

Church Architecture: Theology and Doxology Symbolized

Session Three: Where's the Action? At the Altar

Good church design does not just fill a building with many beautiful religious things. Good church design, particularly modern design, draws our attention to a few important things which symbolize the central truths of our faith. A church's design is shaped by what its people believe. Confessional Lutheran theology leads to a design which has four centers of attention - pulpit, font, altar, nave

Altar --... (Hebrews 10:19-23; 1Corinthians 11:23-26; Hebrews 10:8-14)

A. The altar symbolizes...

1)

2)

3)

...the **presence** of God. To it we direct our prayers and praises, and from it we receive our Lord's own body and blood. The altar also reminds us of the **sacrifice** of Christ. Unlike Old Testament altars, we shed no blood at our altars because Christ has brought an end to sacrifice by the perfect sacrifice of himself "once for all" (Hebrews 10). By placing this important symbol at the front and/or center of our churches, we show what the heart and core of our faith is. It rests in God who sent his Son for us. The altar is the place of **the sacred meal**. Jesus is our host and serves us his body and blood.

Next Slide – picture of small altar beneath pulpit

B. Table or altar?

"The strong reaction against the altar was born in Calvin's determination to rid Reformed churches of everything that smacked of Catholicism; the altar, as much as anything else in church design, was the symbol of Rome's doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass. Pietism was closely aligned with Calvinism, and many Lutheran chancels at the turn of the twentieth century had altars that were in fact tables, and small tables at that, located at the foot of massive pulpits. The altar's size and placement symbolized more than an aversion to Rome's sacrificial theology, however. There was also a statement in that design that the Lord's Supper was neither often celebrated nor highly cherished among Pietists." CW: Manual, p76

C. Free standing or against-the-wall (east)?

In the *Deutsche Messe*, the German service Luther composed for village parishes, he made this comment as he wrote about the liturgy for communion:

In the true mass of real Christians, the altar should not remain where it is [i.e., against the wall], and the priest should always face the people as Christ doubtlessly did in the Last Supper. But let that await its own time. (Luther's Works, v53, p69)

The freestanding altar actually waited for the Roman Catholics, who introduced it during the middle decades of the 20th century. However, the concept concisely matches Lutheran theology, which considers the Words of Institution to be the gospel proclamation of the Sacrament. CW: Manual, p79

A free-standing altar reinforces:

- the sacred meal aspect of the Lord's Supper
- fellowship between God and people
- people gathered around the chief symbol of God's presence
- proclamation of the Words of Institution facing the people
- the presiding minister standing in Christ's place as host of the meal

A "east wall" altar reinforces:

- the holy wonder of Jesus' death for our sins (an east altar is usually more impressive than a free-standing altar)
- a long tradition of the church (even the Lutheran church in spite of Luther's comments about free-standing)
- a powerful focus on the chief symbol of God's presence
- usually a stronger symbolic expression of God's majesty
- the presiding minister and worshipers approaching God together in prayer and praise (facing the same direction)

Malachi 4:2; 2Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16; Numbers 24:17

Early Christian churches were "always" oriented "toward the light" (Tertullian, b.160). Origen (b.185) asserts that the direction of the rising sun obviously indicates that we ought to pray inclining in that direction, an act which symbolizes the soul looking toward the rising of the true light, the Sun of Justice, Jesus Christ

Treatment of a free-standing altar can capture some "east wall" strengths:

- elevation
- candles and other
- significant cross or crucifix hanging above the altar
- canopy (echoing the Israelites tent over the Ark of the Covenant), baldacchino (columned canopy), tester (suspended canopy); dramatic skylight or other lighting

Our altar

Liturgical symbolism

Mensa

Candles

Our altar is a free standing altar. This means that is not placed against the chancel wall. Many are under the impression that free standing altars are Catholic. On the contrary, the free standing altar was invented by Martin Luther for the Torgau Chapel where Luther himself delivered the dedication sermon in 1544. In Lutheran practice, the altar symbolized two things: the presence of God in the midst of his people and the table of the Lord's Supper.

The altar surface is decorated with five blood wood crosses inlaid into the mensa to symbolize the five wounds of Christ's Crucified body.

The altar is also constructed to look like a sepulcher. This reminds us of a sacrifice that ended in death. The corbels support the upper portion. The mensa hangs over the sepulcher about 12-15 inches all around to give the visual of a table. The mensa is not the tight fitting tip that goes on a sepulcher; the idea is tomb and table, sacrifice and meal. Here the Lord's sacrifice is not the substance of the meal he hosts.

The altar is bare, reminding us of Christ's bareness on the cross and without proper

burial in the tomb. We have two large low profile pillar candles holders for the altar reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world. Otherwise the vessels of the Lord's supper alone rest on the altar.

Communion (focusing on *one* of the altar's three symbolisms)

1. What is the dominant mood of Holy Communion?
(1Corinthians 11:23-29; Luke 22:19,20)

"He is truly worthy and well-prepared who has faith in these words: given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Catechism

Confession of Sins in a communion service is *not* necessary, though appropriate.

The sacrament is pure gospel.

Stand or kneel to receive Christ's body and blood? To confess sins?

2. Communion rail?

The communion rail, a traditional feature in most Lutheran chancels, is another of the furnishings that Lutherans inherited from Roman Catholics. Lutherans have used the rail in good conscience, although its history is rooted in the false theology that the members of the priesthood were of better spiritual character than laypeople.

The communion rail is not without its detractors, however. In some older churches the rail allows only a few people to gather at a time, resulting in lengthy communion services. Elderly people have real problems using the steps to get to a rail located in the chancel, and many would rather endure the pain that comes with kneeling than the embarrassment that comes with standing. Some surely refrain from attending the Sacrament to avoid both kinds of pain. Many pastors feel that communing people who are kneeling is difficult. The communicants' mouths often are hard to see. ... Both worshipers and their pastors may be happier if the Sacrament is distributed to people while they are standing at a designated place on the main floor in front of the chancel.

CW:Manual, pp87-88.

3. Centrality of the Sacraments: Lutherans stress "Word **and** Sacrament"

"The sacraments at first glance seem to be a curiosity – like old family heirlooms in a house full of modern furniture. Their chief value seems to be in their age, and not in their practicality. No one would like to throw them out since they've been in the family for so long, but they don't really seem to fit, either! But the sacraments, far from being relics of a by-gone era in church history, are actually part and parcel of the Christian gospel for all time." Senkbeil, 149-150; *Sanctification: Christ in Action*, NPH 1989.

How To Be Born Again, Billy Graham, 1977. In 187 pages he is silent about any connection at all between being born again and baptism. He offers 20 lines on a symbolic view of Holy Communion, but no similar paragraph even on "The Reason for Baptism."

4. Importance of the sacraments is reflected in architecture and design choices.
5. Trends: frequency and efficiency; reverence and joy.

See the WELS Worship website for a several articles on the sacraments:
www.wels.net/worship/articles.html