

Vocation

The Lutheran Difference Series

Angus Menuge

SAMPLE

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Written by Angus Menuge

Edited by Robert C. Baker

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Hymnal Key

LSB=Lutheran Service Book

LW=Lutheran Worship

About This Series

“It’s just a job. I can leave any time that I want.”

“Well, it’s more than a job.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s your *vocation*. God has given you gifts to serve others.”

As Lutherans interact with other Christians, they often find themselves struggling to explain their beliefs and practices. Although many Lutherans have learned the “what” of the doctrines of the church, they do not always have a full scriptural foundation to share the “why.” When confronted with different doctrines, they cannot clearly state their faith, much less understand the differences.

Because of insecurities about explaining particular doctrines or practices, some Lutherans may avoid opportunities to share what they have learned from Christ and His Word. The Lutheran Difference Bible study series will identify how Lutherans differ from other Christians and show from the Bible why Lutherans differ. These studies will prepare Lutherans to share their faith and help non-Lutherans understand the Lutheran difference.

Student Introduction

Today, Christians are pressed from every side to limit the role of faith in their life. A politician can have Christian convictions so long as they are not related to his or her public office. Christians can express their faith in worship, but often see little connection between faith and their work life. Not only secularists, but also some Christians, believe that faith should be truncated in this way. We often hear the mantra, “My faith is one thing, my profession another.” Indeed, some Christians do integrate faith and work in quite inappropriate ways. A Christian auto mechanic who leaves evangelistic tracts in each car but fails to repair them is not a good Christian witness.

What is missing from the discussion is an understanding of *vocation*, or calling. Lutherans are aware that clergy and other church workers are not simply hired but are *called* by God through the congregation. Catechized Lutherans are also aware of a wider sense in which all Christians are servants: the priesthood of all believers. This is often taken to mean only that each Christian is called to spread the Gospel and to lead an ethical life. But there is much more to it than that. God provides each Christian layperson with gifts and circumstances that define a *station* in life. The purpose of this station is to serve our neighbors, to play a part in God’s providential care of humanity. This means that even the work with low worldly status is something God calls us to do.

In our age, intense spiritual experience is exalted as the sign of God’s favor. Ordinary work is often seen as a spiritually dead, practical necessity. But God did not save humankind with spectacular displays of power but through the crucifixion of Jesus. God does not call us to revel in private spiritual gifts, but to take up our crosses and to do His work. It is here that we find what Gene Edward Veith calls the “spirituality of ordinary life.” The life-changing implications of this perspective are the focus of our Bible study.

An Overview of Christian Denominations

The following outline of Christian history will help you understand where the different denominations come from and how they are related to one another. Use this outline in connection with the “Comparisons” sections found throughout the study. Statements of belief for the different churches were drawn from their official confessional writings.

The Great Schism

Eastern Orthodox: On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert entered the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople just before the worship service. He stepped to the altar and left a letter condemning Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople. Cerularius responded by condemning the letter and its authors. In that moment, Christian churches of the east and west were severed from one another. Their disagreements centered on what bread could be used in the Lord’s Supper and the addition of the *filioque* statement to the Nicene Creed.

The Reformation

Lutheran: On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X wrote a letter condemning Dr. Martin Luther for his Ninety-five Theses. Luther’s theses had challenged the sale of indulgences, a fund-raising effort to pay for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. The letter charged Luther with heresy and threatened to excommunicate him if he did not retract his writings within sixty days. Luther replied by publicly burning the letter. Leo excommunicated him on January 3 and condemned all who agreed with Luther or supported his cause.

Reformed: In 1522, the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland convinced people to break their traditional Lenten fast. Also, Zwingli preached that priests should be allowed to marry. When local friars challenged these departures from medieval church practice, the Zurich Council supported Zwingli and agreed that the

Bible should guide Christian doctrine and practice. Churches of this Reformed tradition include Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

Anabaptist: In January 1525, Conrad Grebel, a follower of Ulrich Zwingli, rebaptized Georg Blaurock. Blaurock began rebaptizing others and founded the Swiss Brethren. Their insistence on adult, believers' Baptism distinguished them from other churches of the Reformation. Anabaptists attracted social extremists who advocated violence in the cause of Christ, complete pacifism, or communal living. Mennonites, Brethren, and Amish churches descend from this movement.

The Counter Reformation

Roman Catholic: When people call the medieval church "Roman Catholic," they make a common historical mistake. Roman Catholicism emerged after the Reformation. As early as 1518, Luther and other reformers had appealed to the Pope and requested a council to settle the issue of indulgences. Their requests were hindered or denied for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally, on December 13, 1545, thirty-four leaders from the churches who opposed the Reformation gathered at the invitation of Pope Paul III. They began the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which established the doctrine and practice of Roman Catholicism.

