

# DOWN + UP



*Where Grace Takes You*  
**STUDY GUIDE**

# Centered Life

AN INITIATIVE OF LUTHER SEMINARY

# 1. Up/Down

## *(Justification & Vocation)*

### **Summary:**

Justification and vocation, two ideas—at once simple and scandalous, easily grasped and easily forgotten—central to the Biblical witness, but rediscovered by Martin Luther.

### **Prayer:**

Almighty God, through the death of your Son you have destroyed sin and death. Through his resurrection you have restored innocence and eternal life. We who are delivered from the power of the devil may live in your kingdom. Give us grace that we may believe this with our whole heart. Enable us, always, to steadfastly praise and thank you in this faith, through your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord.

—Martin Luther

### **Getting Started: (10 min)**

What did you leave behind to participate in this group? This open ended question highlights our multiple callings outside the congregation. What are your hopes for our conversations together?

### **While You're Watching:**

1. Is Luther's Reformation finished? *Do his concerns still apply today? Have we gotten it?*
2. Justification and vocation? What do these big words mean?

### **Group Discussion: (30 min)**

1. Well, any immediate reactions? What surprised you?
2. In your own words, what does justification mean? What synonyms come to mind? (Jack Fortin spoke of experiencing belonging.) What does it look like? How is it misunderstood?
3. How do people seek to "reverse the flow" and justify themselves, make themselves worthy, today? How do we try and make ourselves right? Why? *Prompt: What are our "bizarre, alien rituals"? And, as Vivian Jenkins Nelson asks, Are you "lost in the desert of business"?*
4. Marc Kolden characterized one misunderstanding of justification by grace through faith as "justification by believing the right list of stuff". But if God does all the "heavy lifting," faith itself is an undeserved gift from God. Sit with this for a moment. What's your reaction? In what other ways do we misunderstand, minimize, or misrepresent justification?
5. In retrospect, it's easy to see the folly of the church Luther reacted against. But what about us? What are we enslaved to today? Where do we obscure the wonder, the scandal, of God coming all the way down?

6. Do you agree that it is the tendency of “natural religion” to reverse the flow, to make ourselves worthy? Can you find any examples of this today, either formally or informally?
7. In your own words, what does vocation mean? What synonyms come to mind? (Jack Fortin spoke of making a difference.) What does it look like? How is it misunderstood?
8. Lois Malcolm asserts that because of God’s coming down, “I don’t have to prove myself.” In what ways do we try and prove ourselves? What would it feel like to give this up? Similarly, because of justification by grace through faith, we are free to attend to our vocations? Do you feel free? How might you know and claim this confidence?

## 2. In/Out (Congregation)

### **Summary:**

What differences do Luther’s insights, justification and vocation, down and out, make for our congregational life? What would it look like to turn a congregation inside out?

### **Prayer:**

Remember, O Lord, thy church, to deliver it from all evil and to perfect it in thy love. Strengthen and preserve it by thy Word and sacraments. Enlarge its borders, that thy Gospel may be preached to all nations; and gather the faithful from all the ends

of the earth into the kingdom which thou hast prepared; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

### **Getting Started: (5 min)**

What does it look like to serve God? Where does this happen? (What’s a ministry? Who’s a minister?)

### **While You’re Watching:**

Does Luther’s critique apply to us as well? *How is our congregation like, or unlike, the medieval church against which Luther reacted?*

### **Group Discussion: (30 min)**

1. What does it mean to say “we are all priests”? (And what does it not mean? How does the phrase get misunderstood?) What problem was the language intended to solve?
2. What’s the narrator getting at when he characterizes the priests against which Luther reacted as “elevator operators”? Do we still treat pastors or professional church workers in this manner? If so, how?
3. Have you ever heard the phrase “full-time Christian ministry”? If not, move on to the next question. If so, what does it imply about the rest of us?
4. Do you feel called? Do you know of someone that’s received and followed a calling? What does this look like? What is a calling? Who’s eligible? How do you, or did you, find your calling?

5. How does God take care of the world? In particular, how does God give us our daily bread? By what means?
6. What did Lois Malcolm mean by the phrase, “masks of God”? What “masks” does God wear?
7. Richard Bliese described a rule, if a pastor’s in the room the pastor ought not to be the first to pray. What was he getting at? How would your congregation react to this rule?
8. Ministry and vocation, what’s the difference? *Hint: God’s at work in the world in two ways, redeeming and creating.*

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### 3. Wanna/Gotta (Community)

#### **Summary:**

Grace takes us out, into our communities (neighborhoods, schools, little league teams, etc.) in pursuit of the common good. Sometimes we want to serve, other times we simply have to serve, but either way God’s working through us to sustain and renew the world.

