

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



Your Church Is Too Catholic

by Will Weedon

Wittenberg Trail:
From Evangelicalism, to Reformed
Seminary, to Confessional Lutheranism

by Joshua Pauling

Spring—2021

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this issue of the **Journal**, Pastor Will Weedon responds to the common criticism of Lutherans, “Your church is too Catholic.” He shows how this criticism is actually a compliment.

In our Wittenberg Trail feature, Joshua Pauling traces his path from big-box evangelicalism to the treasures of historic Christianity found in the church of the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran church.

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Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
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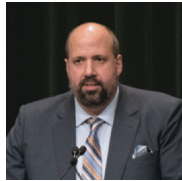
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Your Church Is Too Catholic

by Will Weedon

“Too Catholic” is a charge that Lutheran Christians have had to hear for quite literally centuries! Because I’m rather an ornery sort, my usual retort is: “Oh, you think so? Why, thank you!” I’ll get to why in a bit. But let’s start with a little history on the charge.

Already in the 16th century, you can hear the complaint. Wolfgang Musculus, a south German, attended Mass (the Divine Service) in Wittenberg in 1536. Read between the lines in his report:

At the seventh hour we returned to the city church and observed by which rite they celebrated the liturgy; namely, thus: First, the Introit was played on the organ, accompanied by the choir in Latin, *as in the mass offering*. Indeed, the minister proceeded from the sacristy *dressed sacrificially* and, kneeling before the altar, made his confession together with the assisting sacristan. After the confession he ascended to the altar to the book that was located on the right side, *according to papist custom*.

After the introit the organ was played and the *Kyrie eleison* was sung in alternation by the boys. When this was done the minister sang *Gloria in excelsis*, which song was completed in alternation by the organ and choir. Thereafter the minister at the altar sang “Dominus vobiscum,” the choir responding “Et cum spiritu tuo.” The collect for that day followed *in Latin*, then he *sang* the epistle *in Latin*, after which the organ played, the choir following with *Herr Gott, wohn uns bei*. When it was done the Gospel for that Sunday *was sung by the minister in Latin* from the left side of the altar, *as is the custom with the adherents of the pope*. After the organ played, the choir followed with *Wir glauben all an einen Gott*. After this song came the sermon, which Bucer delivered on the Gospel for that Sunday in the presence of Luther and Philipp. After the sermon the choir sang *Da pacem domine*, followed by the prayer for peace by the minister at the altar. *This in Latin as well*.

The communion. The communion followed, which the minister began with the Lord’s Prayer in German. Then he sang the words of the supper, and

these in German *with his back toward the people*, first those of the bread, which, when the words had been offered, he then *elevated to the sounding of bells; likewise with the chalice, which he also elevated to the sounding of bells.*

Immediately communion was held... During the communion the Agnus Dei was sung in Latin. The minister served the bread in common dress but the chalice *dressed sacrificially.* ...The minister ended the communion with a certain thanksgiving sung in German. He followed this, facing the people, with the benediction, singing “The Lord make his face to shine upon you, etc.” And thus the mass was ended. (Cited in Joseph Herl’s *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*, pp. 195, 196).

In the portions I’ve put in italics you can HEAR the scorn or perplexity implied, can’t you? “What are they DOING?! It’s so Catholic!” Or, as Musculus would more likely have said: “Papist!” But in the description that he provides of the Wittenberg Mass, you can see already the utter seriousness of the Lutheran Confessors at Augsburg: “Our people have been unjustly accused of abolishing the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents... Moreover, no noticeable changes have been made in the public celebration of the Mass....” (AC XXIV)

As the Calvinists took off with their “regulative principle” (i.e., we only do in worship that which the Scriptures mandate), the contrast only grew. Lutherans had an essential openness to the liturgical tradition of previous centuries, because they had what you might call an inversion of the Calvinist position. To the Lutherans, if it wasn’t forbidden by the Word of God, then it was a matter of essential Christian freedom. Thus, they were in a position to receive with gladness the very best of what came in previous centuries. They set aside anything that crept in that obscured the Gospel or contradicted the Scriptures, but rejoiced in all the rest.