Post-Reformation Movements

Baptist: In 1608 or 1609, John Smyth, a former pastor of the Church of England, baptized himself by pouring water over his head. He formed a congregation of English Separatists in Holland, who opposed the rule of bishops and infant baptism. This marked the start of the English Baptist churches, which remain divided doctrinally over the theology of John Calvin (Particular Baptists) and Jacob Arminius (General Baptists). In the 1800s, the Restoration Movement of Alexander Campbell, a former Presbyterian minister, adopted many Baptist teachings. These churches include the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches) and the Churches of Christ.

Wesleyan: In 1729, John and Charles Wesley gathered with three other men to study the Scriptures, receive communion, and discipline one another according to the "method" laid down in the Bible. Later, John Wesley's preaching caused religious revivals in England and America. Methodists, Wesleys, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals form the Wesleyan family of churches.

Liberal: In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher published *Addresses on Religion* in an attempt to make Christianity appealing to people influenced by rationalism. He argued that religion is not a body of doctrines, provable truths, or a system of ethics but belongs to the realm of feelings. His ideas did not form a new denomination but deeply influenced Christian thinking. Denominations most thoroughly affected by liberalism are the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Unitarianism.

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Lutheran Facts

All who worship the Holy Trinity and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are regarded by Lutherans as fellow Christians, despite denominational differences.

Lutheran churches first described themselves as “evangelische” or evangelical churches. Opponents of these churches called them “Lutheran” after Dr. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German church reformer.

Lutherans are not disciples of Dr. Martin Luther but disciples of Jesus Christ. They proudly accept the name Lutheran because they agree with Dr. Luther’s teaching from the Bible, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism.

Late medieval Roman Catholic theology emphasized the holiness of religious vocations (clergy, members of various religious orders, etc.). In contrast, Luther emphasized the holiness of everyday life. Christian mothers caring for their children, Christian fathers working to support their families, Christian soldiers following orders and doing their duty—each of these are God-given vocations of service toward one’s neighbor.

Lutheran Christians understand that vocation is exercised in relationships. Before God, Christians are alone in their relationship with God, a relationship in which *He* serves *them*. But with their neighbor they are in a relationship in which *God* serves their neighbor *through them*. Father, mother, son, and daughter are, according to one Lutheran theologian, “biological orders” in which God serves members of the family. Other spheres of service include our daily work as employees or employers, citizens, teachers, electricians, or volunteers. God even uses people without faith to serve others here on earth. However, only the work of Christians done in faith is truly a good work in God’s eyes.

Although God’s work of love through our vocations serves our neighbor, our service does not obtain the forgiveness of sins. Our full forgiveness was won by Christ through His spotless life, bitter sufferings and death, and glorious resurrection. The fulfilling of our vocations is merely the fruit of lives transformed by God’s redeeming grace.

To prepare for “Called to Be Christ’s,” read Ephesians 2:4–10.

Called to be Christ's

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
... But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
... Came on the following Feet,
And a Voice above their beat—
... 'Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save Me, save only Me?
... Rise, clasp My hand, and come!'*

—Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*

Since the fall into sin, all humans are by nature enemies of God. There is a huge chasm between a holy God and sinful humanity. Humans have no power to change the situation: we are not only lost, but incapable of reorienting ourselves. However, our God is a gracious God, a good shepherd who seeks out His lost sheep. He sent His only Son to lead the perfect life and to atone for our inability to do so, by suffering and dying on a cross. God shows that Jesus' sacrifice is complete by raising Him bodily from the dead. But there is more. Our sinful nature must also be put to death so that we find new life in Christ. God does this by uniting us in Holy Baptism with Christ's death and resurrection, calling us out of the darkness of sin to the light of Christ.

1. Have you ever found yourself in a difficulty where there was *nothing* you could do to repair the situation, but someone else was able to help? How did that experience change you? What insight can it give us into God's love for us?

Lost and Found

2. Read Psalm 51:1–12 and Romans 8:5–8. Why is it that human beings cannot make themselves acceptable to God? Why should Christians be skeptical of self-help religion?

3. Continue reading Romans 8:9–17. Also read the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). What does the Spirit of Christ do to transform an enemy of God into a child of God?

4. Read Titus 3:5–8 and Romans 6:1–14. What means does God use to connect us to the salvation won for us by Christ? What is the connection between the Christian and Christ?

5. Read Matthew 28:19–20. How important is Baptism for Jesus? What is the significance of the fact that Baptism requires water and the name of our triune God?

6. Read Genesis 1:28 and consider the fact that we are born of human parents. What important similarity is there between our physical existence and our new life in Christ?

