

Silent Sermons:  
How Lutheran Church Architecture  
Has Reflected Lutheran Theology

Senior Church History Paper

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## Introduction

Believers throughout all times have worshipped their God in every circumstance of life and in as many varied places. Adam and Eve could offer their worship to God in a garden, at a tree. Martin Luther went so far as to call the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil their own personal "altar" at which they could offer their sacrifice of obedience. Noah could worship God on an ark, buoyed up by the waves of a flood while the rest of humanity perished beneath. A fleeing Jacob could set up a stone and call that place Bethel, "house of God." Jonah could call on the name of the LORD from the belly of the great fish. Daniel could praise the Lord from the bottom of a den in which he shared quarters with hungry lions. Paul could worship his God in a prison cell at midnight. It truly is a wonder of grace that the transcendent God has always heard whenever and wherever faith has found a voice.

Yet God never purposed that the faithful function *only* as individuals - each one doing his own thing in his own way at his own time. God recognized the benefit for believers in a communion of hearts and minds and therefore used corporate worship and specific places to direct the hearts of his people collectively to their common God. In the wilderness he gave them the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle was to be at the center of Israel's camp, and at the center of their lives. The Tabernacle preached the constant message to Israel that their's was the God who "tented" among his people. It was the place where they could reciprocate their love to the Lord as they brought him sacrifice. And though the average Israelite never saw the inside of the Tabernacle, the symbolism inside preached silently yet eloquently to the ministering priests who daily saw the lampstand, the table of bread, the altar of incense, and the thick curtain that separated them from the Holy of Holies. They served daily among the things that were but the shadow of

Christ. The whole of the Tabernacle became for the Israelite what the stain glass windows became for our medieval ancestors, namely, a beautiful, multifaceted tool with which the faithful might teach each other truths about the Christ to come.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way the Temple of Solomon and each temple rebuilt after it flooded the senses of the Jew with symbolism that again communicated theology to him. The Temple music and the singing of the Psalms communicated to the ear of the Jew. The smell of the burning sacrifices served as a perpetual reminder to anyone near the Temple mount of the substitutionary nature of his nation's theology. The sight of the priests in service vividly held before waiting Hebrew eyes the picture of the mediation necessary for sinful mankind to come into the presence of a holy God. But all of the sights, smells, and sounds of the Temple said the same thing, "amidst them all, we ever see that one great outstanding Personality, whose presence filled that house with glory."<sup>2</sup>

The natural conclusion to all of this is the realization that God communicates to his people in different ways. It is not always in words, but many times in forms and structures and symbols. And if we can say that the Tabernacle and the Temple of old communicated theology to God's people by these means, we can say the same thing for our houses of worship today. Through form and structure theology is still communicated. Though the message may not ring out as loudly as the sermon, architecture can still speak quietly to the senses of the saints, preaching silent sermons. It is this topic upon which the rest of this paper will focus, specifically

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<sup>1</sup> *"The Hebrew Way of Life"*, An essay presented by Dr. John C. Lawrenz for the Reformation Festival of the South Central District, 1991. (page 16)

<sup>2</sup> Edersheim, Alfred, *The Temple*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Reprinted 1990) p.6.

addressing this particular facet - how Lutheran church architecture reflects Lutheran theology.

### **I. Beginnings of Faith and Form**

In pursuing the topic of how Lutheran architecture reflects Lutheran theology it first would be wise to take the broader panorama of *Christian architecture* and just how that came to be. We do this because long before there was Lutheran worship and architecture there was Christian worship and architecture.

Not long after our dear Savior ascended and this fledgling new religion got a foothold, Christians began to assemble for "Christian worship." If one were to take a look in the book of Acts and in other portions of Paul's epistles one would find any number of references to "house churches." These were the earliest places of Christian worship. Converts to Christianity gathered in one another's homes to sing, listen, pray, and break bread. There were no elaborate forms of worship to follow. Worship in this way reflected their close fellowship and their close communion of hearts. The number of worshippers was often such that no more than a home was needed.

In the 60's A.D. the first real persecutions of Christians gained momentum. Especially under persecutions like the one initiated by Nero (@ 64 A.D.) Christians realized the wisdom that likewise came in worshipping in house churches. Here they could remain in secret and worship as inconspicuously as possible. Christians in those days also had to defend themselves many times from the charges of speculative outsiders who surmized Christians were practicing cannibalism and drowning babies in their secret services. These things contributed to the lack a strong Christian influence on building in the earliest centuries A.D.

But things changed in the 4th century. The 4th century saw Christianity become not only

legal, but also the preferred religion of the empire. It all started when Constantine became emperor. Constantine became emperor in 306 when his father died. In 312 Constantine claimed that the Lord gave him a vision of a cross with these words, "Conquer by this." The alleged vision had quite an effect on Constantine. The following year, 313 A.D., from Milan he issued an edict of toleration for Christianity. By this edict Constantine made Christianity *religio licita* instead of *religio illicita*. That moment in history affected Christianity in so many profound ways, and one of them was in the area of worship.

Christians were now free to come out from behind their closed doors of worship to open, public worship. Some of the first houses of Christian worship were simply empty buildings Christians took over. The Romans had large meeting halls built on the plan called the *basilica*. These buildings served equally as well for houses of worship. The basilica had a large central area where a large number of people could assemble. Towards one end of the basilica there was a space from which Roman officials could conduct business or make speeches, a space which served equally as well as a place from which readings and exposition of Scripture could be done in a worship context. The basilica floor plan usually had a pool or fountain in a courtyard which served Christians quite well for baptisms. All in all the basilica form worked so well and was so functionally in harmony with the nature of Christian worship that Christians were building their churches in the basilica form for nearly 1,000 years after this.

As Christians began to build houses of worship to God after 313, they had to answer the question with which building committees still have to wrestle today, "What form should this building take so that the function of worship can take place within?" When it comes to the exterior of the Christian church building, there the church has gone through some very obvious

and identifiable changes. We can look at the outside of a church and know immediately if it is built in the Romanesque style (like the basilica), or the Gothic, or the Victorian, or the Renaissance forms. But no matter what the outside looks like, what goes on inside ought to remain the same, and the form the inside takes ought to facilitate it.