From the 1555 Peace of Augsburg in Germany until the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, you could only be Lutheran or Roman Catholic. This led many

German Calvinists to attempt to insinuate themselves into the Lutheran Church and bend it more toward THEIR way of being Christian. This didn't go so well. A real case in point is 17th century Brandenburg, where the Elector became Calvinist by conviction, but faced a Lutheran populace and clergy. The elector was rather determined to turn down the dial on the "too Catholic" elements of the Lutheran liturgy in his territory. Specifically, he wanted to lose the exorcism used in Holy Baptism and the elevation in the Holy Eucharist. Now, both of these are to a Lutheran clearly adiaphora: they are ceremonies neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God, and so left free. But when the Elector implied that there's something problematic with them, the Lutherans dug in their heels. They insisted that these essentially free ceremonies had become necessary in the face of the opposition. In other words, when the order was: *You have to get rid of that stuff that is just "too Catholic,"* the faithful Lutheran response was indeed, *Well, thank you. And no, we're not going to do so. We intend to keep our service that way.*

Fast forward a couple hundred years, and you have the founding of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod here in America. Guess what the complaint was in this new land about us Lutherans? You know it! "Too Catholic!" The first President of the Synod hit the matter head on in the essay he delivered to the Convention to the Central District in Indianapolis in 1867:

It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the difference between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when a person sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American denominations just so they won't accuse us of being Roman Catholic! Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving Word, or be ashamed in the matter of my good cause, and not rather rejoice that they can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them?

It is too bad that such entirely different ceremonies prevail in our Synod, and that no liturgy at all has yet been introduced in many congregations. The prejudice especially against the responsive chanting of pastor and congregations is of course still very great with many people — this does



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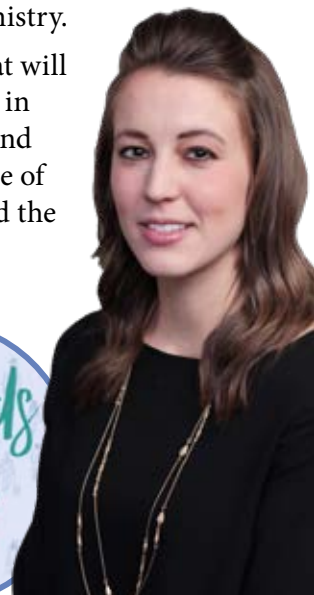
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not, however, alter the fact that it is very foolish. The pious church father Augustine said, "Qui cantat, bis orat — he who sings prays twice."

This finds its application also in the matter of the liturgy. Why should congregations or individuals in the congregation want to retain their prejudices? How foolish that would be! For first of all it is clear from the words of St. Paul (1 Cor. 14:16) that the congregations of his time had a similar custom. It has been the custom in the Lutheran Church for 250 years. It creates a solemn impression on the Christian mind when one is reminded by the solemnity of the divine service that one is in the house of God, where the children of God, in childlike love to their heavenly Father, also give expression to their joy in such a lovely manner.

Pretty blunt, eh? I don't think I'd be mischaracterizing Walther by paraphrasing his answer to fellow Protestants who object to our very Catholic liturgical practice as, "Tough nuggies." To the silly prejudice against it one finds among fellow Lutherans, he says: "Get over it, already!" Nor was that the only time he addressed the problem. Years earlier he wrote an editorial for *Der Lutheraner* (Vol. 9, No. 24, p. 163, July 19, 1853) that simply goes to the heart of the matter:

Whenever the divine service once again follows the old Evangelical-Lutheran agendas (or church books), it seems that many raise a great cry that it is "Roman Catholic": "Roman Catholic" when the pastor chants "The Lord be with you" and the congregation responds by chanting "and with thy spirit"; "Roman Catholic" when the pastor chants the collect and the blessing and the people respond with a chanted "Amen." *Even the simplest Christian can respond to this outcry: "Prove to me that this chanting is contrary to the Word of God, then I too will call it "Roman Catholic" and have nothing more to do with it.* However, you cannot prove this to me.

