not think less of you; he will think you have understood the assignment, and he will be relieved, because the teachers who cause him trouble are almost never the ones who asked too many questions at the start.

Ask them out loud, and get the answers out loud. An arrangement that lives only in two people's memories of a hallway conversation is not an arrangement.

The next faithful step

Go back to the question from the afternoon: *Who am I to stand up in front of that room and say what God's Word means?*

The answer this book gives is not *you are more capable than you think*. You may not be. The answer is that the confidence a teacher needs was never located in the teacher.

The Word is not weak. It does not become weak in the hands of a plumber, a nurse, an accountant with four hours a week. God gives his Word to be taught, and it does its own work: it kills and makes alive, it accuses and forgives, and it does that whether or not the man at the end of the table is eloquent. Your job is not to make Scripture effective. Your job is to say accurately what it says and get out of its way.

The pastor is not an obstacle either. He is the help that comes with the assignment; a teacher who has a pastor to ask is better placed than a scholar working alone.

And *I do not know* is permitted. It is permitted every week, for as long as you teach.

What the church needs is more lay teachers, not more reasons to defer.

So the next step is not a leap. It is a conversation: ask the five questions. Then answer.

But there is something you will need before you walk into that room, and this chapter has not given it. You know now that the request is real and that both fear and self-appointment are dead ends. You do not yet know *what kind of work this is*. When you teach that class, are you doing a smaller version of what the pastor does on Sunday morning? Are you preaching? Are you exercising an office? If not — and you are not — then what are you doing, and what makes it legitimate?

The parallel cases raise it too. The woman leading the Tuesday morning study, the man taking the adult class, the teacher of third graders: same Word, different settings, and the difference between those settings is not accidental. That question has an answer, and it belongs to the church's order rather than to anyone's preference.

Priest, teacher, pastor. Those are three different things, and knowing which one you have been asked to be is the whole of the next chapter.

Chapter 2 — Priest, Teacher, Pastor

The class went better than you expected. Not well, exactly — you talked too fast for the first ten minutes and lost your place once — but nobody looked bored, Harold said something helpful about the second verse, and you got to the end of what you had prepared with four minutes to spare.

Then everyone leaves except one man, who is folding a chair he does not need to fold.

He waits until the room is empty. Then he says: "Can I tell you something? I've never told anyone this."

And in the next four seconds you have to know what you are.

You are not his pastor. You know that much. But you are also not nobody — he did not stay after the class to tell the janitor. He stayed because you spent an hour standing at the end of the table saying what God's Word means, and something in that hour made him think you were safe. Which means whatever you are, it is not nothing, and you had better know its name before he says the next sentence.

That is the question this chapter answers, and the reason it comes second. Chapter one said the invitation to teach is real and that both fearful refusal and self-appointment are dead ends. Fine. But a man standing in an emptying fellowship hall does not need to know that he is permitted to teach. He needs to know what kind of thing he is doing, and where its edges are.

Three words sort it out, and the whole rest of this book depends on getting them in the right relation: **priest, teacher, pastor**. One of those you became at the font. One of them you were given six weeks ago. One of them you are not, and will not be by being useful.

What belongs to every baptized Christian

Start with the largest of the three, because it is the one most often either forgotten or abused.

Peter writes to ordinary scattered Christians — not to clergy, not to a spiritual elite — and calls them a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. He has just told them they are living stones being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Notice the plural, and notice who is included. Every baptized person in that letter is a priest. Not like a priest. A priest.

The Greek word behind it is *hiereus* — the ordinary word for a sacrificing priest, the one who has access to the holy place. In the old covenant that access ran through a family and a building: one tribe, one tent, one man once a year behind the curtain. The New Testament takes the word and hands it to a congregation of tanners and tentmakers and slaves.

What does it get you?

Direct access. You do not need a mediator to reach God, because you already have one, and he is not in the room. You pray in your own name because you have been given his.

A sacrifice to offer. Not for sin — that one is finished. Your body, your work, your day, your patience with a difficult neighbor. The Christian's offering is his life, given back.

A word to speak. This is the one that matters for this book. A baptized Christian may speak the gospel to another person. Not by permission of a committee. Not as a favor from the pastor. It is his by baptism: he may tell a dying friend that Christ died for him, and he may tell his own child that her sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, and neither of those is trespassing. It is the family business.

That is the priesthood, and it is enormous. It is also the thing most likely to be misused in the next two paragraphs, so here is the guardrail.

The priesthood of all believers does not mean everyone is a pastor. It means the opposite of what it is usually made to mean. The phrase was recovered at the Reformation to say that a milkmaid and a magistrate stand before God on the same footing as a bishop — that there are no two grades of Christian. It was never a claim that the office of preaching is unnecessary or that anyone may take it up who feels like it. A priesthood of all believers with no ministry in it is not a Reformation doctrine. It is a congregation with nobody to preach to it.

Hold both. You are a priest. You are not, by being one, a pastor.

What belongs to the called office

Now the second word, and the one this book will not blur.

The Augsburg Confession says that in order that we may obtain the faith that justifies, God instituted the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments — and that through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, working faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear.

Three things are being said there, and they are worth separating.

The ministry is instituted. It is not a management solution the church arrived at once congregations got large. God set it up, for a purpose, and the purpose is that people would come to faith.

It works by means. Word and sacrament are the instruments. The Spirit does not arrive alongside them, as an extra; he comes through them. This is why the office cannot be reduced to leadership, or vision, or care. It exists to deliver specific things.

Its power is not the man's. The Spirit works where and when it pleases God. A pastor cannot make anyone believe, and his own qualities are not the engine.

Paul asks the question that makes the office necessary, and he asks it as a chain: how shall they call on one they have not believed in, and how shall they believe in one they have not heard of, and how shall they hear without someone preaching — and how shall anyone preach unless he is sent? Then the conclusion: faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Read that backward and you have the whole doctrine. Faith requires hearing. Hearing requires a preacher. A preacher requires sending. Nobody in that chain sends himself.

Then the next article names the door. No one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments without a proper call. The Latin is *rite vocatus* — rightly called.

Read that article carefully, because it is routinely stretched in both directions.

It does not say that only pastors may open the Bible in a church building. It is not a rule about who may lead a study. **Publicly teach, here, means the public office: preaching and administering the sacraments.** That is what the article is protecting, and it is the reading that governs this book.

Nor does it say that the call is a formality laid over a gift the man already had. The call is how a man gets the office. Not sincerity, not evident ability, not a burden he cannot shake. Someone outside him — a congregation, acting in good order — puts him there.

Three things are worth saying about that call, because it is the hinge of the whole arrangement and most people have never had it explained.

It comes from outside. This is the entire point. A man does not receive the office by concluding that he has it. He receives it when a congregation, which has the authority to call, calls him. That externality is not bureaucracy; it is the same shape as everything else in this book. God works from outside us — water and a word, bread and a word, a called man and a word. A ministry that began inside a man's own conviction would be the one thing in the Christian life that did.

It is not a judgment about his soul. The call does not certify that this man is holier than the men who did not receive it, or that his experience of God is deeper. It certifies that the church has examined him, found him fit for a particular work, and put him to it. That is why an unworthy pastor's absolution is still valid: the office is Christ's and the word is Christ's, and neither depends on the man delivering them.

And it is genuinely his until the church removes it. A pastor does not have to re-earn the office weekly by performance. This matters for the class in front of you, because a congregation that treats the call as provisional — good until the sermons stop being interesting — has already stopped believing what the call is.

What makes a call *rite*, rightly done, will vary in its procedure from congregation to congregation, and that variation is not a defect. What does not vary is the direction. It comes from outside the man.

The Confession is also frank that the authority attaching to that office is real, that it belongs to Christ rather than to the man, and that it is exercised for the church rather than over it.

So what is actually reserved? Strip away everything a lay Christian may plainly do, and what remains is short and specific:

- **Public preaching** in the assembly of the congregation.
- **Administering the sacraments** — baptizing and presiding at the Supper.
- **Private absolution**, spoken as from God to a person confessing.
- **Public doctrinal adjudication** — saying, on the congregation's behalf, that this teaching is right and that one is not.

That is a short list. Notice what is not on it: teaching a class, answering a question, comforting the grieving, praying with a neighbor, telling somebody the gospel. Those are not clergy prerogatives graciously extended to laymen. They belonged to you at the font.

What belongs to the teacher

Now the middle word, and the reason this book exists.

Between the priesthood every Christian has and the office no Christian may seize, there is a third thing, and it does not have a tidy name in most people's vocabulary. That is exactly why teachers get into trouble: they have two categories and three realities, so the third keeps getting sorted into one of the wrong boxes.

Here is the third thing, plainly.

A lay teacher is a baptized priest, entrusted by the congregation with a specific, limited, public-facing work under the oversight of the office.

Take that apart.

A baptized priest. Everything from the first section is already yours. You may speak the gospel because you are a Christian, not because you are teaching.

Entrusted by the congregation. This is the part the priesthood alone does not give you, and it is what separates the teacher from the man who simply has opinions about the Bible. Someone asked. That entrustment is not ordination and it does not make you a small pastor. It is more like a delegation of a churchly task — the congregation, which has real responsibility for what gets taught in its rooms, has handed part of that responsibility to you.

Specific and limited. You were given a class, a text, a term. Not a pulpit and not a flock. The limits are not an insult; they are the shape of the assignment.

Public-facing. This is why it is not merely private conversation. You are speaking to a group, in a church building, with the congregation's implicit endorsement, and the people in front of you will reasonably assume that what you say is what this church teaches. That is a real weight, and it is why the work is answerable.

Under the oversight of the office. You are not freelance. There is someone whose job includes what is taught in that room, and the relationship to him is not a limitation placed on you but the thing that makes the assignment safe.

Notice that the entrustment has the same direction as the call, on a smaller scale. You did not conclude that you should teach and then proceed. Someone asked. That is not a lesser way of arriving at the work than an inward certainty would have been — it is the more reliable one, and it is the only one you can point to afterward when you wonder what you are doing at the end of that table. A man who was asked can answer the question. A man who appointed himself has only his own memory of feeling sure.

Now the practical payoff, and it is the whole point of the three-column distinction: **the teacher's authority is derived and delimited, which means it is also real.**

Derived: you did not generate it. Delimited: it has edges. Real: within those edges, you are actually doing the church's work, and you may do it with confidence rather than apology. A man who understands this does not preface every sentence with *I'm not a pastor, but*. He knows what he is. He says what the text says.

THE SAME WORK, DIFFERENT SETTINGS

One more thing belongs in this column, and it is stated here rather than argued.

The same baptismal vocation is exercised in different settings. In this congregation, women teach women and children; mixed adult classes are taught by men; the line between a children's class and an adult class is confirmation. That is the order under which a teacher here serves, and this book will not relitigate it. The reasoning behind it — what it rests on, and how far it reaches — belongs in chapter ten, where church order is the subject.

What does belong here is the shape of the thing, because it is routinely described backward.

Women teaching women and children is not a leftover — not a residual permission that survives after the restrictive texts have been applied. It is commanded work with apostolic warrant. Paul tells Titus that older women are to teach what is good and train the younger women. He reminds Timothy of the sincere faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and that from infancy Timothy had known the sacred writings. A boy who would spend his life in the ministry was catechized by two women before he could read, and the apostle names them.

That is not a concession. It is a mandate, and the church has never had enough people obeying it.

Why the distinction is a mercy

It is easy to hear all this as a fence, so let me put it the other way around, because that is how it actually functions.

The distinction protects the hearers. People in a Bible class are not in a position to check you. They will believe what a teacher says with more trust than he probably deserves. The order — a called man responsible for doctrine, a teacher working within an assignment, both accountable to a congregation — is how a class is kept from being at the mercy of whoever happens to be standing at the end of the table.

It protects the teacher. This is the part nobody expects. A teacher who knows what he is not is free in a way that a teacher who has quietly promoted himself never is. He does not have to have an answer. He does not have to carry what he was never given to carry. When the class exceeds him, he has somewhere to hand it, and handing it over is faithfulness rather than failure.

And it protects the pastor from being either useless or everything. A congregation where only the pastor may teach has buried its gifts. A congregation where the office has quietly dissolved into a general fog of ministry has lost the thing God instituted to give it Christ.

Which brings us back to the man folding the chair.

Consider a composite. A teacher — six weeks into his first class, still nervous — is asked to stay after by a man who says he has never told anyone this. What follows is a real confession of a real sin, said out loud in an empty fellowship hall.

What is the teacher?

He is a priest. So he may say — should say, must say — the thing he actually knows: *Christ died for that. He died for that specific thing, and he is not surprised by it, and he does not love you less than he did an hour ago.* That is the gospel and it is his to speak. He does not need a call to say it and he must not withhold it.

He is a teacher. So he is not surprised that the hour produced this; teaching the Word tends to open people. He handles it as part of the work rather than as an interruption of it.

He is not the pastor. So there is something he does not do. He does not hear this as confession and pronounce absolution as one holding the office. He does not begin managing this man's life. He does not become the person this man comes to instead of coming to the church. What he does instead is simple and it takes one sentence: *I want you to say that to Pastor, and I'll go with you if that helps.*

Nothing was withheld. The man got the gospel from a Christian who had it to give, and he got a route to the office that has more to give him. The teacher stayed inside his assignment and it cost the man nothing.

That is the three-column distinction doing its work in about ninety seconds, in an empty room, with the chairs still out.

The next faithful step

If you keep one sentence from this chapter, keep this one: **you are a priest by baptism, a teacher by entrustment, and not a pastor at all — and all three of those are good news.**

The priesthood means you are not a spectator, and you already have the only thing the man in the fellowship hall actually needed to hear. The entrustment means your class is not a hobby; it is the congregation's work, handed to you, and it deserves preparation. And not being the pastor means the weight has a limit — that there are things which are genuinely not yours, and you may stop trying to carry them at eleven o'clock at night.

So: find out who carries oversight of teaching in your congregation. Not in a crisis. This week, before you need to know. In some congregations it is the pastor alone; in others he shares it with a board of deacons or elders. Ask, and write the answer down, because the whole arrangement described in this chapter only works if you know the name and number of the person on the other end of it.

Then go back to the text. Because knowing what you are does not yet tell you how to read — and a teacher who has his categories straight and his Bible closed has not been helped much.

Which is the next question. You stand under this book when you teach it, not over it. What does it actually mean to read that way?

Chapter 3 — The Teacher Under the Word

Ten minutes into the hour a woman raises her hand and asks, politely, how you know that.

Not hostile. Genuinely curious. You have just told the class what a verse means, and she wants to know where the meaning came from.

Most teachers, asked that, reach for one of four answers without thinking, and three of them are bad.

Because that's what it says — when it plainly does not say that; you have added something and not noticed.

Because that's what I've always been taught — which is an account of your upbringing, not of the text.

Because Pastor said so in a sermon two years ago — closer, but you have just made a man the ground of a claim, and if he was misremembered the claim goes with him.

Because Luther says — and now a sixteenth-century German is doing work that only Scripture can do.

The fourth is the one this chapter is about, and the good answer is available and unglamorous: *because of these three verses, read together, and here they are.*

That answer is not humility. It is the actual state of affairs. **You do not have any authority in that room that did not come from the text.** Not from your preparation, not from your appointment, not from having read more than anyone else present. This chapter is about how a teacher lives inside that fact — which turns out to be less restrictive and more freeing than it sounds.

Borrowed authority

Start with the thing the last chapter established and push it one step further.

You were entrusted with a class. That entrustment is real: it means the congregation has handed you a churchly task, and the people in front of you may reasonably expect that what you teach is what this church teaches. So there is authority in the room.

But look at where it comes from. The congregation did not make you an authority on the letter of James. It gave you responsibility for an hour. The authority operating in that hour is the text's, and it reaches the class through you the way water reaches a garden through a hose — which is a humbling image only if you were hoping to be the water.

Paul puts it in the language of household staff. He and Apollos should be regarded as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, and what is required of a steward is that he be found faithful. A steward manages what belongs to someone else. His competence matters — an incompetent steward wrecks the household — but competence is not ownership, and no amount of it converts the goods into his.

Two things follow, and they run in opposite directions, which is why teachers usually get one and miss the other.

Your opinion is not authoritative. Not because your opinions are bad, but because they are opinions. The moment you say *I think this passage means* and the class receives it as *this is what it means*, something has gone wrong that neither of you intended, and it will not correct itself.

But the text's authority actually is yours to use. This is the half that gets lost when a teacher becomes preoccupied with his own smallness. When you say what the text says, you are not offering a suggestion. You are handing over something that has claims on the people hearing it — and you may do that plainly, without hedging, without the apologetic throat-clearing that makes a class doubt whether anything said in the room is worth their Tuesday.

