



College Hill Lutheran Church

Why is the Altar in the middle?



This question may be more common than it once was due to the shift *away from* the historic liturgy of the Christian church *to* a more entertainment-driven, seeker-friendly concept of worship. Naturally, if the aim is to entertain and tap into the emotions of the audience, then the source of entertainment will be front and center in the churches.

However, if the aim of the service is to give the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus to the people, then the source of that forgiveness will be front and center. For this reason, the altar stands in the middle in our church. The altar is where Christ comes to us in His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins (St. Matthew 26:26-28).

The altar even has a more prominent place than the pulpit (where the Word of Christ is preached) as Burnell F. Eckardt Jr. explains in his little book *Why? A Layman's Guide to the Liturgy*:

Churches vary greatly in architectural style, and the style of the interior is generally somewhat representative of what that church believes. Some churches have a very prominent pulpit, elevated above everything else and planted right in the center. This no doubt is meant to proclaim that the preaching of the Word of God is of primary importance. Indeed, Lutheran churches have historically had *extremely* high pulpits, requiring many steps for the preacher to ascend.

Yet in Lutheran churches it is also generally true—as is the case in many other traditional churches—that the pulpit, high and prominent as it may be, is not in the center. Rather, it is off to one side, and the altar stands in the center. This sends a strong visual message: the preaching of the sermon, as important and sacred a thing as it is, is not as central to the Church's life as the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. For the sermon *preaches* Christ, but the Sacrament *is* Christ, as He said, "This is My Body." Therefore the pulpit is appropriately placed to one side, that the preacher may refer to that which is

central, namely, Christ; and the altar is appropriately placed in the center, while the Sacrament is appropriately placed on the center of the altar. This puts Christ in the center of our churches, of our worship, and of our lives” (40-41). ✠