A Royal Family

Being put right with God does not earn the world's favor. However, Christians are the adopted children of God Himself; we belong to the most royal family.

7. Read 1 Peter 2:9–10 and Romans 8:28–30. What is special about the family and household of God? How does election show God's special care for every one of us?

8. Read 1 Timothy 2:3–4 and Ephesians 1:3–14. Does election mean that non-Christians we know are without hope and are not loved by God? What do we learn from Ephesians 1:13?

Gifted and Talented

God does not *save* us to *shelve* us. God has work for us to do, and He knows that workers need the right tools for the job. We have natural gifts, but also need spiritual ones to see and do His will.

9. Read Ephesians 2:8–10 and 6:10–18. How does God equip us when He calls us? What are some of His specific gifts?

10. Read 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 and Romans 12:2. What is the practical connection between spiritual gifts and God's will?

Comparisons

Eastern Orthodox: “What is necessary in order to please God and to save one's own soul? In the first place, a knowledge of the true God, and a right faith in Him; in the second place, a life according

to faith, and good works” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, Question 3).

Lutheran: “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” (Augsburg Confession IV 1–2).

Reformed/Presbyterian: “Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins . . . for Christ’s sake alone” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* XI:1).

Roman Catholic: “Whereas all men had lost their innocence in the prevarication of Adam . . . free will . . . was by no means extinguished in them” (*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6, 1).

Baptist: “We believe that the great gospel blessing which Christ secures to such as believe in him is Justification; that Justification includes the pardon of sin, and the promise of eternal life on principles of righteousness; that it is bestowed . . . solely through faith in the Redeemer’s blood” (*The New Hampshire Baptist Confession* V).

Wesleyan/Methodist: “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings” (*Methodist Articles of Religion* IX).

Liberal: “The traditional soteriology presupposed the historicity of Adam’s fall and started from the assumption that mankind needs to be saved primarily from the taint inherited from Adam. But modern anthropology has discredited this way of determining the nature of man and of sin” (Gerald Birney Smith in *A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion*, p. 519).

Point to Remember

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. Romans 6:8

To prepare for “Redeemed into Service,” read 1 Corinthians 12:4–6.

Leader Guide

Leaders, please note the different abilities of your class members. Some will easily find the many passages listed in this study. Others will struggle to find even the “easy” passages. To help everyone participate, team up members of the class. For example, if a question asks you to look up several passages, assign one passage to one group, the second to another, and so on. Divide up the work! Let participants present the different answers they discover.

Each topic is divided into four easy-to-use sections.

Focus: key concepts that will be discovered.

Inform: guides the participants into Scripture to uncover truth concerning a doctrine.

Connect: enables participants to apply that which is learned in Scripture to their lives and provides them an opportunity to formulate and articulate a defense of a key doctrine.

Vision: provides participants with practical suggestions for extending the theme of the lesson out of the classroom and into the world.

Called to be Christ's

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, participants will (1) see clearly that sin separates us from God, (2) understand that we have no power to recover God's favor, and (3) rejoice that God Himself restores us and calls us into His family by Holy Baptism.

Opening Worship

Opening worship might begin with a responsive reading of the four questions and answers on Holy Baptism in the Small Catechism (*LSB* 325; *LW*, pp. 303–04), especially noting that we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection (question 4) and are called to a life of daily repentance. As James readily and faithfully followed his call to serve Jesus, a good prayer would be the Collect of the Day for St. James the Elder (*LSB Altar Book*, p. 971; *LW*, p. 98). An apt hymn is "Baptized into Your Name Most Holy" (*LSB* 590; *LW* 224).

Focus

1. Read, or ask a participant to read, the first paragraph. Discuss the difference between problems we can fix and chronic conditions that only someone else can help with. (Some examples may be medical, financial, employment, or relationship issues that we realize are beyond our control.) Relate this to the fact that humans cannot save themselves from sin, and how this is a "schoolmaster unto salvation," by showing our need for a savior. Continue with the second paragraph. Ask "What two roles are played by Jesus' death and resurrection?" It should emerge that there is a distinction between the fact of justification (Christ's atonement for the sins of all people) and its effect on us (the believer's justification in Baptism).

Lost and Found (Inform)

Sin is not a problem like a leaky sink or a car that does not start. Such problems can be fixed by human reason and ingenuity. Sin is an

illness beyond our capacity to fix. Fortunately, Christ Himself is our great physician, atoning for our sin and then offering healing and regeneration in the waters of Holy Baptism.