The teacher who understands borrowed authority is *more* confident than the one who does not, not less. He simply knows what he is confident about.

The hierarchy, and why it is short

So what actually governs a claim in your classroom? Four levels, in order, and the order is the whole point.

Scripture governs. It norms everything else and is normed by nothing. When a claim can be shown from the text, it stands; when it cannot, it does not, regardless of who made it.

The Confessions confess. The creeds, the Small Catechism, and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession are what this church has publicly said the Scriptures teach. They are subordinate — under Scripture, always — and they are also *accountable*, meaning public and checkable.

And here is something worth going and looking at. Find your congregation's constitution and read the article on confession. In an AFLC congregation it will say something close to this: that the Scriptures are the only source and rule of faith, doctrine, and life; that the congregation accepts the three ecumenical creeds and, in addition, the unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism — and then a sentence you should not read past. *All preaching and teaching in the congregation shall conform herewith.*

Not preaching. **Preaching and teaching.**

You are inside that sentence. The hour you teach is not a private arrangement between you and the class; the congregation has already said, in its governing document, what is taught in its rooms. That is not a restriction someone is about to impose on you. It is the ground you are already standing on, and it was there before anyone asked you to teach. A congregation that has subscribed to them has told the world what it will teach, and a teacher standing in its classroom is standing inside that promise.

The old theologians had a precise way of putting the relationship, and it is worth having even without the Latin. Scripture is the norm that norms and is normed by nothing. Everything else in the church — creed, confession, sermon, commentary — is a normed norm: it may carry real and binding authority, but the authority is borrowed, granted only as it faithfully says what Scripture already said. The Confessions do not stand alongside the Bible as a second authority. They kneel underneath it and point up.

The Confessions say this about themselves, which is worth knowing. The Formula of Concord opens by stating that the prophetic and apostolic writings are the only judge, rule, and norm by which all teachings and teachers are measured — and then says the creeds and confessions are not judges in that way at all, but witnesses: faithful testimony to how the Scriptures were understood in the church against error. **A word about that citation.** The Formula is not part of the AFLC's subscription and is not binding in this congregation; it is named here because it states the ordering with unusual clarity and because a reader who goes looking will find it. Everything in this chapter stands without it.

So a confessional Lutheran holds Scripture as the infallible rule and, at the same time, subscribes wholeheartedly to the creeds and the confessions — **because** they agree with Scripture, not merely *insofar as* they might.

That distinction looks pedantic and is not. To subscribe *because* is to confess: this is what the Scriptures teach, examine me by it. To subscribe *insofar as* is to reserve — I affirm this up to the point where I decide otherwise, and I keep the right to relocate that point. The second commits a man to nothing and protects nobody. He binds himself to the confession precisely as a way of binding himself to the Word it confesses.

Everyone else advises. Luther. The commentary on your shelf. The teacher whose podcast you like. Your own pastor, when he is explaining rather than exercising his office. These are enormously useful and none of them is a ground. A commentary is one careful man's reading, offered for your consideration, and the honest way to cite it says exactly that.

And notice who the second level actually protects. A binding confession sounds, to modern ears, like a restriction on the laity. It is the reverse. Consider the alternative — not in theory, where it sounds like freedom, but in practice. A congregation without a fixed confession is not one where everyone interprets Scripture freely. It is one where the operative confession is unwritten, unaccountable, and located in whoever currently holds the microphone. Doctrine still gets defined. It simply gets defined by charisma and headcount rather than by public documents anyone can read.

And the layman in that congregation has no ground to stand on. He cannot open a book and say *you are teaching contrary to what this congregation confesses*, because the congregation confesses nothing stable enough to be contradicted.

You can. That is what the second level is for. It is a public, fixed, examinable account of what this church believes the Scriptures teach — short enough to read in an evening, and available to measure everything you hear against, including what you yourself say at the end of the table.

And in some congregations the protection is stronger than you would guess. Keep reading past the confessional article to the one on amendments. You may find that everything in the constitution can be changed by the congregation — the boards, the meetings, the property, the officers — **except the confession, which cannot be changed at all.**

Sit with what that means. The people who wrote it were willing to let a future congregation restructure nearly everything about itself, and unwilling to let it vote on what the church believes. They did not trust themselves with it, and they were right not to. A confession that a majority could amend in a bad year is not a floor; it is a preference with a procedure attached.

So when you stand up to teach, the ground under you was not merely written down. It was, deliberately, put out of reach.

Your experience illustrates. It can make something clear. It can never make something true. A teacher who argues from what he has seen has left the only ground he had.

Now the guardrail, because this is where the hierarchy gets misused. Putting Scripture on top is not the same as clearing the table. *Scripture alone* does not mean the Bible and nothing else — no creeds, no confessions, no teachers, no history, just me and my open Bible. That posture sounds humble and is not. A man who arrives at a text with no church, no creed, and no one who has read it before him is not being careful; he is proposing to derive the faith from scratch by his own lights, and the results are visible in every direction. **The Bible above everything else, not the Bible and nothing else.**

Notice how short that list is, and notice what it does for you. **You are only responsible for the first level.** You do not have to have read everything. You do not have to adjudicate between two commentators. You have to be able to show, from the text, why you said what you said — and where you cannot, to say so.

And this works only because Scripture is clear enough to be worked with. Not every verse is easy — Peter said as much about Paul. But in everything necessary for salvation, the Bible is plain enough for an ordinary believer to understand, which is exactly why the highest authority in the church is not locked in an office you can never inspect. It is lying open on your lap. A teacher can go to the source, and so can the class.

The discipline of "the text says"

Now the practical part, and it is a set of habits rather than a principle.

Read it before you characterize it. If you are going to tell the class what a verse means, read the verse first. Out loud. This sounds too obvious to write down, and it is violated constantly — a teacher summarizes a passage he has not read to the class, and nobody can check him, including himself.

Distinguish four things, out loud, every time:

- *The text says* — actual content, and you are about to read it.
- *The text implies* — your inference from it, which may be right and is still yours.
- *The Confessions say* — the church's public confession, and you can point to the article.
- *I think* — clearly labeled, sparingly used.

A class that hears a teacher make those distinctions for six weeks has learned to read. That is worth more than any single lesson's content, and it costs four words.

Paraphrase accurately or not at all. Paraphrase is legitimate and often better than reading a long passage. It becomes dishonest at the point where the paraphrase carries something the text does not. The test: could the class check your summary against the verse and find it fair? If you are not sure, read the verse.

Quote in context or leave it. A citation that would embarrass you if the class read the surrounding paragraph is not a citation; it is a prop.

Cite to illuminate, not to intimidate. A reference exists to let the class see what you saw. If it is functioning to establish that you have read something they have not, drop it. The test is whether the class could go look it up and be helped — or whether the citation's job was to end the discussion.

And say the uncomfortable sentence when it is true: *I don't know, or that's a fair question and honest readers differ, or I told you something last week that was wrong.*

That last one deserves a moment. Correcting yourself in front of a class feels like a loss of standing and is the opposite. The class already suspects that teachers protect themselves. Watching one not do it teaches them something about the Christian life that no lesson on repentance will teach, and it makes everything else you say more believable, not less.

When sources differ

Sooner or later two things you trust will disagree, and a class will be watching how you handle it.

Sort the disagreement first, because three kinds get confused.

Sometimes the text is genuinely difficult and faithful readers have landed in different places. Say so. Give the strongest form of each reading — not a caricature of the one you reject — say which you find more persuasive and why, and move on. A teacher who does this once buys enormous credit, because the class learns that when he says a thing is clear, it is clear.

Sometimes a source is simply wrong, measured against Scripture and the Confessions. Say that too, without heat and without making a career of it. The commentary is a man's opinion; it does not become true by being printed.

And sometimes the disagreement is over what the Confessions actually teach — and that one is not yours. You may say what the article says. Settling a disputed reading of it, for the congregation, belongs to the office. The honest sentence is short: *the Confession says this much; beyond that, I'll ask Pastor and come back to you.*

Then actually come back. A teacher who says that and does not follow through has taught the class that the promise was a way of ending a conversation.

One composite, because this is where teachers most often overreach. A class is working through a passage on baptism and someone asks whether a person baptized in a church that teaches nothing about what baptism does has really been baptized. It is a serious question, it is being asked by someone whose sister is in exactly that situation, and there is an answer — but it involves the validity of another church's practice and it will be repeated at a family dinner.

The teacher's honest move is not to duck. It is to say what he can show: what the Catechism says baptism is and does, and that the Word attached to the water is what makes it baptism rather than the understanding of the people present. And then to stop, and say that the rest of the question — what to do about her sister — needs the pastor, and to offer to make the call.

Nothing was withheld. The doctrine got taught. The part that exceeded the assignment went where it belonged.

What this frees you from

End where the chapter started, with the woman who asked how you know that.

The answer *because of these three verses* is not a retreat. It is the strongest position available to you, and it has three consequences worth noticing.

You do not have to be the expert. Your job is to show the class the text and what the church confesses about it. When you have done that, you have done the job — even if someone in the room has read more than you, and someone usually has.

You cannot be argued out of your ground. A teacher whose authority rests on his competence can be beaten by a better-read student. A teacher standing on the text cannot, because the argument is no longer about him. He can say: *let's look at it. Show me.* And if the student is right, the teacher has learned something and the class has watched him learn it.

And you are not carrying the weight of being believed. The Word does its own work. It is not made effective by your preparation and it is not made ineffective by your bad Sunday. What you owe the class is accuracy and honesty. What happens after that is not on you, and a teacher who has understood this sleeps better than one who has not.

So: this week, in the passage you are preparing, find the one place where you were about to say *this means* and check whether the text actually says it. Some weeks you will find nothing. The week you find something is the week this chapter pays for itself.

Which raises the next question, and it is a large one. Standing under the text is a posture. It is not yet a method. How do you actually read a passage — how do you get from words on a page to something you can honestly say *the text says* about?

That is the work of the next chapters.

Chapter 4 — Read Before You Explain

You are teaching Philippians. You look up *joy* in a concordance, find it eleven times, and build an hour around the theme.

Nothing you say will be false. Philippians does talk about joy. But you have not read Philippians; you have searched it. And the difference will show, because what Paul is actually doing in that letter — writing from custody to a church that has sent him money and is quarreling — never comes into view. The hour is about a topic that appears in the book rather than about the book.

That is the most common failure in lay teaching, and it is not a failure of effort. It is a failure of sequence. **Explanation arrived before observation.**

This chapter is about the first half of that sequence: what you have to see before you are entitled to say what it means. It is the least glamorous chapter in this book and the one that will change your teaching most.

Observation before explanation

Here is the discipline, stated as a rule: **do not ask what a passage means until you can say what it does.**

Those are different questions. *What does this mean* invites you to supply something. *What does this do* asks you to describe something that is already there — how the argument moves, where it turns, what is being claimed and what is being assumed.

Most bad teaching skips straight to meaning, and the reason is understandable: meaning is what the class wants. But a meaning that has not been anchored in observation is just the teacher's impression, and impressions are exactly what chapter three said carry no authority.

So slow down at the front. Five things to observe, in this order.

One: the whole, then the part

Read the passage aloud. Then read what surrounds it. Then, if the book is short enough, read the whole book in one sitting.

This is the step people skip because it feels like it isn't work. It is the highest-yield twenty minutes in your preparation.

Reading the whole shows you things that are invisible up close. Where the argument began. What the author has already established and is now assuming. Whether your passage is the point being made or an illustration of a point made earlier. Whether a word you were about to explain carefully is one the author uses casually eleven times.

A composite. A teacher preparing a hard verse in Romans 7 spent two hours on it and got nowhere. Then he read Romans 5 through 8 in one sitting and the verse stopped being a puzzle, because he could finally see what Paul had been building since chapter five. The two hours were wasted; the forty minutes were not.

A practical note: your passage's boundaries were chosen by someone. Chapter and verse numbers were added centuries after the texts were written, and they are frequently placed badly. If your passage starts mid-argument, say so to the class and read the preceding sentence.

Two: genre

Ask what kind of writing this is, because the answer changes what counts as a faithful reading.

A proverb is not a promise. *Train up a child in the way he should go* is wisdom — a description of how life generally goes — and reading it as a guarantee has broken the hearts of faithful parents whose children walked away. A psalm of lament is not a doctrinal proposition; it is a prayer, and it is permitted to say things in the way grief says them. A narrative reports what happened, which is not the same as endorsing it. Apocalyptic writing uses images the way a political cartoon does, and reading it flatly produces nonsense.

You do not need technical vocabulary for this. You need one question: **what kind of thing am I holding, and what does this kind of writing do?**

Get this wrong and everything downstream is wrong, confidently.

Three: the argument

For anything that argues — the letters especially — trace the movement.

Find the connectives and take them seriously. *Therefore, but, so that, because, in order that*. These are the joints of the argument, and a reader who ignores them is reading a pile of sentences instead of a case.

Try this: write the passage's argument in three or four short sentences, in order, in your own words. If you cannot, you do not yet know what it says. That failure is information, and it is better to have it on Thursday than on Sunday.

Watch particularly for the *therefore* that connects an imperative to an indicative — a command grounded in something God has already done. That structure runs through the New Testament and it matters more than almost anything else you will notice, because it is where the whole shape of the Christian life sits.

Ephesians is the clearest case in the Bible. Three chapters of pure indicative — chosen, re-deemed, made alive, seated with Christ, brought near, built together — and then chapter four opens with *therefore*, and the commands begin. Everything after that hinge is grounded in everything before it. A teacher who takes his lesson from chapter four without chapter three has the commands and no ground, and what he will produce is a moral lecture from a letter that spent three chapters preventing exactly that.

Cut a command loose from its ground and you have manufactured moralism out of a text that was preaching gospel.

Four: the words themselves

Now the part that goes wrong most often, and the reason it goes wrong is that this is where a teacher feels most like a scholar.

Some genuine facts about words, and then the traps.

Words have ranges of meaning, not single true meanings. Context selects which sense is in play. Repetition is significant — when a short passage says a word six times, that is the author pointing. And sometimes a word carries weight that an English translation cannot easily show.

Now the traps. All four are extremely common and all four make a teacher sound more learned while being less accurate.

The etymology trap. A word's history is not its meaning. What a word once came from tells you very little about what it means in the sentence you are reading, because words drift away from their parts.

The example every lay teacher has already met is the Greek word for *church*. You have probably been told it means *called-out ones* — from a preposition meaning *out of* and a verb meaning *to call* — and that the church is therefore those called out of the world. The elements really are in there. But by the time the New Testament was written, that word did not mean *called-out ones* to a Greek speaker any more than *breakfast* means *breaking the fast* to us. It means the morning meal. The word in question simply meant *assembly* — the citizens' assembly, the gathering summoned for public business — and that is a richer thing to know about the church than the false etymology, not a poorer one.

So when someone says *this word literally means*, and then hands you a root, be careful. The root is often interesting. It is almost never the point of the sentence in front of you.

The one-verse-per-word trap. Taking a rich definition from one passage and importing it into every other place the word appears. Authors use words differently in different places, and so does the same author.

The "the Greek really says" trap. This phrase is almost always doing rhetorical work rather than exegetical work. It says: *I have access you don't have*. If the point cannot be shown from a reliable English translation — or from comparing two of them — it usually isn't there.

The vending-machine trap. Treating original-language tools as a way to extract hidden meanings the translators missed. Translators are not hiding things. They are a committee of people who have spent their lives on this and disagree with each other in public.

Here is the useful version of language work, and it is genuinely useful. Compare two or three good translations. Where they differ, you have found something — either a genuine ambiguity in the original or a real interpretive decision. That is worth showing the class, because it teaches them that translation involves judgment without teaching them that translation is untrustworthy. And when you do use a language tool, use it to *check* a reading you formed from the text, never to generate one you would not otherwise have had.

A test before you say anything about a Greek or Hebrew word in class: could I explain why this matters to someone who will never learn the language, in one sentence, without sounding impressive? If not, leave it out. It was decoration.

Five: the canon

Last, place the passage in the whole book.

Two principles do most of the work here, and both are old.

Scripture interprets Scripture. Where a passage is genuinely unclear, other passages that are clear on the same subject govern the reading. This is not a trick for making texts say what you want. It is a recognition that the Bible has one Author and does not contradict itself, so a reading that sets one passage against a plain teaching elsewhere is a reading that has gone wrong somewhere.

Clear governs unclear, never the reverse. Build doctrine from the passages that state it plainly, and let those govern the hard ones. Almost every serious error in the church's history has run the other way: an obscure verse, read confidently, used to overturn something plain.

And notice the practical relief in that. You are not required to solve every difficult passage before you teach. You are required to know which passages are load-bearing and to teach those accurately.