If you insist upon calling every element in the divine service "Romish" that has been used by the Roman Catholic Church, it must follow that the reading of the Epistle and Gospel is also "Romish." Indeed, it is mischief to sing or preach in church, for the Roman Church has done this also . . . Those who cry out should remember that the Roman Catholic Church possesses every beautiful song of the old orthodox church. The chants and antiphons and responses were brought into the church long before the false teachings of Rome crept in. This Christian Church since the beginning, even in the Old Testament, has derived great joy from chanting... For more than 1700 years orthodox Christians have participated joyfully in the divine service. Should we, today, carry on by saying that such joyful participation is "Roman Catholic"? God forbid! Therefore, as we

continue to hold and to restore our wonderful divine services in places where they have been forgotten, let us boldly confess that our worship forms do not tie us with the modern sects or with the church of Rome; rather, they join us to the one, holy Christian Church that is as old as the world and is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

That is so beautiful and so utterly clear, isn't it? And if you examine the sentence I put in italics, you can readily see the Lutheran inversion of the Calvinist regulative principle. The Lutherans challenged: *Prove to me this is contrary to Scripture*. The Calvinists, by contrast, would say: *Prove to me that this is commanded in the Scripture*.

Walther also hammered home that point in a Reformation sermon from 1858:

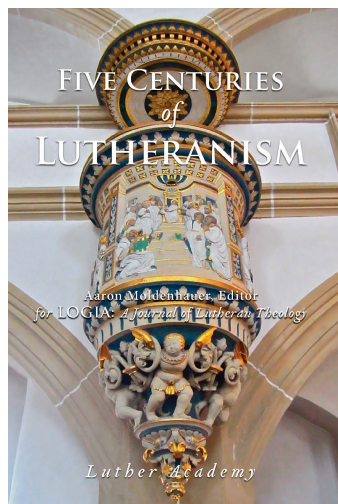
It is true that of all the church bodies which have left the papacy, it is precisely the Lutheran Church which is accused of retaining many papal abuses and of having been the least successful in cleansing itself. It is pointed out, for example, that in our church priestly clothing, church ornamentation, pictures, altar, crucifixes, candles, confession, the sign of the cross, and the like are still apparent. But, my friends, whoever regards these innocent things as vestiges of the papacy knows neither what the papacy is, nor what the Bible teaches. The very fact that the Lutheran Reformation was not aimed at indifferent adiaphora, but retained those things which were in harmony with God's Word, shows that it was not a disorderly revolution, but a Biblical reformation; for whatever did not agree with God's Word was unrelentingly cleansed from the church by the Lutheran Reformation even though it seemed to glow with angelic holiness. (*The Word of His Grace: Sermon Selections, C. F. W. Walther, Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing, 1978, pp. 50-53.*)

So it's clear that for Walther this "too Catholic" objection was worth fighting against, and that pushing back against is indeed the heritage of our "too Catholic" Synod!

That's why, when someone would use that objection on me, I felt free to respond in the smart-aleck way I mentioned at the start of this article. What they offered as a criticism was actually a compliment, whether they knew it or not. It confessed that we were faithful to what our Confessions proclaim:

At the outset again it is necessary, by way of preface, to point out that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things. (Ap XXIV:1)

When people see our ceremonies and say "too Catholic," smile and know that you are standing in honorable company.



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Aaron Moldenhauer, Editor

The chapters of this book were originally published in *LOGIA* (Reformation 2020, XXIX:4). We offer the same essays here in booklet form as a resource for all interested in the history of Lutheranism. Researchers looking for a historical survey can use the book to locate their own work in the broader sweep of Lutheran history. They can turn to the bibliographies to find sources for more detailed historical work. Professors teaching church history can use the book as a textbook, as well as pastors looking to teach a Bible class or other course on the history of the Lutheran church.