2. David tells us that we are sinful from conception, that sin is an inherited disease that corrupts our human nature. This original sin is the result of the fall, and means that human beings are condemned to hell without God's regeneration. "[S]ince the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. . . . [T]his inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit." (*Augsburg Confession*, Article II). As Paul explains, the sinful nature is hostile to God and cannot please Him. Self-help religions deny the harsh facts of original sin and pretend that we can do what only God can do through the Holy Spirit (see the commentary on the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism).

3. Paul goes on to explain that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are no longer enemies of God, but rather, through Christ, we are "sons of God" (Romans 8:14), "children of God" (v. 16), and His "heirs" (v. 17). As heirs, we inherit Christ's merits and benefits. Because of Christ's perfect righteousness, our "Spirit is life" (v. 10) and he "who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies" (v. 11). In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), we see how we walked away from God in our sin. Through the Law, God calls us to repentance. But this cannot save us. Our God is like the prodigal son's father who saw him far off and "felt compassion" (v. 20). Our heavenly Father welcomes back His lost sons and daughters and gives them the full rights of heirs.

4. We are saved "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit . . . poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5–6). God calls Christians to faith through certain "proper channels," the means of grace (Word and Sacrament). One of these is Baptism. As Paul explains, in Baptism our sinful nature is put to death and we are given a new life in Christ. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit connects us to Christ: we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection.

5. In the Great Commission, Jesus commands Baptism for people of "all nations" (Matthew 28:19). He makes no qualifications about age, and it is clear that Baptism is completely passive. The power of Baptism has nothing to do with how educated a person is or how "ready" they feel. This, and the fact that Baptism reconnects the lost to Christ, shows the importance of infant Baptism. In Baptism, the physical element (water) has no magical power, but the water is connected to the Word (the

invocation of the name of our triune God), through which the Holy Spirit works to regenerate the lost.

6. Our God is a God of means, who institutes a proper way in which His calls to us are made. Although God could create us directly, He calls us into human existence through the means of our human parents. Since we now inherit a corrupted human nature, our merciful God has instituted other means to restore us and to incorporate us into His family. Baptism is the means of new birth God institutes to create the new life in Christ that our human existence cannot claim for itself.

A Royal Family (Connect)

7. Many people suffer from feelings of insignificance because they lack wealth, fame, or an exciting job. It is vital that all Christians see that God has given them the highest approval and status possible. By adopting us as His own sons and daughters, God has incorporated us into the royal family of the King of the universe! Paul explains that this was all according to His plan, since God has always known each individual that He would save. As Christians, we can never say that God has forgotten about us or has faulty records. You might note the analogy provided by C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which four ordinary, secular children, Edmund, Peter, Lucy, and Susan are called to be kings and queens of Narnia.

8. It is God alone who saves. We must not assume that someone who claims to reject Christ by words or deeds cannot be saved (Consider the example of Paul.). We know that God wants all people to be saved and that He can work through even our halting efforts to witness. In Ephesians 1:13, we see that those who had been outside of Christ's salvation were included when they "heard the word of truth, the gospel of . . . salvation." God can and does work through our proclamation of that word to bring people to faith, so all Christians are called to witness.

Gifted and Talented (Vision)

9. God does not only save us by grace, He also *gifts* us by grace to do His work. We are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Notice that, as we are incorporated into Christ's royal family, we are given the gifts we need to do His work. (In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan provides Edmund, Peter, Susan, and Lucy each with distinctive gifts that define their distinctive callings.) The spiritual gifts of all Christians include many pieces of "armor": "the belt of truth," the "breastplate of righteousness," the "shield

of faith,” the “helmet of salvation” and the “sword of the spirit” (Ephesians 6:14–17). You may want to discuss the contribution of these gifts to daily life. For example, having a grounding in God’s truth gives Christians a solid place to stand, independent of the shifting sands of politics and philosophy. Having Christ’s righteousness as a gift means that we do not need to depend on our own inadequate righteousness, which is like “a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:6) before God.

10. Spiritual gifts are not merely powers to do things. They are given along with the Spirit immediately in and through Baptism. With the power of the Holy Spirit, the eyes of faith are opened to a realm of spiritual reality. We can see the truth of God’s love amidst a world of suffering and evil. We are taught words of divine wisdom from above that human reason can never reach up to or comprehend. We find the divine truth that God saves and renews us through grace, even though the truths of the Gospel remain “folly” to the non-Christian, who cannot “understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). And we also discern God’s will for our life. This includes the ability to recognize our vocation. No longer are we bound to conform to the patterns of this world: our mind is renewed so that we can believe and live differently from those who find their home in this world. We have a citizenship from heaven and live here as resident aliens.

Discuss some specific ways in which Christians see the purpose of their lives differently than non-Christians. Examples could include: putting less store in accumulating possessions, doing work as a service to others and not merely for reward, and seeing that work as an opportunity to witness to coworkers and clients.