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, some cannot clearly state their faith.

The Lutheran Difference Bible study series will identify how Lutherans differ from other Christian denominations and show from the Bible why Lutherans differ. If you are a Lutheran, this study will prepare you to share your faith. If you are not a Lutheran, it will help you understand the Lutheran difference.
Vocation

The Lutheran Difference Series

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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.
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, Wesleyans, 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.
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?
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?