For the most part, in the history of the early church what was going on inside most churches was uniform. While it is true history saw the evolution of the Western Church, the Eastern Church, and the Russian Church, it is equally true that the theology of all three remained intact enough that among the three groups there were no significant changes in form that resulted from divergent theologies. They did not have a Baptist church on one corner, a congregational church on the next, and a Lutheran church a stone's throw from there. There was essentially the one *catholic* church. Granted, abuses did creep in early, but the point here is that the architecture of churches up to the Reformation time, though differing externally due to construction during various reigns of architectural thought and technical capabilities, remained *functionally* the same. But what happened to churches *functionally* after the Reformation, when church bodies emerged who differed *theologically*?

## II. Lutheran Worship

To answer that question one would have to focus on every denomination and church that claims the Reformation era as its birthdate. That is not the purpose of this paper. We would rather seek to uncover what influence the Reformation had on the architecture of the Lutheran church.

To get to the nub of that issue, we must first enter into a discussion of *what worship is*. It may seem like an infantile tangent to pursue at this moment but a proper understanding of that

important question is going to provide us with the first stone we need to have securely in place before we can enter into a discussion of Lutheran architecture.

In answer to that question, as with every question of this nature, there are two extreme positions and also a centrist or middle position. Some would say worship is purely *sacrificial*. This extreme view would say that when worshippers come together they are gathered in that place to offer their sacrifice to God. They sacrifice their prayers, songs, hearts, and offerings to Him. Worship viewed this way is purely the believer's response to God. The other extreme position would hold worship as purely *sacramental*. This view would hold that worshippers are called on to do nothing in worship. Worship is God coming to us. Of course the best definition of worship falls somewhere between the two extremes.

I think it would be fair to say Lutherans historically have held to a view which embraces both of the aforementioned elements and holds a delicate balance of the two. Worship is, in fact, both *sacrificial* and *sacramental*. In worship believers do offer their sacrifices of song, prayer, and devotion. Yet worship so narrowly defined is incomplete. For also in worship, the sacramental takes place. God comes to us. In Word and Sacrament, in absolution and blessing, God is the active party and the congregation the recipient. Worship properly understood and executed is always a happy marriage of the two.

Martin Luther summed up the two elements of worship very keenly in a sermon he preached: "These are the two priestly offices, viz., to hear God speak and to speak to God who hears us. Through the benediction, through the sermon and the distribution of the Holy Sacraments, God comes down to us and talks with me; there I listen to Him and again I go up

to him and speak in the ears of God who hears my prayer."<sup>3</sup>

With such an understanding, Lutheran Christians gather to worship. And the buildings in which they gather have sought to facilitate the worship of those who see both the sacrificial and the sacramental as being essential to the worship experience. There is an old adage from the architectural world that says "form follows function." And if the function of a house of worship is to provide a setting for both God coming to believers and believers responding to God, then the form must never be at odds with that function. Realizing such a profound truth for building is bound to influence the way a church erects its houses of worship.

James and Susan White, authors of a book on church architecture and theology, have this to say in applying the "form follows function" maxim:

Christian worship is not an esoteric, devious affair; usually the most simple, direct, utilitarian approach is the best. The finest church buildings in every era have sought to provide the simplest and most useful settings for worship. The Christian community gathers not to admire its building but to use the structure. It is not a community of tourists from afar, viewing something in which it never shares. The Christian community must build simply and directly for its needs in worship. Anything beyond that is conspicuous consumption and contrary to the essence of Christianity.

Frequently, when Christians take most seriously that which is simple and direct, eschewing the monumental or purely decorative, the resulting building has the greatest aesthetic appeal.<sup>4</sup>

This is at the heart of Lutheran worship. How does Lutheran architecture, therefore, reflect the beating of such a heart?

### III. Lutheran Architecture

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<sup>3</sup> "Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church at Torgau," 1544, *Luthers Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe, Bd. 49, p. 594

<sup>4</sup> White, James F. and Susan J., *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) pp. 20-21.



"A church is a place where God's people gather together to worship him, and how they worship, as well as what they believe, is either reinforced or undermined by the architecture. Church architecture is therefore first and foremost a matter of theology rather than a matter of style."<sup>5</sup>

In order to see how a Lutheran church's architecture might serve to reinforce a church's theology rather than undermine it, we will now turn our attention specifically to Lutheran church architecture. Not a particular Lutheran church, but the hypothetical Lutheran church which might be like the one you attend every Sunday, or it might be like hundreds of Lutheran churches across our land. The things upon which we will focus are mainly interior points of architecture, as the exteriors are largely evidences of the different periods of architecture (i.e. Gothic, Gothic Revival, Romanesque). The real silent sermons are preached on the inside. Luther Reed offers an explanation why this is true: "Christianity rejected the pagan temple along with paganism itself. Paganism was an outdoor religion. Its temples lavished their architectural detail and decorative beauty on the exterior. Christianity concerned itself with the interior of its church edifices, giving particular attention to the requirements of worshipping congregations."<sup>6</sup>

### **THE LUTHERAN "SPACE"**

We start our tour of the Lutheran church by stepping into the back of the church. What might impact us right away? I think one of the things that a person might notice right away is that most Lutheran churches do not have a flat ceiling that hangs at about 10 feet. Is this purely

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<sup>5</sup> Bruggink, Donald J. and Droppers, Carl H., *Christ and Architecture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Reed, Luther D., *The Lutheran Liturgy*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947) p. 14.

incidental? I don't think so. I believe there is theology here. A low, flat ceiling does little to lift the worshipper's eyes, or thoughts, upward. A majestic vaulted ceiling immediately lifts the thoughts of a worshipper to the majestic God in whose house he now stands. The author of this paper grew up attending St. Mark's church in Watertown. I can still remember the effect the soaring expanse above the assembled congregation had on the mind and heart of one young worshipper there. As Eugene Hartzell said so well in his letter to me regarding Lutheran architecture: "We get plenty of the world all week long, at work, or school, or in our own room. We want our church to surround the worshipper with a different environment and atmosphere. This is the first step in making our church (from a physical perspective) 'The House of God.'"<sup>7</sup> Now of course, a soaring ceiling is not distinctly Lutheran, but it is very consistent with Lutheran theology.