Choosing what to read *about* the text

At some point you will consult something. Three questions to sort what is worth your time.

Who is this writer accountable to? A commentator who belongs to a confessing tradition, writing under its scrutiny, is in a different position from an anonymous website. This does not mean only Lutherans are useful — careful scholarship from other traditions is often excellent, and you should know when you are reading it.

Does he show his work? A source that gives conclusions without reasons is asking to be trusted rather than checked. Prefer the one that shows why, even when it is slower.

Does he tell you when the question is disputed? A writer who presents every question as settled is either not aware of the discussion or is hiding it. Either way, be careful.

On the internet in particular: the shorter and more confident the answer, the more caution it deserves. A three-sentence explanation of a famously difficult verse is a warning sign, not a convenience. And a word-study site that offers you the "real meaning" of a term without context is the vending machine described above, wearing a nicer interface.

A working rubric. Score anything you are about to rely on:

	Good sign	Warning sign
Accountability	Writes within a confessing tradition, under its scrutiny	Anonymous, or accountable to an audience rather than a church
Shows work	Gives reasons you could evaluate	Gives conclusions to be accepted
Handles dispute	Names where honest readers differ	Presents everything as settled
Handles language	Uses the original languages to check readings	Uses them to unlock hidden meanings
Length vs. difficulty	Long where the passage is hard	Uniformly brief and confident
Its own limits	Says when a question exceeds it	Never does

You do not need a source to score well on all six. You need to know which ones it failed before you repeat it in a room where nobody can check you.

When to stop

There is a category of problem this book's method cannot solve, and knowing you have hit one is part of competence.

Stop and get help when:

- Two translations differ in a way that changes the doctrine, not just the phrasing.
- A footnote in your Bible says some manuscripts read otherwise, and the difference matters.
- The passage seems to teach something that contradicts a plain teaching elsewhere, and you cannot resolve it.
- The commentaries you trust disagree with each other about what the passage is even claiming.
- You find yourself constructing an explanation you have never heard anyone make. (See chapter eight.)

None of these means you have failed. They mean you have hit the edge of what a lay teacher's toolkit is for — and the edge is real, and it has a phone number. Take it to the pastor. The alternative is a confident answer manufactured to fill a silence, which is the one genuinely bad option.

One reassurance: questions of manuscripts and textual variants sound alarming and are, in the vast majority of cases, both well understood and doctrinally inconsequential. A teacher who says *there's a variant here, the difference is small, and I'll ask Pastor about it* has handled it correctly and has taught his class something true about how we got the Bible.

All five, on one passage

The chapter has described five steps. Here they are on Philippians 4:4–7 — the *rejoice always* passage, which is beloved, frequently misused, and short enough to work in full.

One: the whole, then the part.

Read the four verses aloud. Then read the last chapter. Then read the letter — it takes twenty minutes.

Reading the whole letter changes these verses completely. Paul is in custody. The church at Philippi has sent him money and a man to look after him. And two women in that congregation, both named in the text, are in a dispute serious enough that the apostle addresses it publicly a few sentences before *rejoice always*.

That is the setting. Not a serene devotional aside — a command to rejoice, written from prison, into a quarrel.

Also notice: the passage starts mid-paragraph. The paragraph break in most Bibles falls in an awkward place, and reading from verse four alone hides that the rejoicing is being asked of people who are angry with each other.

Questions written down, including the hard one: *is this a command about feelings? What do you say to someone who cannot rejoice?*

Two: genre.

A letter — occasional, to a specific congregation, about a specific situation. That matters immediately: this is not a general principle floating free. It is pastoral instruction, from a man in chains, to people he names.

The practical consequence: whatever *rejoice always* means, it must be something the two quarreling women could actually do that week.

Three: the argument.

Trace the movement. Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be evident to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Now the connectives, which most readings ignore. *The Lord is near* sits in the middle, and it is an indicative — a statement of fact — planted between two imperatives. It is the ground. The rejoicing and the not-being-anxious both rest on it.

And the last clause is not a command at all. *The peace of God will guard* is a promise. The passage ends by giving something, not by requiring something.

Written as movement in four sentences: *Rejoice — in the Lord, which is where the joy is located. Be gentle, because he is near. Instead of anxiety, ask him. And what follows is not your achievement but his guarding.*

Four: the words.

Two are worth noticing and one is not.

In the Lord is doing everything. The command is not *be happy*; it is *rejoice in the Lord*, which is a different instruction and one available to a person whose circumstances are terrible. Cut those three words and you have a demand nobody can obey in a hospital corridor.

Guard is a soldier's word — a garrison posted around something. Worth one sentence, because it shows the peace as something stationed rather than felt.

And here is the one to leave alone: the word rendered *gentleness* is genuinely hard to translate, and the versions differ. Note the difference for the class if you like. Do not build the hour on it.

Five: the canon.

Is this passage clear or unclear on its subject? Clear — and it should govern rather than be governed.

But check it against what else is plain. Scripture also gives us the lament psalms, and Paul elsewhere reports being so burdened he despaired of life itself. A reading of *rejoice always* that makes lament sinful has set this passage against plain teaching elsewhere, which chapter four's rule says is a reading that has gone wrong.

So the canonical check does real work here: it rules out the sunny reading, and it does so from the Bible rather than from pastoral instinct.

THE SAME FIVE STEPS, FASTER, ON POETRY

Run them once more compressed, on a psalm, because poetry breaks the habits an epistle rewards.

Take Psalm 1 — the blessed man, the tree by streams of water, the chaff the wind drives away.

Whole, then part. Read it aloud. Then read Psalm 2, because the two open the Psalter together and were almost certainly meant to be read as a pair. Reading only Psalm 1 gives you a wisdom poem about two ways to live. Reading both gives you a wisdom poem followed immediately by a coronation — and the question of who the blessed man finally is becomes live.

Genre. Hebrew poetry, and wisdom. Which means: parallel lines that restate rather than advance, and general truth rather than promise. That single observation prevents the passage's most common misuse — treating *whatever he does prospers* as a guarantee about a Christian's circumstances. Wisdom describes how life generally goes. It is not a contract.

Argument. Poetry does not argue with connectives; it argues with structure. Here the structure is a contrast held across the whole psalm — the man who is like a planted tree, the wicked who are like chaff. Notice what is *not* symmetrical: the tree gets four lines of description and the chaff gets one. The imbalance is the argument.

Words. *Blessed* is the first word and it is not *happy*; it describes a standing rather than a mood. *Planted* is passive — the tree did not put itself there. And the word rendered *meditates* is worth one sentence, because it is a physical word, closer to muttering than to silent reflection: this man is saying the words out loud.

Canon. Is anyone actually like this man? Read honestly, nobody is — and that observation is where the psalm stops being moral advice. Which is why Psalm 2, and its King, sit immediately next to it.

Same sequence. Different genre. And notice the difference: in the epistle the payoff came from tracing connectives, and here it came from noticing structure and a neighbor psalm. The steps do not change. What they turn up does.

What the five steps produced.

A governing claim available for chapter seven: *Christians in real trouble are commanded to rejoice in the Lord — not in their circumstances — because he is near; and the peace that follows is a guard he posts, not a mood they generate.*

And notice what was avoided. The concordance search would have given you a passage about attitude. Observing first gave you a passage about where the joy is located — written into a quarrel, by a prisoner.

What the class should learn from watching you

Everything above is about your preparation. But the class is watching the method, not just receiving the results, and over a term they will absorb your habits.

So make some of it visible.

Read the surrounding paragraph aloud, every time. Say *this verse begins mid-argument, so let's back up*. Say *these two translations differ here, and here's what that tells us*. Say *the word he keeps repeating is this one — count it*.

Do that for ten weeks and you have taught nineteen people to read. That outlasts every particular lesson you will ever teach, and it is the actual goal: not a class that knows what you concluded about James, but a class that could open Philipians on their own and see what is there.

The next faithful step

This week, before you consult anything, read your passage aloud and then read the whole surrounding argument. Then write its movement in four sentences.

If the four sentences come, you are ready to prepare. If they do not, you have learned the most useful thing available to you this week, and you have learned it early.

But observation and argument are not the whole job. A teacher can trace every connective in a passage and still leave a class with information rather than with Christ. Which raises the question the next chapter has to answer: how is this text about him — and how do we get there without inventing the route?

Chapter 5 — Christ Is the Center, Not the Shortcut

You are teaching a chapter of Genesis, and you have two instincts about it.

The first is safe and dull: *this is a story about Joseph, and what we learn from Joseph is integrity under pressure*. A moral lesson from a passage that has one available, and Christ nowhere in the hour.

The second is better and riskier: *Joseph is a type of Christ — sold for silver by his brothers, cast into a pit, raised up to save the very people who betrayed him, and the coat is the seamless robe*.

Now count. Three of those observations are sound and part of the story that arrives at Christ. One you made up in the car. And the class cannot tell which is which, because you said all four in the same voice.

Both failures are common, and the second is the one this chapter is mostly about, because the first is easy to see and the second feels like faithfulness while it happens.

The authorization

Start with why a Christian reads the Old Testament as being about Christ at all, because the answer is not a hermeneutical preference. It is the risen Lord's own instruction.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus calls two disciples foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken — and then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interprets to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. Later that evening he tells the gathered disciples that everything written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled.

Note carefully what he does *not* say. He does not say a new meaning is now being added to old texts. He says these things were always there and they were slow to see them. The rebuke is for missing what was present, not for failing to anticipate an innovation.

And he says the same thing to opponents: you search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and these are the very ones that testify about me. A few sentences later he makes it as specific as it can be made — if you believed Moses, you would believe me, because he wrote about me. Not *he prepared the way for me*. He wrote about me.

So Christ-centered reading is not something Christians do to the Old Testament. It is what the Old Testament is for, on the authority of the one it is about.

But notice the constraint hiding inside the authorization. He interpreted *the things concerning himself*. He did not authorize us to find whatever we like. The warrant is specific, and specific warrant is also limit.

Where the shortcut goes wrong

The abuse this chapter guards against is old and has a name: allegory in the free-form sense — treating the text's details as a code whose real referents lie elsewhere, available to the reader who is clever enough.

Three things are wrong with it, and only the first is obvious.

It leaves the text behind. Once the details are a code, what the passage actually said stops mattering. The scarlet cord, the number of steps, the color of the curtain — each becomes a token, and the historical event, the argument, the promise all recede.

It cannot be checked. This is the serious problem. If Christ is found by ingenuity, then the reading with the most ingenuity wins, and there is no way for the class to test it. A teacher who reads this way has quietly made himself unfalsifiable, which chapter three said no teacher may be.

And it teaches the class that the Bible is a puzzle they cannot solve. They watch the teacher pull connections out of a text they had read plainly, and they conclude that ordinary reading gets you nowhere and only the initiated can really open the book. That is the exact opposite of what this whole book is for.

The Reformers had a word for their alternative: the *sensus literalis* — the plain sense, what the text actually says, taken as the controlling meaning. That was not a rejection of Christ-centered reading. It was the insistence that the way to Christ runs *through* the plain sense rather than around it.

Six warranted lines

So how does a passage actually connect to Christ, when it does? There are established routes, and they have this in common: each is traceable, and a class can follow it and check it.

Direct promise. The text explicitly promises what Christ fulfills. A seed, a son of David, a servant who bears iniquities. The connection is stated by the text.

Apostolic use. The New Testament tells us how a passage bears on Christ. This is the strongest warrant available, because the connection is not ours — it is inspired. When Hebrews reads Melchizedek Christologically, that is not a suggestion.

Type, in the strict sense. A real person, event, or institution which by God's design prefigures Christ and is fulfilled in him. The word *real* is load-bearing: typology runs on the rails of history. Melchizedek was an actual man. The Passover was an actual meal. A type that requires the history to be fictional has stopped being a type.

Office. Prophet, priest, king. Every man who held one held it partially and imperfectly, and the offices themselves point past their holders to the one who holds all three without remainder.

Sacrifice and covenant. The whole system of blood, altar, and mediated relationship is oriented toward a fulfillment it cannot itself supply — and the Old Testament says so about itself, repeatedly, before any Christian arrived to say it.

The situation of need. Every text that shows a people who cannot save themselves is pointing, structurally, to a rescue from outside. That is not allegory. It is the shape of the story.

Four guardrails

Four rules keep those lines from becoming a code. They are worth memorizing, because between them they catch nearly every abuse.

One: the historical reality of the type is preserved. The person lived; the event happened; the institution existed. Typology gains no foothold unless the events are real, because a type is not a symbol invented by a later reader — it is something God did, which turns out to have been shaped like something he would do later. A reading that requires the history to be fictional has stopped being typology and become literature.

Two: the connection must be more than a shared word. This is the guardrail that does the most work and the one nobody applies. A word appears in two places, or a color, or a number, and the correspondence is declared. But a shared word is not a shared meaning, and Scripture is long enough that any two passages can be made to touch if the only requirement is a matching term. The connection has to be one of substance: office, promise, sacrifice, covenant, the structure of the thing.

Three: the fulfillment always exceeds the figure. Christ is not the same size as the type. He is greater, and the type falls short — which is exactly why the Old Testament keeps repeating and keeps failing to satisfy. Every priest died. Every king sinned. Every sacrifice had to be offered again. When a teacher makes the correspondence tidy and equal, he has flattened the thing: the point of the shadow is that it is not the substance.

Four: the safest correspondences are the ones the apostles themselves draw. Where the New Testament makes a link, make it confidently — the connection is not yours and does not need defending. Where Scripture is silent, proceed with much more care and far less volume.

Two practical notes that follow from the four.

Honor the plain sense on the way. Say what the passage says before you say what it points to. A Christ-centered reading that skips the plain sense has not gone deeper; it has skipped a step.

And not every detail has a referent. A type does not encode a one-to-one correspondence for every element. Joseph's brothers sold him for twenty pieces of silver; Judas took thirty. The mismatch means nothing, because the number was never the point.

The question to put in your class's mouth — and in your own — is not *what could this stand for?* It is *where does Scripture itself draw the line from here to Christ?* Those two questions produce entirely different classrooms.

Two that work

The Passover. Read Exodus 12 for what it is: a real night, a real household, a lamb without blemish, blood on the doorframe, a judgment that passes over. Teach that plainly first, because the plain sense is where the power is — a family inside a house, alive because something else died.

Then the line, and it is not yours to construct: Paul says Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. John's Gospel notes that not one of his bones was broken, which is what the Passover regulation required. The apostles made this connection. You are repeating it.

Why it works: real history, apostolic warrant, plain sense honored, and no detail forced. The class can follow every step.

The bronze serpent. Numbers 21: a plague of serpents, a bronze serpent lifted on a pole, and life for anyone who looks. Strange, and strange in a way you should let stand.

Then John 3:14, where Jesus himself makes the connection: as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. The warrant here is the highest available.

Note the teaching payoff: the healing came from looking at something outside yourself, not from anything happening inside you. That is not imposed. It is what the passage does.

Two that do not

The scarlet cord. Rahab hangs a scarlet cord in her window; the cord is red; blood is red; therefore the cord signifies the blood of Christ.

Test it. Does Scripture draw this line? No — Hebrews and James both discuss Rahab, and neither mentions the cord's color. Does the passage make anything of the color? No; it is a marker so the spies' allies could identify the house. Does it require ingenuity? Yes, and the ingenuity is a color match.

And notice what gets lost. The passage's actual gospel is startling and available: a Canaanite prostitute is spared and ends up in the genealogy of Jesus, named there without her label removed. That is better than the cord, it is in the text, and the cord reading walks right past it.

Every measurement in the tabernacle. A teacher assigns significance to each dimension, material, and color — the acacia wood is Christ's humanity, the gold his divinity, the fifty loops are Pentecost.

Some of this is warranted: Hebrews reads the tabernacle Christologically, at length, and tells you which features carry the weight. What Hebrews does not do is assign a referent to every cubit. When a teacher goes beyond the inspired reading and keeps the same confident tone, the class receives the invented parts and the apostolic parts identically.

The test that sorts all four: could a member of your class, with an ordinary Bible and no special training, follow how you got there — and disagree if they thought you were wrong? If yes, you are teaching. If no, you are performing.

One more that works, from a different genre. Isaiah's suffering servant — despised, rejected, pierced for our transgressions, bearing the iniquity of us all. A teacher does not need to construct anything here. In Acts, an Ethiopian official is reading this very passage and asks who the prophet is talking about; Philip begins from that scripture and preaches Jesus to him. The line was drawn by an evangelist, in the text, in answer to the same question your class will ask. That is the highest warrant available and it is worth showing the class that it exists — because it teaches them that the connection is not a Christian overlay but the answer the church has given from the first generation.

What about the class member who brings his own? Sooner or later someone will offer a fanciful reading he loves — usually one he heard years ago, often attached to a real moment when the Bible came alive for him. Do not humiliate it.