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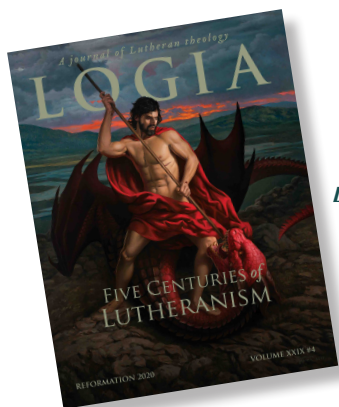
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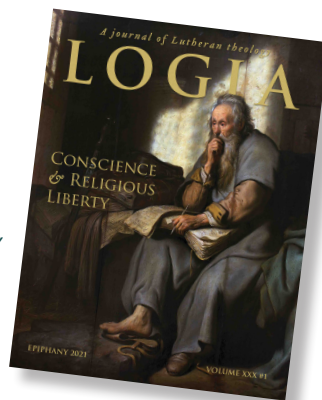
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Wittenberg Trail

From Evangelicalism, to Reformed Seminary, to Confessional Lutheranism

by Joshua Pauling

If you would have told me as an Evangelical teenager that I would be Lutheran as an adult, I would have quipped, “No way. Are they even Christians?” Famous last words.

En route to Lutheranism, I’ve checked off several denominational boxes. That’s not something to be proud of, really. I’m hesitant even to use the language of journey and choice because of the connotations of autonomy and self-expression this might carry in our culture—as if being Lutheran is just a way I’ve chosen to express my self-identity. In a consumerist culture with options for everything, we must remember Christianity is different. Christianity is not a matter of finding which flavor jives with one’s personal preferences, or choosing which style aligns with one’s internal identity. Christianity is a matter of being faithful to what the Word really says, and aligning ourselves accordingly. That is why I am Lutheran. Lutheranism lets the Word speak. In so doing, it reveals a more complete picture of human beings and of the justifying God who saves the whole person, body and soul, through Word and Sacrament.

I grew up in Evangelicalism, with my whole family active in church life. Choir, Sunday school, youth group, worship leading; you name it, we did it. Reading and discussing spiritual matters was a natural part of family life. Yet, sometimes I still wondered if I were truly a Christian. I secretly prayed the sinner’s prayer during many an altar call just to make sure.

After high school, I attended Messiah College to pursue a degree in Christian Ministries. I was astonished by the variety of denominations

represented there, and I experimented a bit (I guess there could have been worse things to experiment with in college). I was especially intrigued by my new Charismatic friends, who seemed to offer a fresh experience of faith. It felt like I was now privy to the secrets of the Spirit, and I dabbled in the so-called spiritual gifts for a year or so. I'd rather forget that year.

I began to notice the destructive effects of Charismatic teaching. Thankfully, the Evangelical roots planted deeply by my faithful parents hadn't withered away completely, especially familiarity with the Biblical text. I returned to Evangelical authors like John MacArthur and Os Guinness who dismantled the Charismatic movement from a biblical and historical perspective.

This renewed interest in Scripture and Church history led me into the theological world of the Reformation. Well-known Reformed authors Michael Horton, R.C. Sproul and J.I. Packer opened up new vistas. I was convinced of the truths of the Reformation in the broad sense of the Five *Solas*, but was not ready to move at all on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. I was a five-point Calvinist, but still Baptist, so I found a home in a Reformed Baptist church.

Eventually, the overwhelming evidence from church history, and a deep study of the *oikos* formula of household baptisms in the book of Acts, convinced me of infant Baptism. Peter's Pentecost proclamation that the "promise is for you and for your children" (Acts 2:39) finally made sense. At this point I was solidly in the Reformed tradition, and explored the doctrinally sound church bodies within it. I wanted further training for the ministry, so I enrolled in the M. Div. program at Reformed Theological Seminary.

But as my seminary studies ramped up, so did my questions. What really separated Luther from the other Reformers that garnered the most attention in the Reformed world? I assigned myself a parallel curriculum to investigate: as we read Calvin, I read Luther; as we read the Westminster Confession, I read the Book of Concord; as we read Reformed Systematics, I read Lutheran Dogmatics. Further exegetical and historical studies made it clear that Baptism and the Eucharist actually did something. A whole host of other doctrines were

interconnected to these issues, far beyond the well-worn path of sacramental debates and predestination controversies.

Reformed theology provided a logically consistent system. But I began to notice how some of those structures seemed to be imposed on Scripture as a grid through which the text is interpreted, rather than something present in the text itself. As my Evangelical and Reformed interpretive lenses faded, Scripture came alive in new ways. Passages that I had read for years leapt off the page with new meaning, now that I understood the sacraments as means of grace through which God acts, rather than ordinances of obedience that man does. Verses that I'd explained away with concepts of spiritual baptism and symbolic representation had new, vivid significance when they were allowed to stand on their own. They revealed the beauties of God's objective works through water and Word, bread and wine.