## THE ALTAR

As the eye of the worshipper scans the interior of our Lutheran church, his gaze will naturally come to rest on the focal point of the church, the chancel area, and more specifically, the altar. Just as the Lutheran church has made Christ and his work of redemption the focal point of its theology, so Lutheran church architecture has reflected that theology by making the altar, a symbol of that sacrifice, the focal point of the church. An excellent example of this can be seen in the photograph which is Appendix II at the end of this paper. This is a picture of Grace Lutheran in downtown Milwaukee. Notice how the altar area is the absolute point of

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Hartzell is a retired pastor now residing in Lakeside, Arizona. Pastor Hartzell served our synod as pastor, but always had a love for architecture. He had even studied architecture before becoming a pastor. Pastor Hartzell was kind enough to answer some questions for me in a letter he wrote, dated March 6, 1993.

attention in the church.

Sacrifice is one of the key messages of having an altar. As one reads the Old Testament one will often find altars and sacrifice as elements of worship. We also know from the New Testament that all of the sacrifices in the Old Testament were merely shadows of their embodiment, who was the Christ. But there is more to having an altar in our houses of worship.

Altars also play a very practical function in worship. It is on the altar that the missal stand rests and also the appointments for celebrating the Sacrament. Very literally, altars serve as tables from which the officiant serves the Lord's Supper.

As Christians began building churches in the 4th century they had these two ideas with which to wrestle as they contemplated the placement and form of their altars. As the abuses of the Mass began to creep into the church, we know altars were very often backed up against the east wall of a long and concealed chancel, where only the presiding priest was privy to the, "Hoc est corpus..." and "hocus pocus" of the Mass. But the bad theology of the Mass didn't ruin what was symbolically, functionally, and theologically a good fixture in a house of God. Lutherans just needed to be clear themselves and make it clear to others what significance *they* placed on the altar in worship.

In a portion of what he has written to be included in our synod's new hymnal, Professor James Tiefel identifies three elements of Lutheran theology the altar accurately symbolizes. These are: 1) Altars portray the vicarious sacrifice of Christ as the central theme of God's plan of salvation. 2) Altars symbolize that God is actually present among his people in the word and

sacrament of Christ. 3) Altars show that Holy Communion is a unique meal offered to believers.<sup>8</sup>

Lutherans who came to America and built churches most often built the forms they had come to know in Germany. This meant that generally Lutherans built churches and located the altar with its backside on the wall of the chancel, just as their churches had in Germany. And it should be noted, Lutherans generally built themselves *altars*, and not just *tables*. More on the significance of the mere table later.

Lutheran pastors historically have communicated what aspect of worship is happening in the service by their orientation to the altar. When the *sacrificial* is happening in responses or prayers, the pastor is turned towards the altar. When the *sacramental* is taking place, the pastor turns away from the altar and speaks the words of God, in His stead and by His command. I believe this deliberate and correct orientation to the altar really communicates what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "In him {Christ} and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."(Eph. 3:12)

In some Lutheran churches, the observer will see a free-standing altar. The free-standing altar is one that has been pulled away from the wall and stands freely in the chancel. The free-standing altar also reflects Lutheran theology very beautifully. Because it is pulled away from the wall, it becomes an even more prominent fixture in the chancel. In so doing the free-standing altar serves to underscore the three objectives of an altar in a Lutheran church. The free-standing altar is especially well-suited for the liturgical portion of the Sacrament. A pastor can then stand

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<sup>8</sup> *Christian Worship Manual*, Kermit Moldenhauer, editor (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) p. 10 of the unpublished manuscript

behind the altar and, while facing the people, consecrate the elements and speak the words of Christ.

In the liturgical renewal of the 1940's some architects decided it would be a good idea to move the freestanding altar out of the chancel altogether, into the nave. The thinking behind the radical change was that communion was such a close gathering of believers, the altar should be moved out into the midst of this fellowship, among the believers. Lutheranism tended away from this change. The altar in the center of worshippers really didn't work well for a liturgical church. But the style can still be seen in many newer churches today, though it is not a Lutheran innovation.

Pietism, too, had its influence on what Lutherans did with altars in the church. Pietism brought with it an emphasis on the preached word, specifically on expositional preaching on sanctification. Justification didn't receive the emphasis it deserved in Pietistic circles. A natural outgrowth of this de-emphasis of justification would be a minimizing of the Sacrament. So what one finds in many Lutheran churches of Pietistic origin is a tiny altar beneath a massive, towering pulpit. The unspoken message is clear. These were churches where the spoken word was clearly the height of worship. We can again see a good example of this type of architecture in this old picture of Grace church downtown. Notice the almost imperceptible altar. (Cf. Appendix III)

Interestingly enough, one can still find this architecture in contemporary Lutheran design. St. John's in Burlington was designed with the pulpit above the altar. No one is accusing their building committee of being Pietistic! But it is interesting how this peculiar Lutheran twist of design is still known by at least one architecture firm today!

Lutherans have even done certain things to make sure the altar receives its due attention.

No paper dealing with silent sermons could pass by the wealth of Lutheran art that adorns Lutheran altars. This was really a distinctly Lutheran contribution to church art after the Reformation. Many beautiful and famous altars in Germany's finest churches were the result of Lutherans taking those churches over and adding the artwork to the altar areas. Some of the finer examples would be the altar panels at Wittenberg and Schneeberg done by Lucas Cranach the Elder. This idea of the painted or carved altar panels became a prime way of preaching a silent sermon.

