



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Steering the Middle Course in Worship

By Joel Otto

Confessional Lutheranism has always struggled to find and walk the narrow scriptural middle. Daniel Deutschlander's recent book, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, explores this in greater detail. The effort to walk the middle road is evident in the way the Lutheran Confessions address various doctrines, such as conversion, election, preservation in the faith, the Lord's Supper, sanctification . . . the list could go on. The confessions make a point of avoiding the ditches which human reason digs and remaining steadfast and confident in Scripture alone.

The center of the Lutheran middle

But where is the center of this Lutheran middle? It finds its bearing in how we are saved. Let these succinct words of the Augsburg Confession sink in.

It is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21–26] and 4[:5].

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works. (AC IV, V).

Throughout the Lutheran Confessions, the confessors never lose sight of "the heart and core of Bible lore" (CW 204:2), the teaching

of justification by faith alone and the doctrine of the means of grace. Our justification is earned by Christ alone. The blessings of Christ's life and death are received by faith alone in Christ alone. The Spirit works faith only through the gospel, proclaimed in the Word and given in the sacraments. Any teaching which deviates from this center is roundly condemned (for an excellent summary, see FC SD XI:15-23).

The importance of the Lutheran middle

Why do the confessions emphasize the importance of steering this middle? First, all other doctrines are connected to the teaching of justification by faith alone. If justification is taught correctly, the rest of Christian doctrine will usually be taught and understood correctly. If another doctrine is taught falsely, it will usually affect the teaching of justification by faith. For example, the Formula of Concord shows that a false view of the real presence of Jesus' body and blood will deny aspects of the scriptural teaching of the person of Christ. If the doctrine of the person of Christ is denied in some way, real dangers loom that the teaching of justification will be lost.

Second, the confessors treasured the pastoral value of the teachings of justification and the means of grace. Reread the confessions and notice how often the confessors express their pastoral concern. These teachings are not just topics for theological study. Justification by faith gives certainty to hurting souls. The emphasis on the means of grace gives certainty of forgiveness.

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Finally, the centrality of justification by faith alone ensured that Christ alone always received all the glory for our salvation. Any attempts to introduce human effort in any way take away from the value of Christ's work and rob him of glory. Robbing Christ of glory robs the Christian of peace and certainty.

The confessions consistently go back to the Scriptures for the basis of the Lutheran middle. The next time you read through the confessions take a highlighter to all the scripture references. The pillar of "Scripture alone" stands tall, as opposed to adding human tradition or reason.

Reread the confessions and notice how often the confessions express their pastoral concern.

The rubber meets the middle road

So how are these central doctrines of the Bible related to the church's worship life? The Lutheran Confessions understood that most people's chief exposure to God's Word was in the Sunday morning service. In a way, that's where the "rubber meets the road"—the Lutheran middle road. Therefore, the confessions address worship, both what was happening and not happening. They speak about preaching and hymns, ceremonies and rites, festivals and vestments. As they do so, we see several characteristics which help us steer the middle in the worship life of 21st century Lutheran congregations.

Lutheran worship keeps the center front and center

Since justification by faith alone is the center of Scripture, the confessions stress the centrality of Christ's life and death in worship. This is not the case in much of conservative Protestant worship, as well as many contemporary worship songs. Therefore, anything in worship which distracts from Christ's cross and empty grave, anything which gives the slightest hint that we can save ourselves is discarded by the confessions and has no place in Lutheran worship. The reason for this is simple: Christ and his saving work are what faith trusts. Christ alone gives us confidence because he did everything for our forgiveness and eternal life. In describing the worship of the woman who anointed Jesus (Luke 7:36ff), the Apology makes this important statement:

The woman came with this conviction about Christ: that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from him. This is the highest way to worship Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to Christ. By seeking the forgiveness of sins from him, she truly acknowledged him as the Messiah. Now to think about Christ in this way, to worship and take hold of him in this way, is truly to believe. (Ap IV:154).