Run the guardrails out loud, as a shared tool rather than a verdict: *is the history preserved? is the connection more than a shared word? does the fulfillment exceed the figure? did an apostle draw this line?* Let the reading fail the test in the open, and let him watch you apply the same test to something of your own. Then give him something better from the same passage, because there usually is something better, and the reason he loved the fanciful reading was that nobody had shown him the real one.

When the passage is not about Christ

Now the honest case, because a book that pretends every passage yields a tidy Christological reading is teaching a technique that will eventually require faking.

Some passages have no traceable line to Christ. A proverb about laziness. A census. A list of towns. A piece of practical instruction about lawsuits.

Three things are true, and they belong together.

The whole Bible is about Christ. That is not a claim that every sentence contains him. A book can be about something without every sentence naming it, and a chapter of a story is part of that story whether or not the protagonist is on the page.

Do not force it. A strained connection costs more than an absent one. The class learns either that you are reaching or that reaching is what teachers do.

But do not end on the law. Here is the discipline that keeps the honest case from becoming a moralistic one: when the passage's own content is instruction, you teach the instruction — and then you locate the class inside the gospel before they leave. Not by wrenching Christ out of the proverb. By saying something true that the passage assumes: *this is what life looks like for people God has already claimed, and he has already claimed you.*

That is not a shortcut. It is the difference between a lesson that ends holding a demand and one that ends holding a promise, taught from a text that gave you the demand honestly.

The next faithful step

Take the passage you are preparing and ask two questions in order.

First: *what is actually happening here, in the plain sense?* Answer it fully before moving on.

Second: *is there a traceable line to Christ — promise, apostolic use, type, office, sacrifice, or the situation of need?* If yes, walk it, slowly, showing your work. If no, say the plain sense faithfully and land the class where God has actually put them.

Either way, the class should be able to follow you the whole distance. That is the standard, and it is the difference between Christ at the center and Christ as a shortcut.

Which leaves the question of what the text is *doing* to the people hearing it — because a passage does not only say something. It does something, and it does different things to different people in the same room.

Chapter 6 — Law and Gospel in an Actual Room

You teach one hour. Nineteen people hear it. They do not hear the same thing.

That is not a failure of your delivery. It is the nature of what you are handling, and it is the reason this chapter exists. God speaks two words — one that demands and exposes, one that gives and forgives — and the same sentence out of your mouth can land as either, depending entirely on who is receiving it.

Which means the teacher's question is never only *what does this passage say*. It is also *what is this passage doing, and to whom*.

That sounds like it requires reading hearts, which chapter three said you cannot do and chapter two said is not your office. It does not. What it requires is knowing that the room is mixed, teaching in a way that serves the mixture, and recognizing the point at which a person in front of you needs something a classroom cannot give.

The distinction, briefly

You have heard this defined. Two sentences, then we move to the room.

Law is God's word that commands, exposes, and accuses. It tells you what you owe and shows you that you have not paid it. It can also restrain evil in the world and guide the life of someone already forgiven — but its characteristic work on a conscience is to convict.

Gospel is God's word that announces and gives. It is not advice about what to do; it is news about what has been done. It creates the faith that receives it, and it forgives.

The Confession puts the second in terms of delivery rather than information: the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments exists so that we may obtain the faith that justifies, and through Word and sacrament as instruments the Spirit works faith where and when it pleases God. The gospel is not a topic. It is something handed over.

The Confessions treat this as structural rather than as one topic among others: the Apology holds that the whole of Scripture divides into these two chief teachings and that the gospel, strictly speaking, is not a preaching of what we are to do but the promise that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, and Formula of Concord V devotes an entire article to the distinction and warns that when the two are mingled, the merits and benefits of Christ are obscured and troubled consciences are robbed of their comfort.

Paul draws the contrast as sharply as it can be drawn. Writing to Corinth about two ministries, he says the letter kills but the Spirit gives life, calls the one a ministry of death carved in letters on stone and the other a ministry of the Spirit, and says what once had glory has none now beside the glory that surpasses it. Note what he does *not* say: that the law was bad, or a mistake, or abolished. It had real glory. It also kills, and never could do anything else.

And Paul says why it kills, in the most personal passage he ever wrote about it. He would not have known what coveting was except that the law said *do not covet* — and sin, seizing the opportunity through the commandment, produced in him every kind of coveting. The commandment that promised life proved to be death to him. And then the verdict, which a teacher should not soften: **the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.**

That is the whole doctrine in one paragraph. The law is good. It shows you what you owe. Showing you what you owe is precisely how it kills you, and it is supposed to.

A word about the law's other uses, because a reader from a non-Lutheran background will be confused otherwise. Alongside its work of accusing, the law does two other things: it restrains evil in society, which is why murder is illegal in places that do not believe in Christ at all; and it guides the life of someone already forgiven, showing a Christian what love for his neighbor actually looks like in practice rather than leaving him to invent it. That third use is real, and it is not a back door to earning anything — the man being guided has already been forgiven, and the guidance changes nothing about his standing.

But do not let the guiding office eclipse the accusing one, because that is how sanctification teaching quietly curdles back into moralism. The law always accuses — even when it is instructing, because the man being instructed is still a sinner, and the old Adam in him hears every *ought* as an indictment. He hears it correctly. Which means a lesson on Christian living is never merely informational; it is doing law's work on somebody in the room whether the teacher intended it or not, and that somebody will need the second word before he leaves.

Three ways teachers get the distinction wrong

Before the room, clear three misidentifications. Each is common, and each will wreck a class quietly.

Law is not the Old Testament and Gospel is not the New. The first gospel promise is spoken in Genesis 3, before anyone has left the garden, and the sharpest law in Scripture comes from the mouth of Jesus in Matthew 5. A teacher who sorts by testament will preach law from the epistles without noticing and miss the gospel in the Psalms.

Law is not harshness and Gospel is not niceness. This is the most common error among kind teachers, and it is why kind teachers so often leave a class with nothing. Tone is not the category. A gentle sentence can be pure law — *you really should be reading your Bible more* — and a blunt one can be pure gospel: *your sins are forgiven; that is finished.*

Say it sharper, because this is where most well-meaning lessons die: **a softer command is still a command**. Advice, encouragement, *do your best and God will meet you halfway* — all of that is law. It is law that has had its teeth pulled, which means it can no longer even do law's proper work of accusing, and it certainly cannot forgive anyone. A class fed on it goes home tired and unsure, taking its own spiritual temperature and never reaching a verdict.

And it is not grammar. You cannot sort by whether a sentence is imperative or indicative. *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved* is an imperative delivering gospel. *You shall not covet* is a command, and for the man who has just recognized himself in it, it is doing law's work perfectly. The category is determined by what the word *does* to the hearer, not by its form.

So the working test is a question about effect: does this word tell me what I owe, or tell me what has been given? Everything else is secondary.

What the text is doing

Now apply it to the passage in front of you, before you think about the room at all.

Most passages contain both words, and the teacher's first job is to notice which is which rather than blending them into a general religious tone. Ask three things.

What does this text demand? State it plainly, in its own terms, without softening. A demand that has been pre-softened cannot do its work, and the class will hear the softening rather than the demand.

What does this text give? Find the indicative. Sometimes it is in the passage. Sometimes it is assumed by the passage and stated three chapters earlier — which is why chapter four insisted you read the whole argument.

Which is the passage's own weight? Some texts are mostly demand. Some are mostly gift. Teaching a gospel passage as though it were a demand is the more common error, and it happens whenever a teacher's application section converts a promise into a program.

A composite. You work through Ephesians 2:8–10 — grace, faith, not works, God's workmanship, good works prepared beforehand. You spend forty minutes on verse ten. The class leaves with a lesson about finding the works God prepared for them, from a passage whose whole point is that they contributed nothing. Every sentence you said was true. You inverted the passage's weight, and the people who most needed verses eight and nine got verse ten instead.

The mixed room

Now the part that makes this a chapter about teaching rather than a definition.

The same passage, taught the same way, meets four different people in your class. Four composites, drawn from the kinds of people who are in every congregation.

The comfortable man. In church his whole life, marriage fine, sins respectable, entirely at peace. Not defiant — unbothered. What he needs from a passage's law is its actual edge: not a scolding, but the specificity that stops him grading himself on a curve. He does not need the gospel softened; he needs the law concrete enough that the gospel has something to do.

The terrified woman. She reads every command as a verdict already rendered against her. She hears *you shall not covet* and spends the drive home cataloguing. For her, more law is not instruction — it is fuel. What she needs is the gospel said plainly, objectively, and out loud, attached to something outside her: Christ died for you, you were baptized, this is finished.

And notice what must not happen to her, because it is what usually does. She must not be sent inward to check — to examine the quality of her faith, the warmth of her repentance, the sincerity of her decision. **A conscience sent inward has been sent to the one place God has not promised to be found, and the one place where it will find nothing but evidence for the prosecution.** She has already audited herself. She did not come up short by accident; she came up short because everyone does, and the audit was never going to end differently.

The weary man. Not terrified, not comfortable — tired. He has been fighting the same sin for eleven years and is running out of reasons to keep showing up. Law tells him what he already knows. What he needs is not a technique and not an exhortation to try harder; it is the news that the outcome does not rest on his stamina.

The defiant one. He has decided about a particular sin and is no longer asking. He may be pleasant about it. Law is exactly what he needs and will not be received, and there is a limit to what a Bible class can do about that — which is the honest thing to say rather than a teaching problem to be solved with a better lesson.

Here is the thing to see: all four are in the room at once, and you are giving one lesson.

The two ways it goes wrong

Which sets up the two failures. Almost every damaged classroom is one of these, and sometimes both in the same hour.

Preaching law as though it were gospel. This is the one that crushes people. It happens whenever the good news is stated as something to be achieved: *if you will surrender fully enough, decide sincerely enough, trust hard enough, then you will have peace.* Every word of that is a demand wearing the vocabulary of grace. The standard is perfection, so an honest conscience never clears it, and the man who tries hardest fails most visibly to himself.

The terrified woman is created by this. So, usually, is the weary man. Neither of them is suffering from too little effort; they are suffering from having been given the law with a gospel label on it, and having believed the label.

And it has a second form that almost nobody recognizes, because it sounds like the opposite.

It arrives as encouragement for the struggling: *God is the God of the weak, the lonely, the overlooked, the ones who do not measure up.* Kind, well-meant, and aimed at exactly the right person — and it has quietly installed a new entrance requirement at the door. You are in because you are down.

Look at what that costs. It fails a man on a good day, when he feels capable and reasonably well-liked, because it has nothing to say to him. And it fails him on a bad day, because it has told him his misery is his qualification — and misery is not a stable thing to build a hope on. Any-one who has tried to feel unworthy enough to be forgiven knows how that project ends.

The tell in both forms is the same: a list. Whatever is on it — surrender, sincerity, brokenness, sufficient weakness — a list handed to a hearer becomes a mirror. He will end up looking at himself, squinting, working out whether he fits. And the word this second form never uses is the one that would have saved it. *Unlovable* is a feeling he might not have on a Tuesday. **Sinner** is a verdict that holds on his best day and his worst, and it is the only condition Christ came to address.

That is the harder word and the far kinder one, because it does not require him to sustain a mood in order to stay eligible.

Preaching gospel as though it were law. The opposite failure, producing false peace instead of a wound. It happens when the commandments are emptied of their sting so nobody feels the weight of anything, or when grace is converted into a new requirement. Nobody is driven to Christ because nobody has reason to think he needs him. The sick have been told they are well.

The comfortable man is created by this, and he is comfortable precisely because the teaching has been kind to him in the way that costs the most.

A note for teaching the whole room. The comfort is never the deficiency. When God answers Moses, who protests that he is slow of speech, the answer is not *your weakness is what I like about you* — it is a promise: *I will be with your mouth and will teach you what to say.* Teach the deficiency honestly, and then attach the promise to it, rather than turning the deficiency itself into the good news.

And the remedy is not a middle path. There is no careful blend of grace-and-effort that avoids both errors, and a teacher looking for the safe midpoint will produce exactly the tepid thing that helps nobody. The remedy is to give each word its own full, separate voice: let the law be the law, in its severity, until it has done its work — and then let the gospel be the gospel, with no conditions attached at all.

Because here is the sentence that governs everything in this chapter: **a promise with a condition attached is no comfort to a conscience that knows it cannot meet the condition.** Read it twice. It is why *God will forgive you if you truly repent* fails the exact person it was aimed at.

One text, two hearers

Take a passage that will meet the room at both ends. *Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

To the comfortable man, this is the sentence that ends the curve. He has been grading himself against the people he knows, and by that measure he is doing well. The commandment does not compare him to his neighbors; it compares him to God. Taught plainly and without softening, it does what law is for — it takes away the comparison he was living on, and the mouth is stopped.

Do not rush him past it. The temptation is to reassure him quickly — but a man who has never been flat on his back has never been in the position from which people look up.

To the terrified woman, the same sentence is not new information. She already believes she falls short of everything; that is her entire problem. Preaching more law at her is not instruction, it is fuel, and it will be received as the verdict she already expects.

She needs the second word, and she needs it as an announcement rather than an offer. Not *God can forgive you if* — but *Christ has kept this commandment in your place; his obedience, not yours, is what stands between you and God, and it does not go up and down with your week.*

Same passage, same hour, same teacher — and neither was served by softening the commandment, which would have failed them both at once. The comfortable man would have kept his curve; the terrified woman would have learned that even the law can be negotiated, which is no help to someone who needs an unnegotiable promise.

That is the practical answer to how a mixed room is taught: **not by aiming, but by saying both words fully.**

How to teach a mixed room

Four practices. None requires knowing which person is which.

Say both words, every time. Not as a formula, but because the room contains both needs. If the passage's weight is law, say the law fully — and then, before they leave, say where the forgiveness is. If the weight is gospel, do not manufacture a demand to balance it. But make sure that in the hour, both were spoken.

Say the gospel objectively, not conditionally. *Christ died for sinners* is objective. *If you truly repent and believe, then God can forgive you* is a condition dressed as good news, and the terrified woman will hear the condition and fail it. The gospel is announced, not offered on terms. Say it as news.

Practical form of the rule: read your gospel sentence back and look for the word *if*. If it is there and it points at the hearer, rewrite the sentence.

Address conditions, not people. You do not know who is who and must not guess out loud. But you can say: *some of you have been fighting the same thing for years*. Or: *if you read a command and immediately conclude you are lost — this text is not saying that to you*. That names the condition without identifying anyone, and lets each person recognize himself if it applies.

Let the law be specific, and stop there. Specificity is what makes law do its work; grinding is what makes a teacher a scold. Say it once, clearly, and move. The Spirit does not need you to press.

Where the classroom ends

Now the boundary, and it is chapter two's distinction arriving in practice.

Everything above is teaching. You are speaking to a room, about a text, and both words of God are yours to speak because they are in the text and because you are a baptized Christian who may say them.

What is not yours is the cure of souls — the individual application of law and gospel to a particular conscience, diagnosed and administered.

The line is clearer than it sounds:

In class you may say, freely and without hedging: what the text demands, what God has given, that Christ died for sinners, that your sins are forgiven for his sake, that baptism means what it says. All of that is objective and public and is not a diagnosis.

You may not decide that a particular person's problem is a hard heart rather than a wounded conscience, and treat him accordingly. You may not press law on someone until he responds the way you expect. And you may not hear a confession and absolve as one holding the office.

Four practical signs the hour has become cure of souls, and the response to each is the same:

- Someone begins telling you something private and specific about their own sin.
- Someone asks you whether *they* are saved.
- A question is clearly about one person's situation rather than the text.
- Someone stays after.

The response: say the gospel — genuinely, not as a deflection, because they may need it more than anything else that will be said to them this week — and then route them. *I want you to say that to Pastor. I'll go with you if that helps.*

And know the failure mode in each direction. A teacher who refuses to speak the gospel to a hurting person because "that's the pastor's job" has withheld what was his by baptism. A teacher who takes on someone's conscience as a project has claimed an office he was never given. Both are real; the second is more common among the confident and the first among the careful.

Four cases

Case one. Teaching the Sixth Commandment, a man says, half-joking, that nobody could keep this one. The room laughs. What is happening: possibly deflection, possibly a real admission with a joke around it. What to do: do not chase him. Say the true thing to everyone — *nobody has kept it, which is exactly why the commandment drives us somewhere* — and let him take it as he needs to. If he stays after, you have your answer.

Case two. A woman asks how she can know she has repented sincerely enough. What is happening: the law has done its work and is now doing damage, because she has been taught that her assurance rests on the quality of her repentance. What to do: refuse the frame. Do not help her assess her sincerity; that is the trap. Point outside her — the promise, the font, the Supper. This one usually needs following up privately and often needs the pastor, because the pattern rarely appears once.