Reformed theology tends to comprehend God through his attributes, or abstract qualities like omnipotence, omnipresence, immutability, and sovereignty. I noted how this can easily overshadow Christ as the ultimate revelation of God. Similarly, while Covenant theology provides wonderful connections between the Old and New Testaments, Christ can get submerged under the covenants. He becomes just another administrator of the covenant structure of the Bible.

A latent dualism also surfaced in Reformed Christology and sacramentology, which rests on the philosophical principle "the finite is not capable of the infinite." Working from this presupposition, the Reformed posit that the resurrected Christ is localized at the right hand of the Father. In the Eucharist, Christians ascend spiritually by faith to feed on Christ spiritually in heaven. This construction undercuts the biblical view of the whole person as a unified, embodied spiritual being. It suggests a platonic universe with divided realms of spirit and matter, with the goal being to ascend into the upper realm. But this is not the universe of the Bible. Man doesn't ascend; Christ descends. There is no such thing as spiritual eating; eating requires the body.

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Despite the internal consistency of Reformed Theology, I increasingly wondered, is it faithful to Scripture? It seemed as if salvation was stuck in the spiritual realm, with the sacraments subjectivized into spiritual baptism and spiritual eating. Assurance of salvation was left to the internal witness of the Spirit.

But then came the hard part—actually attending a Lutheran church. This took some courage, since skepticism of ritual still lingered from my Evangelical days. My previous denominational moves had some level of internally consistent logic to them. But Lutheranism? With its robes and candles? With its routine and repetition? With baptismal regeneration and the body and blood of Christ? That was a different framework altogether. The remaining hurdles were cleared, thanks in large part to dialogues with Dr. John Bombaro, my undergrad philosophy professor, and catechesis with Kent Schaaf, then Pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church (LCMS).

An exhilarating breath of sacred air greeted me in the Lutheran church as I was brought into the captivating, redemptive narrative of liturgical worship. The prayers and hymns were theologically rich, tying together Old and New Testaments, all with Christ at the center. Perhaps most refreshing was the concept that worship was not our work for God, but God's work for us, given to us objectively in Word and Sacrament.

Liturgical worship offered an escape from the “worship wars” that I stoked as a worship leader during my Evangelical days. The contemporary versus traditional debate was transcended in the resonant unity of doctrine and practice, present in the liturgical inheritance that rises above time and place, style and preference, old and new. Here was an experience of worship that didn't play the cultural relevance and style game. Instead, the Divine Service was connected to the longest-standing practices of the Church. Its distinct, sacred musical styles and other-worldly forms were all saturated with Scripture. It was not the subjective faith-experience of Evangelicalism created by a flurry of praise-song crescendos, or fiery preaching and feel-good pep-talks. It was not the cerebral

and abstract faith of Calvinism, sustained by further academic and intellectual work. It was an objective reality of Christ for me, concretized in Word and sacraments.

I am ever-grateful for the treasures of historic Christianity found in the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Lutheranism holds fast to the Word, letting God speak where He speaks and being silent where He is silent. For Lutherans, life is a sacramental experience. It is a daily return to the font where sins are washed away, and a weekly return to confession and absolution and the Lord's Table where Christ's body and blood are given to forgive sins anew. Assurance is found in these objective means of grace *extra nos* (outside ourselves). Yet these objective gifts become subjectively ours as Christ, who came from outside of us to become one of us, is spoken and sacramented to us. Herein lies the ultimate reason to be Lutheran: Christ for you, at the center.



Joshua Pauling teaches high school history and studied at Messiah College, Reformed Theological Seminary, and Winthrop University. His writing has been published in *Front Porch Republic*, *Public Discourse*, *Mere Orthodoxy*, *Modern Reformation*, and *Salvo Magazine*. He is also head elder at All Saints Lutheran Church (LCMS) in Charlotte, North Carolina. He and his wife Kristi have two children who are being classically homeschooled.

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