The panels often portray the same subject matter: the Last Supper. This is the most obvious and appropriate thing to appear on a Lutheran altar. Martin Luther once said:

Whoever is inclined to put pictures on the altar ought to have the Lord's Supper of Christ painted, with these two verses written around it in golden letters: "The gracious and merciful Lord has instituted a remembrance of His wonderful works." Then they would stand before our eyes for our heart to contemplate them, and even our eyes, in reading, would have to thank and praise God. Since the altar is designated for the administration of the Sacrament, one could not find a better painting for it.<sup>9</sup>

We are not graced to live in a day and age when the likes of Lucas Cranach are painting panels for our altars, but we still see the influence of their work as our own altars often have panels decorated with the Last Supper motif, agreeably a most appropriate choice for a church which stands on the doctrine of justification.

In larger churches other measures have been taken to focus the worshippers' attention on the altar. Because it really isn't functionally possible to increase the dimensions of the altar in the chancel so that everyone in a larger church can see it, architects built around altars a canopy-like structure called a *baldechin* (*baldechino*) or *ciborium*. This structure was a canopy over the

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<sup>9</sup> Christensen, Carl C., *Art and the Reformation in Germany*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979) p. 150.

altar area, supported by four pillars. Its function was to bring the attention of worshippers to the most significant object housed beneath that canopy, the altar. At the risk of getting old, we see an excellent example of this in the baldechin of Grace church. (Cf. Appendix IV)

Retaining the altar in houses of worship really was a Lutheran thing to do after the Reformation. Our conservative fathers took over existing buildings and changed practice, not always the buildings themselves. Extreme reformers, however, gutted buildings of anything that smacked of Mother Church. They did away with artwork of all kinds, windows, paintings, and altars. We know Calvin and Zwingli had no use for altars. In defiance of anything Catholic, they set up tables at which to celebrate the Sacrament. This Luther called a "deformed ceremony of the Swiss."<sup>10</sup>

This difference is still one to be noted between the Reformed and Lutherans. Most branches of the Reformed will not speak of an altar to this day. They may speak of an *altar-table*, or just a table for the celebration of the "memorial meal." They continue to eschew any ceremony or formalism that might be considered "Catholic" in opting for the purely functional.

Church growth also has influenced what mainstream churches are doing, or not doing, with altars today that sets them in juxtaposition with confessional Lutheranism. Church growth is fueled as much by psychology as anything. And psychology tells us that it isn't good for a minister to turn his back on a group assembled for worship. To keep pace with this pop-psychology, mega-churches today are often without altars. Chancel areas in church growth houses of worship are designed in keeping with the "form follows function" rule of architecture. But the function of the majority of chancels in such churches is to allow room for pageants,

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<sup>10</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 54, p. 361.

plays, chancel dramas, and musical extravaganzas. There is little room for an altar. It might get in the way of the live cattle or the flying angels suspended by wire when they recreate the nativity on Christmas Eve! These considerations coupled with the church growth view that blood-theology and a communion celebration that doesn't allow outsiders make the altar an interloper on their theology. More and more, altars may be identifiable as Lutheran fixtures in worship.

### **THE CRUCIFIX**

We couldn't leave a discussion of the altar area of Lutheran churches without touching on what undoubtedly also captures the attention of worshippers as they gaze at the chancel of our churches, and that is the crucifix. The theology preached by the crucifix is obvious. It is the gospel in statue form. Its message unmistakable. But the crucifix is really also a confession of the two natures of Christ, and the glory and honor that we lavish on the God/man Christ, without dividing the natures. In this way the crucifix really does preach Lutheran theology overagainst our Reformed friends.

Perhaps it is necessary to define our term. It might go without saying but when we speak of a crucifix we are referring to the cross which usually hangs above the altar area and on which hangs the *corpus*, the body of Christ. The crucifix is to be distinguished from the cross, which does not have the body of Christ hanging from it.

The whole issue of crosses and crucifixes really became a matter of concern when the church was under assault from such Christological controversies as monophysitism and monothelitism. Without dealing in depth with each, suffice it to day that each of these sought to define or understand the two natures of Christ or how they related to one another. To put to



rest this discussion, the church in council at the Sixth Ecumenical Council of 681 declared that all crosses in churches from then on must also have on them the corpus. This was to be the church's way of confessing that Christ, not just the divine Christ or *physis*, was to be worshipped and praised.

Today the Reformed, who still are not clear on the adoration of Christ, giving adoration only to the divine nature, do not put crucifixes in their houses of worship, but only crosses. The Lutheran crucifix still preaches today not only Christ's work of redemption, but also the adoration we rightly give to the undivided Jesus, the Christ.

### **THE COMMUNION RAIL**

In treating the architecture of Lutheran churches one might overlook the communion rail. After all, it isn't big. It isn't very ornate. It isn't the focal point of the chancel. But it isn't without its significance in a house of worship.

The communion rail had its origins in the giant *rood screens* that had become customary in churches before the Reformation. The rood screen was a development that grew out of the theology of the sacrifice of the Mass. Screens almost like walls were positioned between congregation and chancel. Again, this was so that only the priest and his attendants with him in the chancel area could see the mystery of the eucharist. When Lutherans took over some of these churches, some of the first things to go were the rood screens. They were completely out of step with Luther's rediscovery of the gospel, particularly here in Sacrament.

As new churches were built in the 16th century, where once the rood screen stood, architects put the communion rail. It was beautifully functional, as it afforded the recipient of the Sacrament both a place for and an aid to kneeling. Some have said the earliest communion

rails had the additional function of keeping marauding packs of dogs, common in the cities of that day, from entering the chancel area and desecrating the Sacrament.<sup>11</sup>

No one can deny the functional use of the communion rail, but one must be careful not to entirely overlook the symbolic. The communion rail in Lutheran churches is also a barrier in which there is an opening. It is an opening through which the pastor can pass to approach the altar, the symbolic presence of God. Quite frequently in our services, the pastor will stay outside of the communion rail until after the confession of sins and absolution. Then he first approaches the altar. Who can deny the parallel to this we find in the Holy of Holies being opened to all when the veil, which kept people out, was torn in the moment our forgiveness was secured?