Case three. A man says the sin he keeps returning to proves he was never a real Christian. What is happening: a conscience under accusation, drawing a conclusion the gospel does not license. What to do: say plainly that the struggle is evidence of life rather than its absence — the dead do not fight. Then take him to the pastor, and do not manage this alone. This one is beyond a classroom.

Case four. A man explains, calmly, why the commandment does not apply to his situation. What is happening: not confusion. What to do: state the teaching once, clearly, without argument, and do not turn the hour into a negotiation with one person. Then tell the pastor — not as an accusation, but because this is his work and not yours.

What the teacher can and cannot know

One more guard, because the whole chapter could be misread as a call to become an amateur diagnostician.

You cannot see hearts. You do not know which of the four people any given person is, and you will be wrong when you guess. The comfortable man may be terrified underneath; the terrified woman may be further along than you are.

So the discipline is this: **teach the text's own words fully, speak the gospel objectively, name conditions without naming people, and leave the sorting to the Spirit, who does it through the Word without needing your assistance.**

That is not resignation. It is the reason the method works. You are not required to aim the word correctly at each person. You are required to say it accurately and completely, and to trust that it does its own work — which is exactly what the Confession says it does.

And here is why the whole distinction is worth the trouble. If a person's assurance rests even partly on the law — on his obedience, his feeling, his progress, the sincerity of his decision — then his assurance rests on him, and no human being is a stable foundation. His certainty will rise and fall with his week.

The gospel puts his righteousness entirely outside him, in Christ. It is Christ's obedience and not his that saves, Christ's cross and not his surrender that reconciles him to God. And because it is Christ's and not his, it does not waver when he does. On his worst day the verdict is identical to his best.

That is what you are handing out. It is why a Christian who has learned this distinction can look straight at his own sin, let the law say every terrible true thing it has to say, and still not despair — because he has heard a second word, and he knows where to run.

Nineteen people need that, in different proportions, every week. You do not have to know which is which. You have to say both words.

And here is the measure. The test of a lesson is not the confident believer at ten on Sunday morning. It is the deathbed at three, where everything you taught will eventually be tested by somebody who sat in your class. Nobody there wants to hear about the quality of his surrender. He wants to hear that he is baptized, that he is forgiven, and that the One who did both keeps his word.

Teach so that what you said still works then.

The next faithful step

In the passage you are preparing, write two sentences on your page before anything else.

What this text demands: _____. What this text gives: _____.

If the second line is blank, keep looking — and if the passage genuinely does not supply it, find where the class has actually been given it and say that before they leave.

Then check one thing about how you plan to say the second line. Is it conditional? If your gospel sentence contains an *if you*, rewrite it until it does not.

That single edit will do more for the terrified people in your room than anything else in this book.

Which brings us to the method itself — because knowing what to observe, how Christ is in it, and which word is doing what still leaves the practical question of how any of it becomes an hour.

Chapter 7 — From Exegesis to an Hour of Teaching

You have a passage, a room, and sixty minutes. Somewhere between those three, most Bible classes go wrong.

Not because the teacher failed to study. Usually the opposite. He studied four hours, arrived with eleven pages of notes and nine interesting things, and spent the hour delivering as many as would fit. The class was informed. Nobody could say afterward what the passage was about.

That is the problem this chapter solves, and it is a problem of *conversion* rather than of study. Preparation is not research. Research produces material; preparation produces an hour. The step between them is where the actual work of teaching happens, and almost nobody is ever taught to do it.

What follows is a sequence — not the only one that works, and not sacred. It is a repeatable path from a passage to a page you can teach from, and it produces something you could hand a substitute if you woke up sick on Sunday.

Six steps, and one that comes before them. Read for the whole. Find the governing claim. Sort what you found. Plan the hour. Write the page. Then, afterward, note what happened.

There is a step before all six, and it happens once per course rather than once per week.

Step zero: carve the course before you teach the first hour

You were not asked to teach a passage. You were asked to teach James, for six weeks, starting in the fall.

So before the first session exists, draft the whole thing: which text belongs to which week, from the first session to the last. Not in detail — a line each. *Week one, 1:1–18. Week two, 1:19–27.* That is the outline, and it is the single most useful hour you will spend on the entire course.

Three reasons it has to come first.

The divisions are a teaching decision, and they are irreversible. Where you break a book determines what each hour can claim. Put the faith-and-works passage in a week that also has to cover two other things and you have guaranteed a bad hour in week five before week one has happened.

It lets you plant. Knowing in week two that a phrase returns in week six means you can lay it down early and let it pay off later. That construction is impossible if you decide each week's text each week.

It protects the ending. Courses outlined in advance end where they meant to. Courses assembled weekly run out of weeks in the wrong place.

Then, week by week, work out the details of the coming session — **a week or two ahead, not on Saturday night.** That lead time is not perfectionism. It is what allows a hard question to sit unresolved for a few days, which is usually how it gets resolved, and it is what allows you to ask the pastor something and actually get an answer before you teach.

If you take one practical habit from this chapter, take that one. Outline the course before week one. Prepare each session a week or two out.

Step one: read for the whole, before anything else

Before commentaries, before word studies, before notes of any kind: read the passage aloud, more than once, in one sitting. Then read the section it sits in. If the book is short, read the whole book.

Aloud matters more than it sounds. These texts were written to be heard. Reading aloud slows you to the speed of a listener and catches things the eye skates past — repetitions, a sentence that turns, the place where the argument shifts.

Do this before you consult anything, and do it before you have decided what the passage means. You are trying to hear it the way the class will hear it, which is the last time you will be able to.

Then, and only then, deal with the mechanics, and in this order.

Identify the key words first — before you open a commentary. Which terms is this passage actually leaning on? Which one carries the argument? Doing this yourself, from the text, before anyone tells you what to think, is the difference between reading a passage and receiving a reading of it. You will get it partly wrong. That is fine; you will find out shortly.

Then consult trusted commentaries. Note both words. *Consult* — you are checking work you have already done, not outsourcing it. *Trusted* — a commentary is a man's opinion, and whose it is matters. A teacher who reads three commentaries before forming a view will teach whichever he read last.

This is the exegetical work, done the same way a man would do it preparing to preach the text — the difference is in what you build afterward, not in how you handle the passage. And notice that all of this is *step one and a half*, not step one, and that it is the part everyone treats as the whole job.

One discipline for this stage: write down every question the text raises for you, including the ones you cannot answer. That list is worth more later than your answers are — those are the questions your class will have.

Step two: the governing claim

Now the step that makes or breaks the hour.

Write one sentence that says what this passage claims. Not a topic. Not a title. A claim, in a complete sentence, that could be true or false.

The difference is not pedantry:

- *Topic*: "James on trials."
- *Claim*: "God uses trials to complete a faith he has already given, which is why a Christian can meet them with joy rather than resignation."

The first tells you what you will be near for an hour. The second tells you what you are trying to get nineteen people to walk out holding.

Three tests before you accept a sentence as your governing claim.

Is it in the passage? Not merely compatible with it — made by it. Anything you would still say if this text did not exist is not this text's claim.

Is it one thing? If your sentence joins two independent ideas with *and*, you have two lessons. Pick one; the other will keep.

Does it survive being said out loud? Say it to your spouse. If it needs a preamble, it is not finished.

There are published Bible-study guides that open every session with a box labeled *the big idea in one sentence*, and there is a reason it is the first thing on the page. Everything downstream is decided by that sentence: what gets explained, what gets cut, which question gets asked, where the hour lands. Get it wrong and no amount of good material will save the hour. Get it right and a mediocre hour still works.

A warning about the Gospel here, because this is where lessons quietly fail. Ask what the passage does with Christ — not whether you can get to him from it, but what *this* text says or assumes about what God has done. Sometimes the claim itself carries the gospel. Sometimes the passage is law, or wisdom, or narrative, and the honest claim is not itself gospel; forcing it produces a strained lesson. What is *not* fine is an hour that ends with the class holding a demand and nothing else. Plan the landing now, at step four, rather than improvising it at 10:52.

Step three: sort what you found

You now have a claim and a pile. The pile is too big. Every item in it goes into one of five buckets, and the sorting is the skill.

Explain. What the class cannot follow the passage without — a term, a custom, a piece of background. The test is *cannot follow*, not *is interesting*.

Cross-reference. Passages that make the argument *this* text is making. Two is plenty. A chain of six teaches proof-texting no matter what you say while reading them.

Confess. Where the Confessions speak to this. Not decoration — use them where they actually settle something or say it better than you can. In an AFLC congregation the standard is short: the three creeds, the Small Catechism, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. You will find the Catechism does more work here than you expect.

Question. Material that would be better as a question to the class than as a statement from you. More on this below.

Omit. Everything else — and this bucket should be the largest.

But do not picture this as a stage. In practice the sorting is not a meeting you hold with your notes at the end; it happens continuously, while you study, and the real skill is earlier than the bucket.

The skill is recognizing an unfruitful rabbit hole *before you have gone down it*. Every passage offers three or four fascinating side questions — a textual variant, a historical dispute, an argument between commentators — each of which will take ninety minutes and contribute nothing to the hour. A teacher who notices at the mouth of the hole saves the ninety minutes. A teacher who notices at the bottom has to climb out, and having spent the time, he will want to use it. That is how material nobody needed ends up in a lesson: not chosen, but paid for.

So the question at the entrance of every detour is short: *does the class need this to follow the passage?* If no, mark it and walk on. Be curious about it on your own time.

The omit bucket is still worth writing at the end, because naming three things you left out proves you made choices. But the discipline is upstream, and it is a habit rather than a step.

Omission is not failure; it is the job. Four hours of study producing fifty minutes of teaching means most of what you learned is not going in, and it was not wasted. It is why you can stand there without notes for whole minutes at a stretch, why you can field a question, why you sound like a man who knows the passage rather than one who read about it. Your study shows up as *confidence and compression*, not as content.

Say the ratio plainly: **if everything you found makes it into the hour, you did not prepare. You transcribed.**

Step four: plan the hour

Now build the thing you will actually do. Five decisions.

The opening — three to five minutes. Something concrete: a situation, a question, a problem in the text itself. Not a summary of what you are about to say, and not an apology. Its job is to make the class want the passage.

The movement — the body of the hour. Two to four sections, each with a job, each ending somewhere. Do not simply walk verse by verse unless the passage's own argument runs that way; a lesson organized by verse numbers usually has no argument at all.

Give each section a rough clock — a budget, not a script. Writing 0:12–0:25 beside a section is the most useful thing you can do to a lesson plan: it forces you to admit in advance that the thing you love takes thirteen minutes and you have not got thirteen minutes.

The weight-bearing wall. Decide, before you walk in, which one section cannot be cut. Everything else can compress. This decision is what saves you when the announcements run eight minutes long, and it must be made now, not at 10:40 while you are talking.

The questions. Choose them in advance. Two or three, written down. And apply the test that matters: **a good question sends the class back to the text; a bad question asks the class how they feel.** *What does verse three say the testing produces?* is a question. *What does this passage mean to you?* is an invitation for the room to share impressions, and it teaches that the text is a mirror.

One question done well beats three done quickly. Pick a favorite in advance and let the others go if the clock presses.

The landing. Decide where the hour ends. Not where it runs out — where it ends. If the passage warrants a gospel landing, plan the sentence. If you are teaching law honestly, you still know where the forgiveness is, and the class needs to hear it before they leave. An hour that ends on a command has ended in the wrong place.

Step five: write the page

One page. Front of one sheet. If it does not fit, the lesson is not finished.

On it: the governing claim at the top. The sections with their clock. The three or four things you will explain, in order. Your cross-references written out so you are not fumbling. Your questions. The weight-bearing wall marked. The landing sentence in full, because it is the one most likely to desert you.

The page is not to be read from. It makes the lesson *portable* — into your head, into an unexpected forty-five-minute hour, into a substitute's hands. A page you can teach from is a lesson you understand. Eleven pages of notes is a lesson you are hiding behind.

The Appendix has a worksheet with these fields laid out. Use it until you do not need it.

Step six: afterward, three lines

Sunday afternoon, while it is fresh:

- What confused them.
- What I could not answer.
- What I would cut next time.

Ninety seconds. Nobody does it, and it is the difference between teaching a course once and teaching it well the third time. The middle line especially: those unanswered questions are your next conversation with the pastor, and the beginning of your competence.

A worked example: James 1:2–4

Watch the whole sequence on a real passage.

Read for the whole. James 1:2–4 aloud three times, then the whole first chapter, then — because James is short — the whole letter in one sitting. About twenty minutes. Reading the whole letter changes the paragraph: James returns to trials at the end, so this opening is not a throwaway greeting.

Questions written down, including unanswerable ones: *Is "consider it joy" a command about feelings? Does "complete" mean sinless? What about trials that visibly destroy people?* That third one is the question somebody in the class is living inside.

Governing claim. First attempt: "James says trials are good." Fails the claim test — it is barely a sentence and it is not what he says.

Second attempt: "God uses trials to produce endurance, which completes a faith he already gave, so a Christian can meet trials with joy rather than pretending they are pleasant." Long, but it is a claim, it is in the text, and it is one thing.

Sort.

- *Explain:* what "consider" means — a judgment made about trials, not a feeling to manufacture. And "complete," which does not mean sinless.
- *Cross-reference:* Romans 5:3–5, which makes the same argument. One is enough. Resist the ten-passage suffering survey.
- *Confess:* the Small Catechism's First Article — God provides and defends daily, out of fatherly goodness, without any merit in us. The Catechism has already taught this class that God's care and hardship are not opposites.
- *Question:* what endurance actually produces, per verse four.
- *Omit:* the authorship question. The relation between James and Paul. The Greek behind *dokimion*. The date of the letter. All interesting; none of it needed to make this claim land.

Plan the hour.

0:00–0:05	Opening: a hardship everyone recognizes, and the sentence "consider it joy" read cold. Let it be jarring.
0:05–0:20	What "consider" is — a judgment, not a mood. Why James is not asking anyone to enjoy suffering.
0:20–0:35	The weight-bearing wall. What God is doing: producing endurance, completing a faith he gave. The direction of the verbs — who is acting.
0:35–0:45	Romans 5 briefly; then the hard question named out loud: what about trials that destroy people. Do not resolve it falsely.
0:45–0:55	Discussion: the verse-four question.
0:55–1:00	Landing, closing prayer.

The landing sentence, written out: *The joy is not in the trial. It is that the God who gave you this faith has not walked off and left you to keep it alive by yourself.*

Where to slow down: the middle section. If the clock presses, cut Romans 5 to a single sentence and shorten the opening. Do not cut the section on who is acting; the whole claim is in it.

What could go wrong: someone in the room is in the third-question trial right now. If that surfaces, the lesson stops being a lesson. Do not explain their suffering. Say the true thing — Christ died for you, God has not left — and take it to the pastor afterward. That boundary is chapter nine's, and it overrides this plan.

A second worked example: Psalm 121

One more, on a different genre, because a method that only survives epistles is not a method.

Step zero. Psalm 121 is not chosen in isolation. It belongs to the Songs of Ascents — the pilgrim collection, Psalms 120 through 134, sung by families climbing the road up to Jerusalem for the festivals. A course outline that puts this psalm immediately after a session on lament is doing something deliberate: the last psalm wept beside a river it could not leave, and this one puts on its sandals. That decision was made weeks earlier, at the outline, and it is doing work in this hour.

Read for the whole. Eight verses. Read them aloud three times, then the psalms on either side. Two things surface that a silent reading misses.

The first is repetition. One word recurs — *keep* — six times in eight verses. When a short poem says a word six times, the poem has told you what it is about, and you can stop hunting for a theme.

The second is a change of voice. Verses one and two are first person: *I lift up my eyes; my help comes from the LORD*. From verse three on it turns to the second: *he will keep you*. Someone else has started speaking — a priest, a fellow traveler, the congregation — laying the keeping over the pilgrim like a blessing for the road.

Questions written down, including the hard one: *verse seven says the LORD will keep you from all evil. Is that true? Because I know people it was not true for.*

Key words, then commentaries. *Keep* is obviously the word; that much you can see. What the commentaries add is the hills — not serene scenery but dangerous country, the haunt of bandits, dotted with the high places where the nations kept their shrines. That single correction changes verse one from a postcard into a question with an edge: *looking at all that, where is my help actually coming from?*

Governing claim. "The pilgrim's help comes not from the hills he fears or the gods on them but from the LORD who made them, and this Keeper does not sleep — so the believer on a hard road is held by the firmness of God's grip rather than his own."

Notice what the claim does with verse seven's problem: it does not dodge it, and it does not promise what the psalm does not.