#### **Prayer:**

Lord, what a curious way you have of bringing life and hope into your world, of working peace and justice, of showing compassion and love for all of your creatures. No hands but the hands of us, your servants: no feet but ours; no protection but such as we provide; no money but ours; no friends unless it be we; no shelter except we build it; no institutions unless we found them. Since it does seem to be so: Lord, be in our minds and in our understanding; Lord, be in our hearts and give us compassion; Lord, be in our feet to run your service; Lord, be in our eyes and be our insight: Lord, be in our plans

and be our hope; Lord, be in our present and give us a future.

—Wendell Frerichs<sup>1</sup>

#### **Getting Started:**

1. What’s God doing in your community?
2. The last two sessions often characterized the move from justification to vocation, down and out, as free and spontaneous: overwhelmed by God’s grace, we cannot help but love and serve our neighbor. Well, you have neighbors, are you always overflowing with goodness towards them?

#### **While You’re Watching:**

1. What are some of the challenges unique to living out your calling in the community?
2. And what motivates your service?
3. Where could your congregation help out?

### *Group Discussion: (30 min)*

1. At one point, Richard Bliese calls justification without vocation disobedience. What do you make of this? Are these two ideas starting to fit and work together for you?
2. Lois Malcolm described the Gospel as “radically transformative” and threatening to dictators. Why might this be so? Do you agree?
3. The narrator says that “really letting [justification and vocation] seep into our deepest cracks and crevices is scary, and hard to do.” Do you agree? If so, why is this? How might it happen?
4. Marc Kolden noted that God keeps creating and maintaining the world, with us and despite us. We hold the world in bondage, it awaits rescue. Do you agree? Where do you see creation suffering at our hands?
5. Do you believe that God is active behind the scenes? Why does God work in this way?
6. How could your “gathered” congregation better support its “scattered” callings in the community?

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## **4. Creature/Creator** *(Workplace)*

### ***Summary:***

Grace takes us out, into our daily work, be it paid or unpaid. Through our seemingly mundane daily activities God’s at work renewing and sustaining creation.

### ***Prayer:***

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being. We humbly pray that you so guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—*Book of Common Prayer*

### ***Getting Started:***

What are the peculiar challenges, and opportunities of living out a calling in the workplace? What does it look like? What doesn’t it look like?

### ***While You’re Watching:***

1. By work, we don’t necessarily mean employment, although that’s certainly a form of work. Think more broadly. What gets you out of your chair? In a practical sense, what do you live for?
2. If God’s Creator, what are you? Hint: a creature. What are creatures for?
3. How could your congregation help you to live out your callings in the workplace?

### ***Group Discussion: (30 min)***

1. What is your work? *Note: Not all work is paid.* What makes something a vocation? What are the essential ingredients?
2. What difference does Christ make for your work? What would it look like to be a Christian language teacher? What about a writer? A mechanic?
3. Of the multiple potential callings available to you, how did you hear and respond to your current calling? Did an awareness of your strengths and abilities help? If so, where did it come from?
4. What does living out your calling in the workplace look like? Where do you need help?
5. To affirm our current commitments (we don't need to go and find a calling) Darrell Jodock invites us to ask, What would this community be like if I weren't fulfilling my calling? Do you find this to be helpful and compelling counsel? Given the specialization of modern work, many aren't able to observe a direct benefit from their labor. What's your counsel to these folk?
6. Roland Martinson describes our role on earth as "created co-creators." What's he getting at? Do you agree or disagree? What difference does it make?
7. How could your "gathered" congregation better support its "scattered" callings in the community?

## 5. Self/Others

### *(Home)*

#### **Summary:**

Grace takes us out, into our homes, varied and complex though they may be. In the home, God's busy changing diapers and teaching forgiveness.

#### **Prayer:**

Lord God, our home is among the most precious gifts we receive in this life. We realize this all the more as we remember our Lord Jesus. He set aside home and family. Having no place to lay His head throughout His ministry, He chose to sojourn among those He came to save. We prayerfully invite Him to dwell in our earthly abode even as He continually invites us by Word and Sacrament to dwell forever in our heavenly home, which He prepares for us. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Getting Started:**

What are the peculiar challenges and opportunities of living out a calling at home (e.g., daughter, brother, grandmother, etc.)? What does it look like? What doesn't it look like?

#### **While You're Watching:**

1. Like the domain of work, think of home in the most expansive sense possible, something like "familial relations."
2. How could your congregation help you to live out your callings at home?