The communion rail is also a place at which a person strikes a theologically appropriate stance for receiving Christ's body and blood. At the rail a person completely humbles himself in response to the marvelous grace the Lord is showing him in the Sacrament. It shows the heart of the psalmist who said, "O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker." (Psalm 95:6) A particularly fitting statement to this effect surprisingly came out of the United Lutheran Church in America at its Twenty-second Biennial Convention, when their *Commission on the Sacrament of the Altar and Its Implications*, said this regarding kneeling to receive the Sacrament:

This judgment is not derived from New Testament fact or command. Man's widening mastery of the powers of the earth tempts him to suppose that his mastery needs no bowing before anything. He is tempted to strut about the malleable earth with his egocentric hat on. But only the 'Holy One with whom we have to do' is truly ultimate. A posture that is a physical sign of this acknowledgement would seem particularly

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<sup>11</sup> Needham, A., *How to Study an Old Church*, (London: B.T. Batsford LTD., 1948) p. 38.

appropriate.<sup>12</sup>

## PULPIT AND LECTERN

No sane person would ever deny that the spoken word has always been a high point in Lutheran worship. Any Christian who has ever taken our Savior's words to heart, "Preach the gospel to every creature," will likewise have to admit the prominent role preaching the word has in the lives of God's people. In an oft cited passage of Luther, he wrote this: "When God's word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together."<sup>13</sup> Lutheran churches have sought to convey the importance they place on the spoken word by designing their houses to "showcase" the spoken word. This is done by providing pulpits and lecterns.

The pulpit in worship is a natural carryover from the basilica form we discussed at length towards the beginning of this essay. The basilica had one end of the building which housed a raised platform and what was called an *ambo* from which a Roman might address those assembled for this or that meeting. The ambo was very much like a pulpit. When Christians took over these buildings, the ambo became the logical place from which a minister might preach or expound Scripture. In time, as Christians built houses of worship the ambo evolved into the pulpit.

In the Roman church, in the course of time, pulpits began to get smaller and smaller as the sacrifice of the Mass became the reason for gathering and not necessarily hearing the word. But after the Reformation, Lutherans began to elevate their pulpits again. This they did for good

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<sup>12</sup> Hoefler, Richard Carl, *Designed for Worship*, (Columbia, SC: The State Printing Company, 1963) p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 53, p. 11.

reason.

Functionally, if a church was going to place an emphasis on the preached word they better be sure the people can hear when the word is preached. And the raised pulpits of early Lutheran churches in the days before electronic amplification made hearing much easier. Some portraits of Luther in the pulpit show him preaching from an elevated pulpit that is situated half way out in the nave. Again, this was putting the speaker out in the midst of the people where they could best hear him. Whereas the altar is largely *visual*, the pulpit is meant to be *audible*.

But the elevated and highly-ornamented pulpits of many Lutheran churches communicate far more than just wanting to get the preacher up so the people in the back can see him. The high pulpit reflects the Lutheran church's high regard for exegetical preaching. The richly ornate pulpit draws the eye to the pulpit and communicates reverence and esteem for Christ's injunction to preach the gospel. Its elevation is never meant to signify heavy-handedness or dictatorial authority, but it does suggest that what is presented here is "six feet above contradiction."<sup>14</sup>

Beautiful examples of Lutheran pulpits can be found in many churches. St. Mark's church in Watertown still has maintained its elevated pulpit. Grace church, too, in downtown Milwaukee has a beautiful Lutheran pulpit. (Cf. Appendix V)

An interesting "accessory" to the elevated pulpit is the canopy that has customarily hung above such pulpits. This canopy, called a *schaldeckel*, really had purely functional beginnings. The *schaldeckel* was added to pulpits to serve as a sounding board in the days before microphones. But the effect of the *schaldeckel* has been to further add to the beauty and

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<sup>14</sup> White, James F. and Susan J., *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) p. 45.

aesthetic appeal of the pulpit and enhance its significance. This has happened to such a degree that even though modern churches with their modern sound systems no longer need sounding boards to help amplify the preacher, many churches are retaining or restoring their schaldeckels for their symbolic value. The photo in Appendix V shows quite well what a schaldeckel looks like and the effect it has on the pulpit.

The usual placement of the pulpit in Lutheran churches is to one side of the chancel area at the front of the church. It is there to communicate what we have talked about above. It is, to a degree, a focal point, but not **the** focal point. Professor Tiefel again has words worth noting regarding the placement of pulpits in Lutheran worship: "...care must be taken that the pulpit does not again begin to dominate the altar. The Lord does not rank the means of grace; neither should symbolism."<sup>15</sup>

Pulpits are quickly becoming things of the past and hallmarks of Lutheran churches. If one is to tune in to any one of the many reformed or evengelical preachers on television nowadays, one does not usually find them preaching from a pulpit. What one is more apt to find in these houses of worship is more of a "podium" from which the preacher addresses the people. This form would be right in line with their theology which places a high regard on expositional, instructional preaching. The podium approach gives their service a more educational feel to it, intentionally so.

The other appointment in the front of many of our churches that deserves treatment here is the lectern. Lecterns have an odd history. Very early churches did not have them. These

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<sup>15</sup> *Christian Worship Manual*, Kermit Moldenhauer, editor, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) p. 23 of the unpublished manuscript.

churches may have had a "presider's chair" from which some reading may be done. Chapels in monasteries sometimes had lecterns, as this was a good spot from which to read the many appointed lessons and Psalms for their frequent worship services. It seems the Victorian age with its love of things symmetrical really had as much to do with introducing a lectern into church design as anything. They felt the need to balance the front of the church visually, so across the front of the church from the pulpit they put a lectern. Church designers have followed suit since then.

Theologically, there is not much to say about the lectern. The fact that it is smaller than the pulpit is in no way meant to communicate that the read word is less important than the preached word. Both are held in equal regard in the Lutheran church. But the Lutheran church has historically built its service almost on steps, each thing building up and taking us one step closer to the sermon. I believe the lectern falls right in line with that view.

Some today question the theology of having a separate lectern. To them it is bad theology to make a distinction between what is read and what is preached. Having a different place for each will confuse people. Their concern is worth noting. The careless church or minister could inadvertently communicate just such a faulty message if not mindful of potential confusion. But there is nothing wrong, or un-Lutheran, about either having a lectern or not having a lectern.