Sort.

- *Explain:* the hills and the high places. The change of voice at verse three. That is enough; two things.
- *Cross-reference:* Numbers 6:24, where the oldest blessing in Israel uses this same word — *the LORD bless you and keep you*. One reference, and it lands in the room, because the class hears it spoken over them most Sundays.
- *Confess:* the Small Catechism's First Article — God defends and guards me daily, out of fatherly goodness, without any merit in me. The class already knows this psalm's doctrine; they learned it as children.
- *Question:* who is doing the keeping in verses three through eight? Have them count the verbs.
- *Omit:* the authorship and dating of the Ascents. The debate over whether verse one is a question or a statement. The Hebrew of *slumber* versus *sleep*. All genuinely interesting; none of it needed.

The hard verse gets its own decision. *He will keep you from all evil* cannot mean that no hardship touches a believer, because Psalm 88 is in the same book and ends in darkness. It means that no evil can finally have the one the LORD keeps — the road may bruise him; it cannot take him.

Decide before you walk in that you will say this plainly. A teacher who softens it will be caught by someone in the room who has buried a child, and a teacher who skips it has left the class with a promise that will break the first time it is tested.

Plan the hour.

0:00–0:05	Opening: read the eight verses aloud, once, and ask the class to count one word.
0:05–0:15	The hills, and the question with an edge. Where help does not come from.
0:15–0:30	The weight-bearing wall. Who keeps: the six verbs, the Keeper who does not sleep, the change of voice at verse three.
0:30–0:42	Verse seven, honestly, against Psalm 88. What <i>kept from all evil</i> does and does not promise.
0:42–0:52	Discussion: the counting question.
0:52–1:00	Landing; Numbers 6:24; closing prayer.

The landing sentence: *You will hear this word again on Sunday, spoken over you at the door — the LORD bless you and keep you. It is the same word. You are being sent back onto the road by the One who does not sleep.*

If the hour is cut to forty-five: lose the change-of-voice observation and shorten the hills. Never cut verse seven; a class that leaves without it has been given a promise the psalm does not make.

Now compare the two examples. Different genre, different problems, different landing — and the identical sequence, producing in both cases a single page a substitute could teach from.

What changes with the genre is the answer to step two. The method does not change.

A closing word on narrative, which is the third genre you will meet and the one most often mishandled. The method holds, and step two carries the whole weight: with a story, ask what *God* is doing in the passage, not what the human character is doing. A lesson on Elijah under the broom tree that arrives at *don't get discouraged* has answered the wrong question. God feeds an exhausted prophet twice and lets him sleep before he says a word to him about anything. That is the claim, it is in the text, and it is not a moral.

The next faithful step

Take the passage you are teaching next and do step two before you do anything else. Write the governing claim in one sentence, on paper, today.

If it comes easily, you understand the passage better than you thought. If it will not come, you have found out something important early: you do not yet know what this text claims, and no amount of additional reading around the edges will substitute for sitting with it until you do.

That sentence is the lesson. Everything else in this chapter is bookkeeping around it.

Chapter 8 — The Three Most Dangerous Words: "I Think That..."

Two years in, you are good at this.

That sentence is the danger, and it is worth saying plainly because nobody warns lay teachers about it. The hazards of the first month are obvious — you might be unprepared, you might be nervous, you might get something wrong. The hazards of the third year are not obvious at all, and they are worse, because by then you have a room full of people who trust you and a growing supply of things you find interesting.

Nobody drifts on purpose. It happens by small, reasonable steps. A teacher who has read more than his class begins to enjoy the reading. What he has read starts appearing in the hour. Then the thing he has been thinking about all week starts appearing, whether or not the passage raised it. And somewhere along the way the class stops being about the text and starts being about the teacher's current interests, delivered by a man who is, by now, genuinely good at delivering them.

The word that marks the drift is small: *I think*.

It is not a bad phrase. Used honestly it is one of the most useful things a teacher can say. Used carelessly it is the sound of a man handing the class his opinion with the text's authority still attached. This chapter is about telling those two apart, and about three specific ways a good teacher goes wrong in his third year.

The steward, again

Go back to what chapter three established, because every hazard in this chapter is a version of forgetting it: **you are a steward, not an owner.**

Not of the text — that is obvious once said. But also not of the class. The hour does not belong to you. Its contents were not left to your discretion because you happened to be standing there. You have been handed something that belongs to the congregation and finally to God, and the question asked of a steward is not whether he found the work interesting. It is whether he was faithful.

Every failure below is a steward quietly beginning to behave like an owner.

Hazard one: the hobbyhorse

Everyone has one. That is not a character flaw; it is what happens when a person reads seriously. Some question got hold of you — the end times, textual criticism, church music, a controversy in another denomination, a book you have not stopped thinking about — and it is now the lens you reach for.

The problem is not the interest. The problem is that a hobbyhorse does not announce itself. It disguises itself as relevance. Every text seems to raise it, because you are the one reading every text.

Three tests, and they are all measurable rather than introspective.

Count. Look back at the last eight sessions. How many of them arrived at your topic? If the answer is more than two, the text is not raising it. You are.

Ask who leaves satisfied. After a session that touched the hobbyhorse, was the class fed — or were you? A teacher usually knows the answer and usually declines to ask the question.

Watch for the pivot. The hobbyhorse announces itself grammatically. *Which reminds me. This is actually related to. You know what nobody talks about.* When one of those leaves your mouth, you have just changed the subject, and the class does not know it because you said it in the same voice you use for the passage.

The cure is not to become uninterested. It is to move the interest somewhere it belongs — a conversation after class, an evening study announced as what it is, an article. What you may not do is spend the congregation's hour on your own reading list while calling it James.

Hazard two: novelty

The second hazard flatters harder than the first.

Sooner or later you will see something in a text that you have never heard anyone say. It will be exciting. It will feel like the reason you have been studying — the moment the work paid off and you found something.

Take the excitement seriously as a warning sign.

Not because new observations are impossible; a careful reader really does notice things. But run the arithmetic. This passage has been read by the church for two thousand years, in a hundred languages, by people who gave their lives to it. If your reading is genuinely new, the overwhelming likelihood is not that everyone missed it. It is that you have missed something.

And notice what an untested novelty does in a classroom. The class cannot check you. They will receive it as the teaching of the church, because it came from the front of the room, and it will still be in their heads in ten years when nobody remembers where they got it.

Paul warns Timothy about people who want to be teachers of the law without understanding what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions, and tells him to charge certain people not to teach anything different or to occupy themselves with speculations that promote controversies rather than God's work. He tells him elsewhere to warn against quarreling about words, which does no good and only ruins those who listen. *Ruins those who listen* is the phrase to keep. The damage of a novel teaching is not to the teacher's reputation. It is downstream.

So when you find something new, do the thing that costs a week: take it to the pastor before you take it to the class. If it is right, it will still be right on Sunday. If it is wrong, you have found out privately, which is a mercy.

A useful rule of thumb: if your discovery makes the passage *smaller* — one more thing the text turns out not to mean, one more group it turns out not to include — treat it with extra suspicion. Errors are usually tidier than the truth.

Hazard three: certainty about what has not been settled

The third hazard is the subtlest, and it is the one this chapter's title is really about.

There are four different things a teacher can say, and they carry four different weights:

- *The text says* — and you can read it aloud.
- *The text implies* — your inference. Might be right. Yours.
- *The Confessions say* — the church's public confession, and you can point to the article.
- *I think* — clearly labeled, sparingly used.

Chapter three named these. Here is what goes wrong with them in practice: **they all come out in the same tone of voice.**

A teacher who is confident by temperament — and most good teachers are — delivers his inference with the same steadiness as his citation. The class cannot hear the difference, because there is no difference to hear. They received four kinds of claim as one kind.

So *I think* has to do real work, and it can do two opposite jobs.

Honest tentativeness: *I think this is what Paul is doing here, but I'll be honest that it's an inference and other readers land elsewhere.* That sentence tells the class exactly how much weight to put on what follows. It is one of the most valuable things you can say.

Disguised authority: *I think the problem with the modern church is...* — said in the same voice, about something the passage never raised, with the text still sitting open as if it were the source. The words *I think* are present. They are doing no work at all. They are decoration on an assertion the class will receive as taught.

The test is simple and slightly uncomfortable: **when you say *I think*, are you lowering the weight of the claim, or borrowing weight for it?** If it is the second, cut the sentence.

And the same discipline applies to the genuinely contested questions. Some things in Scripture are clear and should be said clearly; manufacturing doubt about them is its own failure. But where honest readers differ, say so — give the strongest form of the other reading rather than a caricature of it, say which you find more persuasive and why, and move on. A teacher who does this buys enormous credit, because his class learns that when he says a thing is settled, it is settled.

Reason, doing its job

One more distinction, because it prevents the overcorrection this chapter could otherwise produce.

Nothing here says *stop thinking*. Careful reasoning is not the enemy of a faithful class; it is most of the work. A teacher's mind is a creature God made, damaged like everything else but not discarded, and the tradition that supposedly distrusts reason spent its first century building schools and teaching logic.

The distinction is one of jurisdiction. Reason serves the Word — arranging what Scripture says, comparing passage with passage, noticing when two things have been confused or one thing has been split. That is the office, and it is demanding. What reason may not do is sit over the Word and rule on what Scripture is permitted to have said.

Which gives you the practical form of the wall you will eventually hit. Sooner or later a class will meet two things that are both taught and cannot be fitted together — and someone will ask you to fit them.

Here is the distinction that saves you. A contradiction asserts a thing and its opposite in the same respect at the same time, and it must be rejected, because God does not lie. A mystery is different in kind: it stands above reason, which did not generate it and cannot explain the mechanism, and which therefore has no standing to refuse it.

How do you tell them apart? A contradiction is found by examining the claim. A mystery is found by examining yourself. When we say *that can't be*, we almost never mean we have located a formal contradiction. We mean *I cannot see how*. Those are different sentences.

So when the class presses for the mechanism — how a body can be in bread, how God can choose and also desire all to be saved — the faithful answer is often a refusal, and the refusal is not evasion. It is a servant recognizing the edge of his jurisdiction. Say what is taught, say both halves, and decline to invent the synthesis. Inventing it always costs you one of the halves, and the half that gets quietly dropped is usually the one that was comforting somebody.

The pre-class humility check

Five questions. Two minutes, at the kitchen table, before you walk out the door.

1. **Whose hour is this?** If the honest answer involves what you want to talk about, fix it now.
2. **Is anything in this lesson here because it interested me rather than because the text raised it?** Name it. Cut it or move it.
3. **Am I about to say anything I have not heard anyone else say?** If yes, hold it until you have asked the pastor.
4. **Where am I inferring, and have I said so out loud in my notes?** Mark it on the page so you say it in the room.
5. **What am I planning to be wrong about?** Not a trick question. Every lesson has a soft spot. Know where yours is before someone finds it for you.

And run all five on yourself before you ever run them on another teacher. That is not a pious flourish. It is the only way the tool stays sharp, because the errors you cannot see are by definition the ones inside your own house.

Correction is not a loss

End with the habit that makes all the rest survivable.

You will teach something wrong. Not might — will, and probably this year. The question was never whether, but what happens next.

Here is what should happen. The following week, early in the hour, plainly: *I told you something last week that wasn't right. Here's what's right, and here's how I got it wrong.* No drama. No groveling. Ninety seconds, and then on to the lesson.

Teachers resist this because it feels like a loss of credibility. It is the exact opposite, and the reason is worth understanding. Your class already assumes teachers protect themselves — they have watched it happen elsewhere. A teacher who visibly does not protect himself has told them something about the whole Christian life that no lesson on repentance can convey, and it makes everything else he says more believable rather than less.

A planned correction is a mark of fidelity. It is what a steward does when he finds he has mishandled what was not his.

So decide now, before it happens, that this is what you will do. The decision made in advance is easy. The decision made at 9:40 on a Sunday morning, in front of nineteen people, with your dignity in the room, is not.

Which brings us to the harder version. Sometimes what arrives is not an error you can correct but a question you cannot answer — or a person whose need has just exceeded the hour entirely.

That is the next chapter.

Chapter 9 — When Someone Asks the Question You Cannot Answer

The question comes at 10:41.

You have four minutes left, the lesson has gone well, and a woman near the back asks something you have never considered. The room turns to you. And in the pause — which is much shorter than it feels — you become aware of exactly two options, both bad: say something that sounds like an answer, or admit in front of nineteen people that you do not know.

There is a third option, and it is better than either. But it has to be learned before 10:41, because 10:41 is not when anyone learns things.

Four steps

Clarify. Ask what she means before you answer. Not as a stall — because you probably do not yet know what was asked. *Say a little more about what you're asking* costs four seconds and frequently reveals that the question was smaller, or much larger, than it sounded.

Classify. Decide what kind of question it is. This is the step nobody teaches and the one that determines everything after it. Five kinds, below.

Commit. Say what you are going to do about it, out loud, with a time attached. *I don't know. I'll find out and we'll start there next week.* The commitment is what separates honesty from a shrug.

Close the loop. Do the thing. Next week, early, unprompted.

That last step is where teachers fail, and the failure is worse than never having promised. A class that has been told twice that the teacher will find out and never heard back has learned that the promise is a way of ending conversations.

Five kinds of question

Exegetical — what does this passage mean? This is your work. If you can answer from the text, answer. If you cannot, this is the ordinary *I'll look into it* and it should be genuinely easy to say, because nobody expects a teacher to have every verse.

Doctrinal — what does the church teach about this? Sometimes you know and can point to the article. Sometimes you know the general shape and not the precision, and the honest sentence is *the Confessions address this; let me get the exact wording rather than paraphrase it badly.* And

where the question is genuinely disputed, saying which teaching is the congregation's is not yours to settle — that belongs to the office. *I'll ask Pastor* is the right answer, and it is not a weak one.

Practical — what should I do about this in my life? Often you can answer. Often it looks practical and is not. *Should I let my daughter be baptized at her fiancé's church* sounds like logistics and is doctrine and probably pastoral care.

Pastoral — this is about a particular person's situation, conscience, or grief. Chapter six drew the line; this is where you notice you have crossed it.

Safety — someone is in danger, has been harmed, or is harming. Everything else in this chapter is suspended.

The classification is not academic. An exegetical question can wait a week. A safety question cannot wait four minutes.

Saying "I don't know"

The fear is that it costs credibility. It does the opposite, and it is worth understanding why.

Your class does not believe you know everything. They know you are a member of this congregation with a job and a family who read this passage carefully. What they do not yet know is whether you will pretend. The first time you say *I don't know* is the moment they find out — and everything you say afterward becomes more believable, because they have evidence that you distinguish between what you know and what you don't.

The teacher who never says it teaches his class something corrosive: that this is a subject where confident answers are always available. Then they meet a hard question in their own life, find no confident answer, and conclude the problem is them.

Two ways to say it badly. *I don't know, I'm not a pastor* — false modesty that also blames the office for your limits; most such questions are perfectly answerable by a layman. And *I don't know, nobody really knows* — which converts your gap into universal fog and is usually not true.

One way to say it well: *I don't know. That's a real question and I want to give you a real answer, so let me find out and we'll open with it next week.*

Then a composite worth keeping in mind. A teacher three sessions into Genesis was asked where Cain got his wife. He did not know. He said so, said he would find out, and did — and reported back with an answer that was partly *here is what the text implies* and partly *here is what nobody can say for certain*. A woman told him afterward that she had wondered that for thirty years and had never asked anyone, because she assumed the question was stupid. It was the most useful four minutes of the term, and it happened because he did not know something.

When you taught it wrong

Chapter eight said a planned correction is a mark of fidelity. Here is the mechanics.

Promptly. Next session, not eventually. A wrong teaching left standing for a month has been learned.

Early in the hour. Not tucked at the end where half the class has stopped listening.

Specifically. Name what you said and what is right. Vague self-deprecation — *I probably got some things wrong last week* — corrects nothing and manages to look humble while doing it.

Proportionately. Ninety seconds. A misremembered date needs a sentence. A misstatement about how a person is saved needs more, and needs to be said carefully, because someone may have carried it home.

Without theater. No extended apology, no visible wounding. The class should come away thinking *he checks his work*, not *that was uncomfortable for everyone*.

And if you learn of it from someone else, thank them out loud and correct it anyway. The teacher who becomes defensive about being corrected has just guaranteed nobody will do it again — and the next error will run for months.

What it sounds like. A composite, ninety seconds into the following session:

"Before we start — last week I told you that James and Paul are answering the same question in different words. That isn't right, and I want to fix it. They're answering different questions. Paul is asking what makes a man righteous before God, and his answer is faith apart from works. James is asking what a living faith looks like, and his answer is that it produces works. I collapsed those, and if you went home thinking Paul and James disagreed and we're papering over it, that's my fault, not the text's. Alright — James chapter three."

