



# Liturgical Thought

## EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY<sup>1</sup>

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### Why is the altar in the middle of the Chancel?

The use of **liturgical furniture** has a long history and tradition in Christian Churches. Our **Lutheran** traditions have been inherited from the **Roman Church** and when, during the **Reformation**, our **Lutheran forefathers** made liturgical changes they did not remove, but elected to retain **altars, pulpits, and baptismal fonts**. These three have always been considered by Lutherans to symbolize the importance of the **Word of God, Baptism, and our Lord's Holy Supper, the Means of Grace**, in our lives as God's redeemed people.

The **altar** has always been seen as not only the place where the pastor prepares and distributes the **Lord's Supper**, but also as a **symbol of God's presence among His holy people**, and therefore, as the place where we **offer** to God our **prayers, praise, and thanksgiving**.

**Lutherans** have kept the **altar** in the **center** position of our chancels because of the **centrality of blood sacrifice in God's plan of salvation for His people**. One needs not read very far into Holy Scripture before one begins to sense the importance of blood sacrifice for the **purifying and redemption** of a world and people **corrupted by sin**. The first shedding of blood in the Bible occurs in **Genesis 3** when God provides animal skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. Man's first sacrifice occurs in **Genesis 4**. For centuries following, blood was spilled on **Old Testament altars** in **anticipation** of, and **pointing the people of God to**, the **greatest of blood sacrifices in God's Son upon the Cross**, where Jesus offered Himself up as the **Lamb of God, the Perfect Sacrifice**, to **"redeem those under the Law"** (Galatians 4:4-5). For **"according to the Law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission"** (Hebrews 9:22, NKJV).

With the **altar** in the **central position** at the front of the church we have a **visual testimony** and **proclamation** of the **Gospel** which declares that **Jesus gave His life for the sheep**, reclaiming those who were once lost and far from God, that they be **brought near in His Blood** (Ephesians 2:13).

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the content of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman's Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Forgiveness of sin.

Still, there is another reason for the **altar's central position**. It is the place where the pastor performs his **sacrificial** and **sacramental duties** as an **ordained servant of Christ** and a **called servant of the Church**. You have probably noticed, though perhaps without giving it much thought, that the pastor sometimes faces the altar and at other times faces the congregation during worship. **Liturgically**, when **facing the altar** he is performing **sacrificial** functions, while when **facing the people** he is performing **sacramental** functions. He is either **speaking to God** on behalf of the congregation (**e.g. prayer-sacrificial**), or **conveying God's mercy and grace** to God's people (**e.g. absolution-sacramental**). Thus the altar conveys the message that **our Lord is truly among His worshipping people** who may approach Him through the **mediation of Christ**, our crucified and risen Lord and Savior.

To retain the altar in the **central position** makes it the **focal point** inviting worshippers to **remember the centrality of the blood sacrifice Jesus offered up on the Cross of Calvary** as a **universal atonement** for the sins of the world. It also serves as the place where **we offer up our prayers and supplications** trusting in **Jesus as our own High Priest** to mediate for us to **His Father and ours**.

Finally, to retain the **altar** in its **central position** calls one's attention to the **real presence of God for His people**, in the **power of His Word**, in **His bodily presence in Blood, Wine, Body, and Bread** for the forgiveness of our sins. It is the place where **God's people gather together with angels and arch angels** and **all the company of Heaven**; **for the chancel, with the altar at its center is the place where Heaven comes down to touch the earth**.

\*\*\* Soli Deo Gloria \*\*\*