### **THE BAPTISMAL FONT**

Joseph Furttenbach, a Lutheran architect after the time of the Reformation, influenced the Lutheran world when he wrote that everything in a Lutheran church should be visible to the people. Altar, pulpit, and font should all be focal points, he said. The symbolism of having

these three fixtures as focal points is the absolute essence of Christianity -- being made a child of God through Holy Baptism, and lifelong nurture of faith through word and Sacrament. What better silent sermon could a church wish its architecture to preach?

While true Lutherans have never flinched in their view of the importance of Baptism and the regeneration that comes through it, the Lutheran church has had its trouble deciding what to do with the font in its houses of worship. There is the old school of thought, the evidence of which can still be observed in many churches, which kept the font almost out of sight. The font might be pushed way off to one side of the front of the church. Other churches even have fonts that are moved aside when not in use, so as not to "be in the way." Pietism had something to do with this. With their emphasis on subjectivism and experience, Pietists let the baptism of infants slide. It would be much more significant for that person when they could "feel" saved. The influence Pietism had in this regard is unfortunate.

But there is also "new" thought in regard to placing the font in our churches. This new thought gets back to what Furttenbach said. Lutherans today are rediscovering the baptismal font. Lutherans are placing their fonts out in the open, where they are visible to the congregation. In some churches, the font is now the fixture in the chancel that offsets the pulpit for symmetry. Many churches doing renovations are taking tiny little fonts out of dark corners and putting in prominent, new and beautiful fonts. There are even some Lutheran churches now that are putting their font in the back of the church so people can see it as they enter the church.

These are wonderful silent sermons on the meaning of baptism! Having the font in front where it is very visible will be a constant reminder to the worshipper of his or her own baptism. Each baptism that takes place at such a font is in front of the eyes of those who can take from

that the reminder that each day for them is a reliving of their own baptism. They can as well rejoice in this means of bringing even little babies into the fellowship of the faith. The font in the back preaches silently to those entering the church. It can serve to remind them as they enter the house of God how it is they have entered the kingdom of God. All in all, it is certainly a positive development that has Lutherans rethinking what they do with baptismal fonts. The baptismal font, properly placed, can be a very powerful sermon on the importance we and Scripture place on baptism; improperly placed, it can certainly also communicate the lack of esteem in which a church holds the sacrament.

#### **A PLACE FOR ORGAN AND CHOIR**

The Lutheran church has always been the "singing" church. Martin Luther himself loved music and commended it very highly. When a church body has the truth of God's gospel, it seems only natural to sing out. Carl Halter in his book on music and the church has this to say: "It is natural for the human spirit to resort to music when worshipping because worship enlists the deepest and strongest emotions - those emotions which go beyond words and demand greater expression."<sup>16</sup>

In developing its musical heritage the Lutheran church has been unique in its view of music. Just as Lutheran worship sees both the sacramental and the sacrificial happening in worship, so also in worship music has a two-fold function. Music is to be performed to the glorification of God and the edification of men. It is to serve the congregation and help the congregation serve. This is a unique view. The Roman Catholic Church doesn't share that view.

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<sup>16</sup> Halter, Carl, *The Practice of Sacred Music*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965) p. 7.



In their estimation, music is one way - it is the church lifting its voice to God. The Reformed have tended down the other path. For them, music is largely proclamatory. Lutheranism again occupies that middle ground, that happy balance between the two.

With that in mind, Lutheran churches have sought to place choirs and organs in their houses of worship. This is not to be a discussion of the theology *in* Lutheran music, but how the presentation of music in Lutheran churches communicates the view we hold of music.

Perhaps it is appropriate to mention where we *do not* place our organs and choirs. We generally do not place the organ up in the chancel. The same is true of our choirs. Why not? The answer lies in what happens in the chancel. If a choir or organ is located in the chancel it communicates that the music which is performed from that location is predominantly proclamatory. A good example of wanting to convey that message can be found in many Baptist churches today, where one regularly finds the choir on risers behind the pastor. That obviously communicates the Reformed slant on music. Pastor Hartzell also mentions this in his letter: "I grew up in the Reformed church. The most prominent visual element was the rear end of the organist playing the big pipe organ against the front wall of the church." He notes how this did little to focus the worshipper's attention on Christ.

What is the Lutheran way to present music? I believe the practice one sees in many churches communicates exactly the Lutheran view of music. Many Lutheran churches locate their organs and choir lofts in the balcony. This is perfect for both functions of music. A choir singing from the balcony can offer its praises to God as the rest of the congregation joins their hearts in the ascending notes. The choir can also sing didactic music and edify the people because the music stands out clearly as it is proclaimed from the balcony. The same principle

applies to organ music. If a congregation doesn't have a balcony the choir or organ is sometimes positioned on a side, in a transept perhaps, where they still can serve equally well as servant or teacher of the congregation, either glorifying God or edifying the saints.

### **A PLACE FOR THE WORSHIPPERS**

Our discussion of how Lutheran architecture reflects Lutheran theology is drawing to a close. We have said much about what the worshippers might see in a Lutheran house of worship, but we have said little about what the placement of the worshippers themselves says about the theology of the church.

It is perhaps obvious, but when Lutherans gather together for worship, they need to be able to *assemble in worship*, but they also need to be able to *move to receive the Sacrament*. So the fact that Lutheran churches still have pews and aisles means that our theology still holds Jesus' words to "do this...in remembrance of me," dearly. We want to be able to position our people so they can *hear* the word, *see* the focal point of the church, the altar, and we want them to be able to *move* forward to receive.

If that was not an important part of our theology, then we could build theater-churches, with theater seating. We could install long rows of seats. After all, the fewer aisles, the more seats. And the more seats, the more people you can accommodate for worship. That is exactly what has happened to churches bitten by the church-growth bug, or churches where the sacrament is seldom-to-never celebrated. They have become theaters where the important thing is getting people in for the "show." As long as theology remains the driving force in Lutheranism, it will always be important to facilitate the reception of the Sacrament, and never to hinder it.