In other words, Lutheran worship keeps the center of theology front and center in worship. The center of Lutheran theology is about receiving by faith what God gives and promises, as the Apology states:

Faith is that worship which receives the benefits that God offers; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. God wants to be honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers (Ap IV:49).

The confessions strongly condemn any forms of worship that demand obedience as a condition of salvation. The confessions reject the Catholic teaching that the priest's work earns God's grace for the people, while the people simply have to be present. Legalism in every form is not tolerated. Any teaching, preaching, ceremony, song, or prayer which even gives the slightest hint that human effort enters the salvation equation is roundly rejected. An overemphasis on sanctification is rebuffed. All focus of everything in worship should be on Christ and his work as our Savior.

Lutheran worship centers in the means of grace

At the same time, Lutheran worship centers in the means of grace precisely because the gospel in Word and sacraments is all about Christ—his person, life, cross, resurrection, the blessings he won, the promises he made. And the message about Christ not only proclaims Christ, but it also is the power of God to give us the faith to receive Christ and the forgiveness he has won. Again, the Apology makes this clear.

God cannot be dealt with and cannot be grasped in any other way than through the Word. Accordingly, justification takes place through the Word, just as St. Paul notes [Rom. 1:16]: the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Likewise [Rom. 10:17], "Faith comes from what is heard" (Ap IV:67).

Luther applies the centrality of the means of grace when he writes in the Large Catechism: "Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly" (LC I:94).

Again, there is a narrow middle road which Lutheran worship strives to walk. On the one hand, the confessions clearly reject the idea that the sacraments are human works which earn God's grace. On the other hand, the confessions condemn the teaching that Christ can be received apart from the Word. Lutheran worship avoids the philosophy that Sunday morning is about conjuring up the right experience. If only we have the right atmosphere,

people will experience God's presence. The Formula of Concord labels those who lack the proper understanding of the power of the gospel as "Enthusiasts."

We also reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts, who contrive the idea that God draws people to himself, enlightens them, makes them righteous, and saves them without means, without the hearing of God's Word, even without the use of the holy sacraments (FC Ep II:13).

Lutheran worship centers the people's response in the middle

While the Lutheran Confessions emphasize that worship is first about receiving blessings from God through the gospel, they also recognize that faith responds in worship. For example, Luther describes the importance of observing Sundays and other holy days "so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God" (LC I:84).

God's people gather to hear the Word. They respond with praise and prayer. This response, however, always flows from the gospel and even proclaims the gospel. Continuing with the description of the woman who anointed Jesus, the Apology states:

[Jesus] reprimands the Pharisee for not acknowledging that Christ was the Messiah, even though he showed Christ the outward courtesies due to a guest who is a great and holy man. He points to the poor woman and praises her worship, her

anointing, and her tears, etc., all of which were signs of faith and a kind of confession, namely, that she sought the forgiveness of sins from Christ. (Apology IV:154)

Her response of faith was a confession of her faith that forgiveness is found in Christ alone. The liturgy does this, for example, in the "Gloria in Excelsis" and the creeds. Faith responds to the gospel by proclaiming the gospel. Lutheran worship centers the people's response of faith on the central doctrine of the Christian faith.

This walks the narrow road between works done in order to earn grace and the avoidance of good works in the life of a Christian. Reread the fourth article of the Formula of Concord for an in-depth discussion of the proper role and place of good works in the life of a Christian and the preaching of the church.

Lutheran worship teaches the people about the middle

The confessors consistently expressed the pastoral concern that the common people, and especially children, know what they are to believe. So they have to be taught the Word, which implies a trust in the power of the Word to work faith in people's hearts. The confessors saw worship as a key context in which this teaching should take place.

The Augustana states:

Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents. The people are instructed more regularly and with the greatest diligence concerning the holy sacrament, to what purpose it was instituted, and how it is to be used, namely, as a comfort to terrified consciences. In this way, the people are drawn to Communion and to the Mass. At the same time, they are also instructed about other, false teaching concerning the sacrament. Moreover, no noticeable changes have been made in the public celebration of the Mass, except that in certain places German hymns are sung alongside the Latin responses for the instruction and exercise of the people. For after all, all ceremonies should serve the purpose of teaching the people what they need to know about Christ (AC XXIV:1-3).