#### **Group Discussion: (30 min)**

1. The narrator describes the home as a source of "selfless love". Did (or do) you experience it this way? Does week three's "wanna/gotta" discussion help here? Or, and perhaps more to the point, can you see, indeed, can you feel, how justification and vocation come together in circumstances like this?
2. With respect to family life, the church privileges "married with kids." But what does it look like to live out your calling at home in another life stage (e.g., child, single adult, widow, etc.) How might your congregation equip folk for these particular callings?
3. More specifically, how can congregations support the home, in all its varieties, as a primary means of faith development? Hint: One congregation included table prayers for the week as an insert in the Sunday bulletin.
4. What does it mean to "find your cross in your calling"? Can you think of any examples from your own life? What happened?
5. Many people have difficulty discerning where, or exactly how, to live out their calling, be it at work, the community, or in the home. Did the participants in this session give you any ideas for discerning God's call? Hint: 1) Ask, What's the helpful, or human, thing to do?, and 2) Let your

current roles, and the people in relation to those roles, determine what good, that is, useful, works are.

6. What's Darrell Jodock getting at when he says, "God breaks the cycle: I adopt you no matter what. You are

my child no matter what." Have you experienced this?

7. How could your "gathered" congregation better support its "scattered" callings in the community?

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## 6. Spirit/Flesh

### *Summary:*

God comes down and sends us out. In Jesus' humanity, the incarnation, God dignified the tiny and often mundane details of creaturely existence. We cannot separate body and soul, flesh and spirit.

### *Prayer:*

O God and Father, give us graciously what belongs to the body and its life. O Son of God, free us from sin and mercifully grant us your spirit. O God the Holy Spirit, heal, comfort, and make us strong against the devil, and finally give us the victory and the resurrection from the dead. Amen.

—Martin Luther<sup>1</sup>

### *Getting Started:*

Share highlights from your circle charts (See last week's To Think About This Week section.) Did this experience clarify your sense of calling? Did you notice any common themes across the domains (home, workplace, congregation, community, leisure)?

### *While You're Watching:*

Throughout this series we've explored the implications of two ideas, justification and vocation. How does an understanding of these ideas help, in the words of Richard Bliese, to expose "false gospels"? What are some of these "false gospels"?

### *Group Discussion: (30 min)*

1. What surprised you in this final session?
2. What are your associations with popular spirituality and popular views of the body? What examples can you think of?
3. What difference does a thoroughly Christian understanding of the self make? What are the implications of this understanding for spirituality?
4. Darrell Jodock asserts "God's home is down here with us." Does this surprise you? Do you find it hopeful?
5. Who in your life is a silent witness of God's grace?
6. In the past six weeks, where did grace take you? What are your next steps?
7. What are the next steps for your congregation?

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## Notes



## Endnotes

## 2. In/Out (Congregation)

<sup>1</sup> John W. Doberstein, *A Lutheran Prayer Book* (Muhlenberg, 1960), p. 97.

### 3. *Wanna/Gotta (Community)*

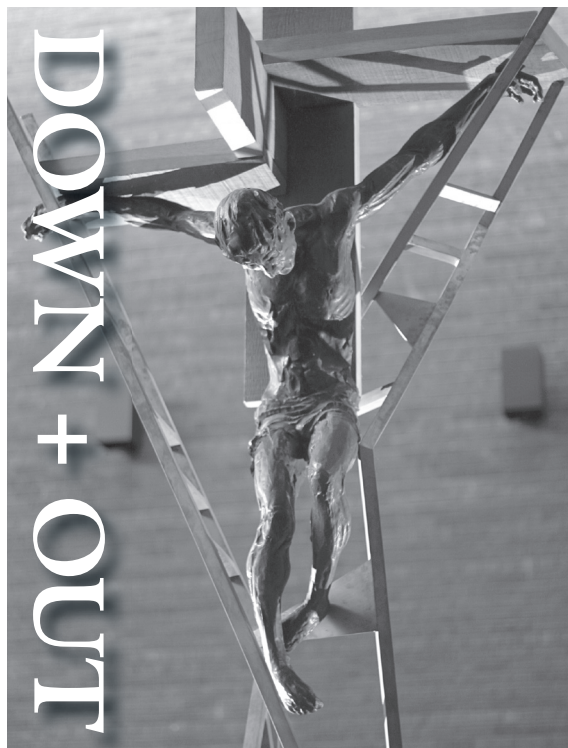
<sup>1</sup> Wendell Frerichs, *Real Prayers* (Centered Life, 2004).

### 5. *Self/Others (Home)*

<sup>1</sup> *Lutheran Book of Prayer* (Concordia Publishing House, 2005), pp. 199-200.

## 6. Spirit/Flesh

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Prayers* (Augsburg, 1967), p. 62.



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