### **IV. The Future of Lutheran Architecture**

The last statement of the above paragraph has a flaw. It presupposes that theology is driving Lutheranism today. Understand that the statement is meant to refer to confessional Lutherans, like our beloved synod. The truth of the matter in mainstream Lutheranism is - theology drives very little today, if its even on board! That means that years from now when some young Seminarian sits down to write his paper on "How Lutheran Church Architecture from the Late 20th Century Reflects Lutheran Theology," the churches he has to analyze probably will not be a reflection of any theology in particular.

A very fine article was written about this problem by Ronald Goetz in a 1986 issue of *Faith and Form*. He writes:

The dynamics of even well-designed modern buildings range all over the place, as they thrust up, down, forward, sideways - or even not at all. Their "mystery" reflects the highly personalized expression of the individual architect, who may not even be a Christian. Just as much Protestant preaching is nondoctrinal, personal and even idiosyncratic, so modern Protestant church architecture reflects the radical pluralism and individualism of our age.

Protestantism has no vital theological center. Its architecture reveals this disarray. Our modern church buildings exhibit Protestantism's desperate attempt to provide a sense of mystery that will fill the spiritual void within our community of faith by creating some sort of sacred space around us.<sup>17</sup>

The observer of developments within Lutheranism will immediately see much of what Goetz has referred to going on among Lutherans. It may not be stretching things too much to say we may be seeing the last of distinctly Lutheran design in church buildings.

The other development that I think will have a bearing on how churches build has more to do with architectural theory than with theology. I believe it can be summed up in the

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<sup>17</sup> "Protestant Houses of God: A Contradiction in Terms?", Ronald Goetz, *Faith and Form*, Fall 1986, Vol. XX, p. 22.

statement once made by Frank Lloyd Wright. He said: "Why not... build a temple, not to God...but build a temple to man, appropriate to his uses as a meeting place, in which to study man himself for his God's sake."<sup>18</sup> More and more I think we are seeing "temples built to men." Churches build and architects design to their own glory. To build the eccentric, the new, the brilliant, the innovative, the novel, that is the goal. Theology stands by while pride and arrogance drive. I believe this is the current trend in church building and I believe this current would be as hard to stop from flowing as trying to stop the Mississippi.

### Conclusion

True houses of God have always been, and continue to be to this day, places where the senses of the saints are treated to beautiful silent sermons. They are places where the faithful meet to feed their faith by means of sight and sound, and touch and taste. At best, we would have to say the connection between theology and church architecture is very subtle, at least for many persons, and it plays only a minor role in the entire spiritual experience. But if we can make even a subtle statement of our faith in wood, or stone, or glass, then that is a good thing and worth doing.<sup>19</sup>

Putting a new twist on an old addage, it was the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe who once noted, "God is in the detail." Lutheran church architecture has borne that out. God is in the detail of our churches - he is communicated in the detail of the beautifully placed altar, he is held before the eyes of patient sojourners on this earth in the detailed attention given to the

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<sup>18</sup> Lym, Glenn Robert, *A Psychology of Building: How We Shape and Experience our Structured Spaces*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980) p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> Exerpt from Pastor Hartzell's letter, March 6, 1993.

hanging of a crucifix above an altar, and his message is made clear to eyes and ears and hearts in the many different sensations of worship. Yes, God is in the detail, many times preaching silent sermons.

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## Appendix I

Other research for this paper included a letter questionnaire which was mailed out to @30 pastors in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Texas, Arizona, Illinois, and Indiana. The letter basically asked the pastor to share with me any insights he might have on this topic or any points of architecture in his church that might be of interest to me in my research.

Also, especially worth noting was the help retired Pastor H.E. Hartzell of Lakeside, AZ gave me in researching this paper. He sent a long letter to me in response to my request of him to share with me his thoughts on this topic. He is uniquely qualified to address this issue as he studied to be an architect for a time, but later became a pastor in our synod. He has put his love for architecture into practice on occasion by helping to design churches.

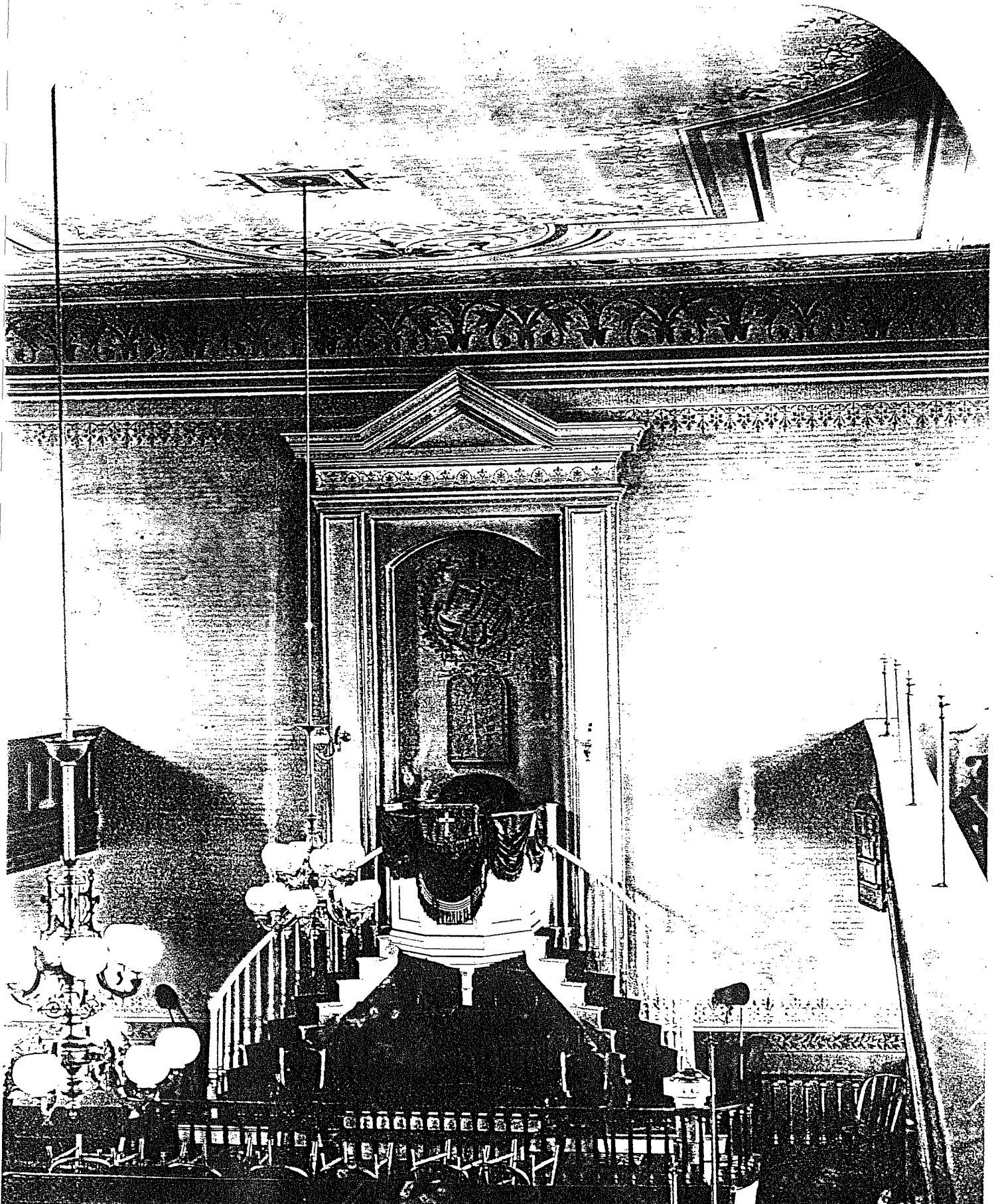
Other than that and the sources cited, research took the form of observing different churches, occasionally making a special trip here or there with a camera.