Notice what is taught in the ceremonies, rites, symbols, songs, creeds, hymns, and sermons: the person and work of Christ, the meaning and comfort of the Lord's Supper, warnings about false teachings. Notice the purpose of such teaching: that people "know about Christ" and that they are "drawn to Communion" for the comfort of forgiveness. In other words, Lutheran worship walks the narrow middle by teaching people about the middle, namely, justification by faith alone and the power of the means of grace.

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This avoids the ditch on the one side which claims that symbols, ceremonies, and rites really don't teach anything at all or fail to teach what they do mean. This also stays out of the other ditch where songs, symbols, and ceremonies teach falsely or proclaim a confusing message.

Lutheran worship confesses the Lutheran middle

In the decade following Luther's death, those struggling to uphold Luther's teachings put their lives on the line when the government demanded adoption of certain worship practices which taught false doctrine. They refused to give in on what might have seemed like outward forms because false teaching would have been communicated and the people would have been confused. Their pastoral heart was again evident. Their stance is embodied in the tenth article of the Formula of Concord.

We also believe, teach, and confess that in a time when confession is necessary, as when the enemies of God's Word want to suppress

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the pure teaching of the holy gospel, the entire community of God, indeed, every Christian, especially servants of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated according to God's Word to confess true teaching and everything that pertains to the whole of religion freely and publicly. They are to do so not only with words but also in actions and deeds. In such a time they shall not yield to the opponents even in indifferent matters (FC SD X:10).

Since worship forms teach, confessional Lutheran worship ought to use forms which correctly confess Lutheran doctrine, specifically emphasizing the Lutheran middle of justification by faith alone and the means of grace. Lutheran worship employs the creeds, the Church Year, vestments, songs and hymns—ancient and new—which correctly proclaim the Word, emphasize Christ, and confess a connection with the whole Christian church in heaven and earth. At the same time, there is a uniqueness to Lutheran worship because there is a uniqueness in Lutheran doctrine when compared with the other denominations of Christianity. Therefore, Lutheran worship confesses the Lutheran middle.

The Lutheran middle proclaims Christ and his work in preaching, singing, ceremony and symbol.

The Lutheran middle looks like . . .

So what will this Lutheran middle look like on Sunday morning? Deutschlander offers this advice.

The extremes of excessive ceremony that make the Lutheran service appear no different from a high form of the Roman mass would best be avoided. We do not want to give anyone the impression that there is no difference between the Lutheran teaching concerning the Sacrament and the Roman false doctrine of transubstantiation

*At the same time, the rejection of all the historical forms of worship to the point that Lutheran worship services seem to be the same as the services of so-called mega-churches may well be an abuse of freedom. For again, people may get the impression that the doctrine of the one is the same as the doctrine of the other when they see no real difference in the content of the services. Is the focus of the mega-service to get people in the right mood to "make their decision for Christ" or "invite King Jesus into their hearts" or just teach them about how to live better lives? We certainly would not want to adopt words or forms, music, or sermon styles and content that would give people the impression that that's what our services are all about (Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 208-209).*

Lutheran worship keeps the center of theology front and center in worship.

That really provides a summary of the middle road to which the Lutheran Confessions steer us in worship. The Lutheran middle proclaims Christ and his work in preaching, singing, ceremony, and symbol. The Lutheran middle revolves around the means of grace in everything that is happening in worship because we trust the power of the gospel to create and strengthen faith. The Lutheran middle endeavors in all aspects of worship—preaching, singing, praying, architecture, art—to let the gospel shine forth because the gospel alone will build up the church.

As we strive to plan and carry out worship in our parishes which steers the middle course, let's take to heart these words from the Formula of Concord.

We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church (FC SD X:9).

Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, © 2000 Augsburg Fortress.