Notice the shape. He names what he said. He says what is right. He takes responsibility for the specific damage — *if you went home thinking* — and then he moves. No preamble about his own limitations, no invitation to reassure him, and no lingering.

Also notice what he did not do: he did not blame the difficulty of the passage, and he did not say *some of you may have misunderstood me*. He said he got it wrong.

When the hour exceeds the room

Now the part that is not about knowledge.

Sometimes what arrives is not a question but a disclosure. Someone is grieving, or has done something they cannot carry, or is in a marriage that is failing, or is not sure they want to be here next year. Chapter six named four signs; here is what to do about them.

Stop teaching. Whatever remained of the lesson is finished. It was not more important than this.

Do not do it in front of the class. If it surfaces publicly, acknowledge it without exploring it — *that's important and I don't want to handle it in four minutes; can we talk after?* — and protect the person's privacy at the cost of the hour.

Say the gospel. This is yours. Christ died for that. Your sins are forgiven for his sake. You are baptized. Say it plainly and mean it. Do not withhold it because you are on your way to the pastor's office; the person in front of you may need to hear it more than anything else that gets said to them this week.

Then route. *I want you to tell Pastor. I'll go with you.* Say it as a next step rather than a referral, because "referral" sounds like being handed off.

Do not manage it. Not the follow-up counseling, not the weekly check-in that becomes a private ministry, not the phone calls at eleven at night. That is not caution about liability. It is that you cannot do it, that you were not given it, and that a person who has made you their pastor has been quietly separated from their actual pastor.

And say very little afterward, to anyone. The person did not consent to being discussed. What was said to you was said to you.

RECORDS, FOLLOW-UP, AND PRIVACY

Three practices, and they are shorter than people expect.

Write almost nothing, but write the safety exceptions. For an ordinary pastoral disclosure, keep no notes; a file on a parishioner is not a lay teacher's to keep, and its existence changes what the conversation was. **The exception is a safety matter.** If you have called a reporting line or emergency services, write down that same day what you were told, by whom, what you did, when, and whom you notified — plain facts, no speculation, no conclusions about who did what. That record protects the person more than it protects you, and it is the one thing you will not be able to reconstruct later.

Follow up once, then hand it off. Ask how they are, a week later, in one sentence. Then stop. A second and third check-in is how a teacher becomes a substitute pastor without ever deciding to.

And treat the class as owed nothing. If someone was visibly upset and people noticed, the whole answer is: *that's not mine to talk about.* Say it warmly and do not elaborate. A congregation learns very quickly whether its teachers hold things, and it learns from one instance.

Safety

One category is different, and this section is short because the actions are short.

If someone is in immediate danger — theirs or another's — call emergency services first. This is not a reporting question or a pastoral question. It is an emergency, and the sequence is: call, stay, then tell the pastor.

If someone discloses abuse, or that they are being harmed, or that a child is being harmed: you do not need to determine whether the law classifies you as a mandated reporter. That question has an answer, it varies by state and by role, and it is genuinely unclear for volunteer church teachers in many places. **It is also not the question you need answered at that moment.**

What you need is the number, and the willingness to call it on reasonable suspicion, and the understanding that screening the facts is the agency's job rather than yours. You are not deciding whether abuse occurred. You are reporting a concern to people whose work is to find out.

Three things not to do. Do not investigate — do not press for details, ask leading questions, or try to establish what happened; that can damage both the person and any later inquiry. Do not promise secrecy, before or after; you cannot keep that promise and should not offer it. And do not wait for permission from anyone in the congregation before making a call you have grounds to make.

Then tell the pastor, and tell him you have called or intend to.

Before you teach — not after — find out three things and write them down: who in this congregation carries oversight of teaching; what the reporting number is where you live; and whether your congregation has a written child-protection policy. Fifteen minutes. Most volunteer teachers have never been told any of the three, and the moment you need them is the moment you cannot look them up.

What this protects

Read straight through, this chapter can sound like a list of things a teacher is not allowed to do. It is the reverse, and the reversal is worth seeing.

A teacher who knows he may say *I don't know* is free to take questions. A teacher who has decided in advance how he will correct himself is free to teach confidently, because an error is no longer a catastrophe. A teacher who knows where the boundary is can let a hurting person talk without panicking, because he knows what he will do next.

The alternative is a teacher who is quietly guarded — steering away from hard questions, avoiding the class member who might say something heavy, keeping the hour safe by keeping it thin. That teacher is not protecting anyone. He is just alone.

You are not the last line. There is a pastor, there is a congregation, there are people whose work this is. Knowing that is what lets you do your own work without flinching.

The next faithful step

Three things this week, none of which takes long.

Decide, now, what sentence you will say when you do not know. Say it aloud once so it is available at 10:41.

Write down, on the same page as your lesson notes, who you take a question to and who you take a person to.

And find the emergency and reporting numbers, and put them somewhere you would find them while flustered.

Then go teach, and take questions, and let the room be as large as it turns out to be.

Chapter 10 — The Class Is Not the Pulpit

Eight chapters ago you were standing in a fellowship hall while a man folded a chair, and the question was what you are. Priest by baptism, teacher by entrustment, not the pastor. That settled the categories.

This chapter is about the wiring — what actually has to be agreed, with whom, and when. Because a distinction that lives only in a book is not protection. It becomes protection when two people have talked about it on a Tuesday, before anything went wrong.

Here is what it looks like when nobody has.

A composite. Suppose you have been leading the adult class for two years. You are good at it; attendance has grown; people ask you things. The pastor has never sat in — not from indifference but because Sunday morning is Sunday morning, and the class runs itself, and there has never been a reason.

Then a member mentions to the pastor, casually, something the class learned last month. And it is wrong. Not scandalously — a distortion of one doctrine, taught confidently for six weeks, now settled in the minds of nineteen people.

Now consider what the pastor has to do. He has to correct a volunteer he likes, who was never told what the standard was, who has never had a conversation with him about the class in two years, and who will reasonably experience this as an ambush. You will feel accused. He will feel like an inspector. Both of you will be right, and the reason is that neither of you ever agreed to anything.

The doctrinal error is the small problem in that story. The large problem is that there was no relationship in which correction could be ordinary.

What the class is not

Start with what the last several chapters have been circling.

The class is not the pulpit. That is not a statement about importance — a Sunday morning Bible class may be where more actual learning happens in a congregation than anywhere else. It is a statement about *kind*.

Preaching is the public proclamation of the Word by a man the congregation has called to do it. The Confession ties this together deliberately: the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments is instituted so that we may obtain faith, and no one is to teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments without a proper call.

Publicly teach, in that article, means the public office — preaching and administering the sacraments. It is not a rule about who may open a Bible in a church building.

So the class sits in a real space, and the space has a shape. Four things belong to the office and do not transfer:

- **Public preaching** in the assembly.
- **Administering the sacraments.**
- **Private absolution** spoken as from God to a person confessing.
- **Public doctrinal adjudication** — declaring on the congregation's behalf that this teaching is right and that one is not.

The fourth is the one that matters most in a classroom, and it is the least obvious. A teacher may say what he understands a text to mean. He may say what the Confessions say. What he may not do is settle a disputed question *for the congregation*, in a way that binds anyone. When a class arrives at a genuine dispute, the honest sentence is: *the Confessions say this much; beyond that, I'll ask Pastor.*

And notice the second claim of this chapter, which is the positive form of all this: **a good teacher makes his students value the pastoral office more, not less.** If a class becomes the place people go for what they are not getting on Sunday, something has gone wrong even if every word taught in it was true. The class exists to send people back — to the sermon with sharper ears, to the rail, to the pastor with the question that outgrew the hour. A teacher who has become an alternative magisterium has not been promoted. He has been quietly separated from the church he thought he was serving.

The teaching agreement

Now the practical center of this chapter, and the thing I most want you to actually do.

Before a term begins, have one conversation. Not a policy document — a conversation, and then a short note recording what was said. Five things need to be in it.

1. What is being taught, and who chose it. Which text, which curriculum, how many weeks. Who selects it — the pastor, a board, the teacher with approval? Say it out loud, because the assumption is usually unexamined and the two of you may not share it.

2. Where the doctrinal standard sits. In an AFLC congregation this is unusually clean. The constitution names the three ecumenical creeds, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, and Luther's Small Catechism — and then adds that all preaching **and teaching** in the congregation shall conform to them.

Bring that sentence to the conversation. It settles the question before it can become personal: the standard is not the pastor's preference and not your reading, and neither of you invented it. It is short, it is public, and you already own most of it.

3. Who carries oversight of teaching. In some congregations the pastor alone. In others he shares it with a board of deacons or elders; in the congregation this book is written from, the deacons carry doctrinal oversight of teaching as an extension of the pastoral office, so a teaching matter may go to either. **Find out which it is where you are, and find out before you need to know.** Pastors take sabbaticals. Congregations go through vacancies. An arrangement that only works when a particular man is in the building is not an arrangement.

And ask a second question that most teachers never think to ask: is there more than one body? In many congregations there is. One handles curriculum, scheduling, and who teaches which class; another handles doctrine and spiritual concern. They are frequently different people, they are both legitimate, and they answer different questions. A teacher who takes a curriculum question to the doctrinal board, or a doctrinal problem to the scheduling board, will get a polite answer and no help. Find out which is which now, while nothing is wrong.

4. How questions get handed over. What happens when the class asks something you cannot answer, and what happens when the question stops being about the text and becomes about a marriage or a deathbed. Agree the route in advance so that using it is ordinary rather than an admission of failure.

5. How correction happens. This is the one everybody skips, and it is the one that saves the friendship. Agree now — while nothing is wrong — that if you teach something off, the pastor will tell you directly and promptly, and that you would rather hear it from him than have it discussed around you. Agree the reverse too: that if you think something is off, you will say so to him rather than to the class.

That is the whole agreement. Twenty minutes, once a term. Write down what was said and keep it, because in eighteen months neither of you will remember it the same way.

WHAT IT ACTUALLY SOUNDS LIKE

Teachers stall on this because they picture something formal. It is not. A composite, in a church office on a Tuesday:

"I wanted to ask you about the fall class before I start. Am I doing James, or is that still open?"

"James is what I had in mind. Ten weeks, and you'd finish before Advent."

"Good. Then the practical one — when somebody asks me something I can't answer, what do you want me to do with it?"

"Tell them you'll find out, and then bring it to me. I'd rather have five of those a month than have you guessing."

"That's what I hoped you'd say. Last one, and it's the awkward one. If I teach something wrong — not if, when — how do you want to handle it?"

"I'll tell you. Directly, that week, not through anybody else."

"Please do. And I'd rather hear it from you than find out the class has been talking about it."

Four minutes. Nothing in it was uncomfortable except the last question, and the last question is the one that will matter most in eighteen months. Notice who asked it: the teacher, not the pastor. A pastor cannot easily open that subject without it sounding like a warning. A teacher can open it in a sentence, and doing so is the single most useful thing in the conversation.

Correction, in both directions

Two things follow from that fifth item, and they deserve their own paragraphs because both are hard.

When the pastor corrects you. He is not questioning your intelligence or your faith. He is doing the thing his office exists to do, and the fact that he does it means the class is being watched over rather than left alone. The right response is to say thank you and then to correct it in front of the class — plainly, without drama and without groveling: *I told you something last week that wasn't right, and here's what's right.* A class that watches a teacher do this learns more about Christian life in ninety seconds than they will get from a month of lessons.

When you think the pastor is wrong. This happens, and a book that pretended otherwise would be useless. Three rules.

Take it to him, not to the class. A teacher who signals disagreement from the front — by tone, by a raised eyebrow, by *well, some would say* — is doing real damage and doing it dishonestly.

Ask before you conclude. Most apparent disagreements are the pastor having a reason you have not heard yet.

And if a real disagreement remains, know what kind it is. A difference over emphasis or method is yours to live with. A difference over what the Confessions actually teach is a matter for the congregation's order, and it goes through the process the congregation has, not through the Bible class. If it is grave enough that you cannot teach under it, the honest thing is to stop teaching that class — not to keep teaching while quietly working against it.

That last sentence is unpleasant and I am leaving it in, because a teacher who has never considered it will handle the situation badly the first time it arises.

And there is a third party in that disagreement who is easy to forget: the class.

They are not spectators to it, and they are not resources for it. Whatever you owe the pastor, you owe them something separate — and it is more than silence.

You owe them the church's teaching rather than yours. On the disputed point, teach what the congregation confesses; that is what they came for and what you were entrusted to give.

You owe them no hint. Not a tone, not a raised eyebrow, not *well, some would say*, not a pause in the wrong place. Adults read those instantly, and a class that senses its teacher is quietly at odds with its pastor has been handed something it has no way to resolve and no authority to act on. You have made nineteen people carry a disagreement that belongs to two.

You owe them an honest answer if they ask you directly. Not a performance of agreement you do not have. Something like: *the pastor and I have talked about that, and it's his call, and I think he's earned the benefit of the doubt*. That is true, it does not lie, and it does not recruit.

And you owe them the knowledge that the disagreement is being handled somewhere. Not the contents. That there is a process, that it is being used, and that nobody is sulking. A congregation whose members believe that disagreements go somewhere is a healthier place than one where everything is either public or buried.

The practice, and how far it reaches

Chapter two stated something flatly and promised the reasoning here. This is where the promise gets kept.

The practice is this: women teach women and children; mixed adult classes are taught by men; the line between a children's class and an adult class is confirmation.

Where does that come from? Not from the Augsburg Confession, which does not address it. Not from the creeds or the Catechism, which do not either. And — this is the part that surprises people — not from the AFLC.

It cannot come from the AFLC, and the reason is structural rather than accidental. The *Fundamental Principles* say that a congregation directs its own affairs under the authority of the Word and the Spirit of God and acknowledges no other ecclesiastical authority above itself. They say free congregations have no right to demand that other congregations submit to their opinion, will, judgment, or decision. They say the association's conferences, committees, and officers cannot impose obligations or restrictions on a congregation, but may only recommend and request.

And the association locked that in. The *Rules for Work* may be amended, but every amendment must agree with the Fundamental Principles — and the rule names two of them specifically: 5 and 10. The two principles most protective of a congregation's independence are the two the amendment procedure singles out for protection. This is not a polity that drifted into congregational freedom. It is one built to keep from drifting out of it.

So there is no body in this association with the authority to rule on how a congregation arranges its teaching, and any that tried would be acting against the documents every member congregation has subscribed to.

Which means the practice is the congregation's own — not by concession, but because in this polity there is nowhere else for it to live.

Does it contradict the confessional standard? No, and the demonstration is short. The creeds do not touch it. The Catechism assumes catechesis in the household and restricts no one from a congregational class. The Augustana's one relevant article governs the public office of preaching and administering the sacraments, which is not what a Bible class is. The standard is silent on the question, and silence is not contradiction.

And the affirmative half is not a leftover. Women teaching women and children is commanded work with apostolic warrant. Paul tells Titus that the older women are to teach what is good and train the younger. He reminds Timothy of the faith that lived first in his grandmother and his mother, and that Timothy had known the sacred writings from infancy. A man who would spend his life in the ministry was catechized by two women before he could read, and the apostle names them both. That is a mandate, not a residue.

Now the part that is easy to mistake for modesty. Congregations applying this same polity draw this line differently, and this book will not tell them they are wrong.

That is not authorial diffidence, and the reason is in the same constitution that authorizes the arrangement in the first place.

Read the article again. *This congregation directs its own affairs, subject to the authority of the Word and Spirit of God, and acknowledges no ecclesiastical authority of government above itself.*

Now notice that the sentence cuts both ways. **A congregation that acknowledges no authority above itself cannot coherently claim authority over another.** The independence it asserts for itself is the same independence it owes its neighbors. And the association's own *Fundamental Principles* say so explicitly — free congregations have no right to demand that others submit to their opinion, will, judgment, or decision, and the association's conferences and committees may only recommend, never impose.

So a book written from inside one congregation, presenting that congregation's arrangement as binding on others, would contradict the very article that establishes its freedom to have an arrangement at all.

So the practice is stated with confidence and its reach is stated honestly, and those two are not in tension. They are the same commitment. **What is confessed, the book asserts. What is judged locally, the book describes.** A reader elsewhere should take the doctrine and go ask his own congregation about the arrangement.

When there is no pastor

One case remains, and most books on lay teaching skip it — which is strange, because it is the case in which lay teaching carries the most weight.

Congregations go without pastors. Calls take time. Pastors take sabbaticals, get sick, and leave. During those months the Bible class does not stop, and the teacher who has been told *take it to the pastor* now has nobody to take it to.

Two things hold.