Appendix II



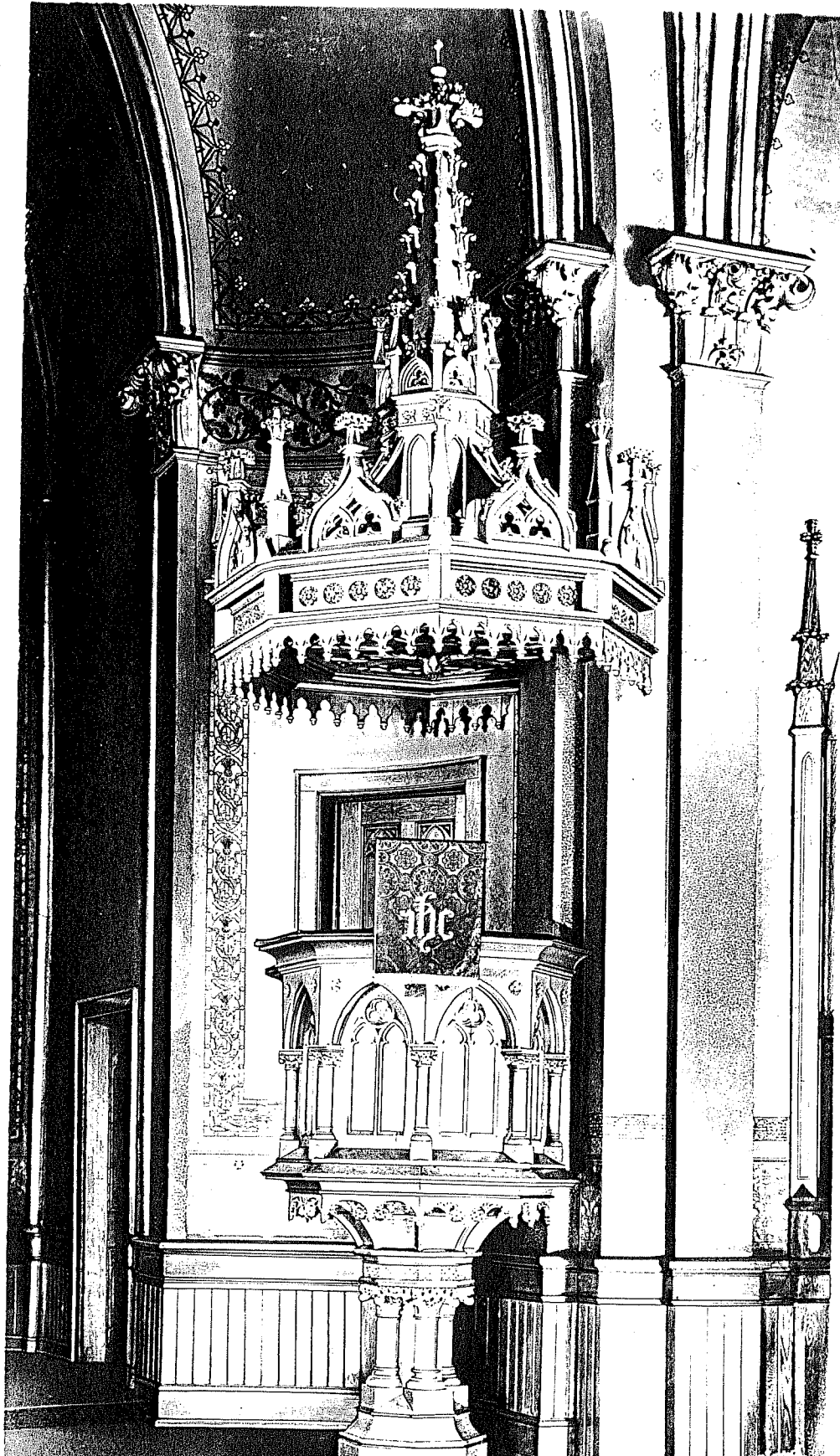
Appendix III



Appendix IV



Appendix V



Wesleyan Lutheran Seminary Altar  
1884, Chicago, Ill.  
Marion, Illinois