Oversight does not evaporate; it relocates. The congregation still has responsibility for what is taught in its rooms, and it has some body that carries it — deacons, elders, a board, a neighboring pastor serving as vacancy pastor. Find out who, and use them exactly as you would use the pastor for anything that is a teaching matter.

But some things do not relocate. Confession and absolution belong to the office. A deacon board is not a substitute for it, and neither are you. When someone needs absolution and there is no pastor in the building, the answer is not to improvise a replacement — it is to find one. Vacancy pastors exist. Neighboring congregations exist. And in the meantime you may still say the gospel to that person freely, because that has been yours since your baptism, and it is not nothing. It is, in fact, the main thing.

A teacher who understands that distinction can serve a congregation through a vacancy without either abandoning people or overstepping. A teacher who has never thought about it will do one or the other.

The next faithful step

Have the conversation.

Not eventually. Before the next term, twenty minutes, five questions: what am I teaching and who chose it; what is the doctrinal standard here; who carries oversight of teaching; how do I hand over what exceeds me; how will you correct me. Write down the answers.

Do it while nothing is wrong. That is the entire point. An agreement made in calm weather is a gift to both of you when the weather changes — and it will, because you will teach something wrong eventually, and someone will eventually stay after class with something you cannot carry.

And when you have written it down, notice what you are holding. It is not a set of restrictions on your teaching. It is the reason you can teach freely: someone knows what you are doing, someone is responsible for it with you, and there is a place to put what is too heavy. The man in the empty fellowship hall got the gospel from you and a route to the office from you, and neither of those cost the other anything.

That is what good order is for. Not to make the class smaller. To make it safe enough to be useful.

Chapter 11 — Always a Disciple

The last session of a ten-week course ends the way they all do. Somebody has to stack the chairs.

There is a particular flatness to that afternoon. You prepared for ten weeks; now there is nothing to prepare. The class was good, or it was uneven, and either way it is finished, and on Tuesday you will notice that you are not reading anything in particular.

That flatness is worth paying attention to, because it will tell you something true if you let it. And what it tells you depends entirely on what you thought you were doing for ten weeks.

You did not graduate

Go back to the word from chapter one, because the book ends where it began.

The ordinary New Testament name for a follower of Jesus is *mathētēs* — a learner, someone under instruction, attached to a particular teacher. It comes from the verb *to learn*. And in Acts it is simply the word for Christians: Luke uses it more than thirty times for ordinary believers, not as a title for an inner circle who advanced past the rest.

Then, in Antioch, something happens that is easy to read past. The disciples are *called Christians* — and the name comes from outside. It is what the neighbors called them. The church accepted it, and it stuck, and eventually it was worn with honor. But the name the church had for itself, before anyone else supplied one, was *learners*.

Which is worth sitting with. The one word the church chose for itself describes a person who has not finished.

So the teacher who has taught ten weeks has not moved up a category. He is what he was — a learner, under the one Teacher, who told his disciples not to be called *rabbi* because they had one Teacher and were all brothers. Teaching does not exempt a man from that. It intensifies it, because he now handles the Word in public and the handling is answerable.

There is a third thing the word carries, and this book has been quiet about it. A disciple is one who follows the Master, and the Master's road went through a cross. Discipleship is not a path to competence and standing; it is a life shaped like his. For a teacher that mostly looks unspectacular — being corrected, being tired, teaching to a half-empty room, saying the same things for years without visible result. That is not the work going badly. That is the shape.

And notice the practical form all of this takes. The teacher who understands it will keep sitting under preaching he could have given. He will keep going to the rail with everyone else. He will keep being catechized by a Catechism he could recite. Not as an exercise in humility — because he actually needs it, on the same terms as the people who were in his class.

A teacher who has stopped receiving has nothing to hand out but himself.

What the class was for

Which raises the question this chapter has to answer honestly: what was it all for?

Not for the class to know what you concluded about James. That is a good thing and it is not the goal.

The goal is hearers who can increasingly receive Scripture themselves. People who could open Philippians without you, notice the argument, hear the promise, and be fed. People who will be better hearers of Sunday's sermon because they have spent ten weeks learning what it looks like to read carefully.

Paul says the gifts given to the church — including teaching — are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry, so that the body is built up, until all attain to the unity of the faith and mature manhood, no longer children tossed about by every wind of teaching.

Read the direction of that. The teaching exists to produce maturity in the hearers, not to produce a permanent gap between the one who knows and the ones who receive.

Hebrews puts the failure case bluntly: by this time you ought to be teachers, and instead you need someone to teach you the elementary principles again; you need milk rather than solid food. That is written as a rebuke to hearers — but it is also, indirectly, a measure of teaching. A class that has been taught for years and cannot feed itself has been given something other than what it needed.

So the uncomfortable test of your teaching is not how much they liked it. It is whether they need you less.

A class that has become dependent on a teacher — that cannot read a passage without wondering what he would say about it — has been formed into something. Just not the thing Ephesians 4 describes.

Signs you are building dependence

Four, and none of them looks like a failure while it is happening.

Every question routes through you. People stop saying *what do you think it means* and start saying *what does it mean*, and you are the one who tells them.

Nobody disagrees. Not because you are always right, but because the room has learned that disagreement is not part of the arrangement. A class where no one has ever said *I don't think that's what it says* is not a peaceful class. It is a quiet one.

They quote you. In conversations outside the hour, your name appears where the text should. It is flattering. It is a symptom.

And they stop looking things up. Why would they? You have read more than they have, and you are right there.

There is a fifth sign, and it is the one that should worry a teacher most, because it feels like success: **the class gets quieter every term.** Early on, people interrupt, argue, wander off the point. Later they take notes. That looks like maturity and is frequently the opposite — a room that has learned its job is to receive what the teacher has prepared. The mature class is noisier than the new one, because the people in it have opinions about the text and are willing to be wrong out loud.

The correction for all four is the same and it is uncomfortable: **teach the method visibly, admit uncertainty out loud, and let the class check you.** Say *look it up and tell me if I've got it wrong*. Then mean it, and thank whoever does.

Chapter four said the class absorbs your habits more than your conclusions. This is the payoff of that: what you are actually forming is a way of reading, and it will outlast every particular lesson you ever give.

Ordinary means, over years

The growth this chapter is describing does not arrive in a course. It arrives the way everything in this book arrives.

Colossians tells the church to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Notice the picture: not a program, but a word living among a people, over time, with them handing it back and forth to each other.

That is slow and mostly unremarkable and it is the whole method. The same texts, the same Catechism, the same Supper, the same absolution, week after week for years, in a congregation where the pastor preaches and the teachers teach and people who have heard it all before hear it again.

Repetition is not failure of imagination. The Catechism is designed to be learned repeatedly by people who already know it. The liturgy repeats. The church year comes around again. This is not because the church ran out of material. It is because human beings do not learn things once, and because the things being handed over are gifts rather than information, and a gift given last year does not feed you this year.

Which means the teacher's aspiration should be modest and long. Not a breakthrough. Not a class that changes lives in ten weeks. **Faithful repetition of the ordinary things, for years, in one congregation, to people whose names you know.**

That is what patient teaching is. It is unglamorous, it is the actual work, and almost nothing else in the Christian life produces more over a lifetime.

And it has one further consequence worth naming, because teachers rarely get told it. **You will almost never see the results.** The lesson that changes somebody changes them four years later, at a graveside or in a hospital corridor, when a sentence they half-heard on a Sunday morning turns out to be the only thing standing. You will not be there. You will not be told. A teacher who requires visible fruit to keep going has attached himself to something the work does not reliably supply — and will either burn out or start manufacturing results he can see.

When to stop, rest, or step back

A book about lay teaching should say this plainly, because nobody else will.

Sometimes you should stop teaching a class, and it is not a failure. Because a season of your life needs the hours. Because someone else in the congregation should be given the chance — and a teacher who cannot be replaced has become a problem. Because you have taught the same course four times and are running on memory.

Sometimes you should rest. Teach a term, then sit in someone else's class for a term. This is not a demotion; it is the *mathētēs* thing being taken seriously. You will teach better afterward, and the congregation will see a teacher receiving, which teaches them something.

And sometimes you should step back for a season because of what is happening in your own life. Grief, exhaustion, a marriage under strain, a sin you are fighting hard. Not because a struggling Christian is disqualified from teaching — if that were the standard nobody would teach. But because there are seasons when a man needs to be a hearer for a while, and knowing that about yourself is wisdom rather than weakness.

How to do it: tell the pastor or whoever carries oversight, early, before the term is planned. Do not disappear, and do not manufacture a reason. *I need a term off* is a complete sentence, and any congregation that cannot hear it has a problem larger than your class.

And the reverse case, said just as plainly: do not quit because one hour went badly, or because someone disagreed with you in front of the room, or because you got something wrong and had to correct it. Those are not signs to stop. Those are Tuesdays.

Four things, none of them new

A rule of life is usually where a book like this goes wrong. It offers a program, the program becomes a measure, and the teacher now has one more thing to fail at — which is the exact opposite of everything in the preceding chapters.

So here are four, with a constraint: **not one of them is something to add. Each is something you already do, done on purpose.**

Hear the Word preached, as a hearer. You are in church anyway. The only change is that you stop listening for material. Sit under it as a man who needs it, because you are, and because a teacher who has begun mining sermons for lesson content has stopped receiving them.

Go to the Supper. You are going anyway. Go knowing what it is doing to you rather than what you might say about it in class. This is the difference between a teacher who is being fed and one who is describing food.

Keep the Catechism in your week. Not as study — as prayer. Morning and evening, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the commandments you learned as a child and now teach. Luther meant it to be prayed by people who already knew it, which is the whole point.

And say your sins out loud to someone whose office it is. Not because your class needs a teacher with a clean record. Because a man who is regularly forgiven by name preaches differently from a man who is only ever explaining forgiveness to others.

That is the list, and it is deliberately unimpressive. Nothing on it is a discipline you will build; all four are gifts you will receive, and the only instruction is to keep standing where they are handed out.

One warning about it. If reading that list produced a plan, reread it. It is not a plan. It is a description of an ordinary Christian's life, and the only reason to write it down in a book for teachers is that teachers are unusually good at drifting into positions where they give without receiving — and unusually slow to notice.

The last thing

So: back to the empty room and the stacked chairs.

Here is what that flatness means, and it is good news rather than an ending.

The class is over and the thing the class was serving is not. Those nineteen people are going to hear the Word preached next Sunday, and the Sunday after, and they will keep coming to the rail, and the Spirit will keep doing through those ordinary means exactly what he did during your ten weeks — which was never something you generated in the first place.

Your class was a help to the church's hearing. It was never a substitute for it. The lectern and the rail were always the destination. The class was a road.

Which is the last thing to say about your own teaching, and it is the same thing this book has said in every chapter. The confidence was never in you. Not in your preparation, though you should prepare. Not in your competence, though you should be competent. Not in whether the hour went well.

The Word is not weak, and it does not need you to be strong. It needs you to say accurately what it says, and then to sit down and receive it with everyone else.

So go back to the text. There is another passage, and another term, and a room with folding chairs, and people who need to hear it — and you are one of them.

You were asked to teach. Keep learning.

Appendix A — One-Page Preparation Worksheet

Print one per session. If it does not fit on the page, the lesson is not finished.

TEXT _____ DATE _____ CLASS _____

Genre / immediate context (one line)

THE GOVERNING CLAIM

One sentence. A claim, not a topic. In the passage. One thing. Says itself out loud.

WHAT THE TEXT SHOWS

About God / Christ	
Law — what it demands or exposes	
Gospel — what God gives	
Who is addressed	

THE SORT

Explain (*only what the class cannot follow the text without — 3 or 4 max*)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Cross-references (*two is usually plenty; write them out*)

- 1.
- 2.

Confessional witness (*creeds · Small Catechism · Augsburg Confession*)

Deliberately omitted (*name at least three — this is the job, not a failure*)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

THE HOUR

Time	Section
0:00–	Opening:
–1:00	Landing + prayer

WEIGHT-BEARING WALL (*the one section that cannot be cut*)

If the hour is cut to 45 minutes, I will cut:

QUESTIONS

Each must send them back to the text. If a question could be answered without the passage open, rewrite it.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

If I use only one: _____

BOUNDARIES

Likely misunderstandings:

Questions I cannot answer — for the pastor:

If this becomes pastoral (*abuse, self-harm, danger, crime, or a conscience in distress*): stop the lesson, say the gospel, and route it. **Who I contact:** _____

THE LANDING

Write the sentence in full. It is the one most likely to desert you.

AFTER CLASS — THREE LINES, SUNDAY AFTERNOON

What confused them:

What I could not answer:

What I would cut next time:

Appendix B — The Distinctions Card

Before it is a fallacy, it is an erased line

Almost every error you will meet is one of two things: **a line God drew that has been rubbed out, or a line drawn where God drew none.**

Rub out the line between Law and Gospel and you get despair or license. Draw a line where God drew none — between the water and the promise, between the bread and the body — and you get a sacrament with nothing in it.

So the questions below are not debating tools. They are how the lines get erased, which is why a teacher should be able to spot them.

Run every one of these on yourself before you run it on anyone else. The errors you cannot see are, by definition, the ones inside your own house.

Seven ways a line gets erased

Equivocation — one word, two meanings, swapped mid-argument. *In the house:* **faith** meaning trust in a promise, and **faith** meaning a spiritual act I perform well enough to count. **Free** meaning uncoerced, and **free** meaning able to turn toward God unaided. *Ask:* is this word carrying the same meaning it had two sentences ago?

Category error — applying the rules of one realm to the other. *In the house:* the Gospel's gift restated as a demand to be met — which is the engine of decision theology, and the moment it happens it has stopped being Gospel. It runs the other way too: the Christian who thinks his baptism excuses him from competence at his job. *Ask:* is this a gift being turned into a requirement, or a requirement being turned into a gift?

False dilemma — a fork in the road where God laid down a distinction. *In the house:* reason or faith. Assurance or perseverance. Scripture or the Confessions. Grace or effort. *Ask:* am I being asked to choose between two things I am supposed to hold?

Genetic fallacy — locating an argument's origin and treating that as a refutation. *In the house:* *that sounds Reformed*, or *that sounds Catholic*, said as though it settled something. Sometimes a useful early warning. Never an answer. *Ask:* have I said why it is wrong, or only where it came from?

Ad hominem — the man who cited the text is a fool, therefore the text does not say what it says. *Ask:* would this still be true if a better man had said it?

Appeal to emotion — *I felt God leading me*, which is the version we point at; and *that hymn moved me to tears, so it must be sound*, which is the version we do not. Ask: is the feeling evidence, or is it a response to something that has to be true on other grounds?

The quotation used to end a conversation — deploying a famous line to close down a sincere question. Using *reason is the devil's whore* to silence an honest inquiry is itself the abuse the phrase was coined to describe. Ask: did I just answer him, or did I just win?

The wall: contradiction or mystery?

Sooner or later a class will meet two things that are both taught and cannot be fitted together. Someone will ask you to fit them.

A contradiction asserts a thing and its opposite, in the same respect, at the same time. It must be rejected — not merely because logic says so, but because God does not lie and cannot deny himself. A God who contradicted himself would be a God whose promises meant nothing.

A mystery stands above reason. Reason did not generate it, cannot verify it, and cannot explain the mechanism — and has no standing to refuse it, because the claim never rested on reason's evidence in the first place.

How to tell them apart:

A contradiction is found by examining the claim. A mystery is found by examining yourself.

When we say *that can't be*, we almost never mean we have located a formal contradiction. We mean *I cannot see how*. Those are different sentences, and the distance between them is everything.

What to do at the wall. State both halves plainly. Decline the synthesis. That refusal is not evasion or a failure of nerve — inventing a synthesis requires information nobody has, and it always costs one of the two halves. **The half that gets quietly dropped is the one that was comforting somebody.**

Where the confession states both and refuses to explain, you may do the same, and say so out loud.

Reason's actual job

Not the enemy of faith and not its foundation. It has an office, and the office is real work.

Ministerial reason serves the Word: it arranges what Scripture says, compares passage with passage, sorts, defines, and notices when two things have been confused or one thing has been split.

Magisterial reason sits over the Word and rules on what Scripture is permitted to have said. That is not thinking. That is a coup.

Knowing where your competence ends is part of competence. A nurse who says *that is the physician's call* has not failed at nursing. She has done it correctly.

The last thing on this card

You are not required to win an argument. The faith was not established by one and will not be dismantled by one.

You are required to refuse to let the lines be rubbed out — to notice when a tidy version has quietly dropped a half, and to say so, even when you cannot construct the tidier reply.

Tidiness is a rhetorical advantage. It is not evidence of truth. God has said things that do not tuck in, and the tucking-in is precisely how the errors get made.