

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

Introduction to the course

A. The course contents

1. Preface & Theological Ditches (pp. v-9) –
2. Beyond the Ditches & God's Promises (pp. 9-21) –
3. Doubt & Presumption (pp. 21-32) –
4. Forgiveness & Carnal Security (pp. 33-45) –
5. Despair & God's Perspective (pp. 46-71) –
6. God's Providence & Prayer (pp. 71-94) –
7. God's Control of Nature & His Will (pp. 95-108, 120-126) –
8. The Freedom of Man & Me or God (pp. 108-119) –
9. Bad Good Works & Good Good Works (pp. 127-153) –
10. Contentment & Idolatrous Love for the World (pp. 153-169) –
11. Ungrateful Contempt & The Ministry (pp. 169-193) –
12. Election & The Worship Wars (pp. 194-212) –
13. 13. The Final Stretch (pp. 213-228) –

B. What we will try to learn

1. The nature of theological ditches
2. How to recognize the ditches on common issues
3. The dangers of listening to Dame Reason
4. How to remain on the narrow Lutheran middle road

C. How to prepare for each session

1. Read the chapters from the book.
2. Answer the questions on the handouts.
3. Consider the issues that are being raised by the readings.

1. Preface & Theological Ditches

1. What is meant by the “narrow Lutheran middle”?
2. According to Deutschlander, what is the Bible?
3. Why do many regard the Bible as hard to understand?
4. What is so important about a middle position? Does one always exist in theology?
5. Give examples of how human reason digs spiritual ditches?

2. Beyond the Ditches & God's Promises

1. Why is purgatory such an attractive ditch for the less than pious?
2. Why is denying the bodily presence of Jesus in the sacrament so deadly?
3. What does “Using Scripture to undermine Scripture” mean?
4. What evidence do we have that God will not forsake us?
5. Why is the example of the Israelites arriving in the promised land so important?
6. Search the Scriptures. After Eve, to whom and when did God renew His promise of a Savior?
7. What is the appropriate role of Dame Reason?

3. Doubt & Presumption

1. Why is doubt a ditch?
2. Why might people have doubts about the Law? The Gospel?
3. Why did the punishment of David and Korah differ so much?
4. Does doubt or presumption appear to be the greatest threat to Christians today?

4. Forgiveness & Carnal Security

1. Contrast the meaning of objective justification with that of universal justification.
2. Explain the Great Exchange.
3. Where does repentance come in the conversion process?
4. How do people deny God's justice?
5. What is wrong with justification by comparison?

5. Despair & God's Perspective

1. Why would people fear that God could not forgive them?
2. Why do people sometimes have trouble forgiving themselves?
3. What is the *opinio legis*?
4. How does God view time?
5. Explain God's promises made in time versus God's promises kept in time?

6. God's Providence & Prayer

1. What does divine providence mean?
2. How does God differentiate between believers and unbelievers in His providence?
3. Why does God give us physical and spiritual challenges if He loves us?
4. Why should we pray when God knows already what He will do?
5. Why can't we use prayer to cut deals with God?
6. How does prayer complement divine providence?

7. God's Control of Nature & His Will

1. Why is a knowledge of physics helpful in understanding God's control of nature?
2. What is a miracle? State the definition clearly.
3. Compare God's sustaining power with His directing power in the physical world.
4. What is the antecedent will of God?
5. What is the consequent will of God?

8. The Freedom of Man & Me or God

1. If God is omnipotent, what does man control?
2. How does God use history as a tool?
3. In what ways do people have “wiggle room” in their actions?
4. What is the “theology of me”? Where does it come from?
5. What is the source of the theology of the LORD?

9. Bad Good Works & Good Good Works

1. How can good works be bad?
2. What is civil righteousness?
3. Give some examples of making sin respectable.
4. What is the worst type of a bad good work?
5. Explain the difference among Christ **for** us, Christ **in** us, Christ **through** us.
6. What are the main requirements of a good good work?

10. Contentment & Idolatrous Love for the World

1. What is wealth? Be inclusive in the definition.

2. What is contentment?

3. For what reasons do people love money so strongly?

4. How do people attempt to get fame and power?

5. Why is seeking the “good life” so harmful to so many?

6. How does the entitlement culture harm people’s spiritual lives?

11. Ungrateful Contempt & The Ministry

1. Why are people contemptuous of the world?

2. How does our personal battle with sin affect our view of the world?

3. What is the universal priesthood?

4. What do members of the universal priesthood do as priests?

5. What differentiates the office of the ministry from the universal priesthood?

6. What is the special “mark” that all ministers have?

12. Election & The Worship Wars

1. How and when did God elect some to be saved?
2. In view of God's election, why is the Great Commission important?
3. What are the major elements of Lutheran worship and their relative importance?
4. Why do we say that the church liturgy is an adiaphoron?

13. The Final Stretch

1. Do pericopes cause pastors to fail to preach to the real problems of their congregations?

2. Do the numerous and frequently changing hymns in hymnals today still preserve the purpose of people “singing their way into heaven”?

3. Do the various “transitions,” prayers and readings (propers) included in the various liturgies make sense to most of the modern worshippers?

4. How does the amount of congregational participation in the spoken or sung responses versus those of musicians and cantors affect the laity’s sense of worship?

5. How much time is worth spending to teach the laity about the parts of the various liturgies vis-a-vis giving instruction in Christian doctrine?

6. Is the approaching of a life in heaven really affecting the lives of Christians?

7. Why are we tempted to loaf in doing God’s work as we age?

8. What is the key to keeping our eyes on the prize and our feet on the narrow Lutheran road?

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

1. Preface & Theological Ditches

I. Preface

A. An introduction to reason

1. Defining reason.
 - a. The anatomy of reason – Reason is the human ability to use a set of assumptions and rules to draw conclusions in an attempt to create a cohesive understanding of some event or process. Reason allows people to deal with their environment, which can be physical, mentally or emotionally dangerous to them. For example, people use reason to examine the physical evidence they see in a wilderness area to determine the likelihood that a large predator is present.
 - b. Magisterial reason – In this usage reason acts as the judge of the evidence it is presented, using external criteria of its own choosing to decide the validity of the information and its appropriate usage. For example, reason uses human experience to judge whether the account of Jonah is credible.
 - c. Ministerial reason – In this usage reason acts as a servant who accepts the validity of the available information and organizes it so that it can be used for the task at hand. For example, it arranges the statements in the Bible about good works to show what the Bible does and does not say on the subject.
2. Deutschlander on reason.
 - a. Defining the middle – When traversing an area where the land falls away in various directions along a trail, one must be careful where one places one's feet to prevent siding off the trail and into a ravine. This is also true when one studies the Word of God because Satan continually directs us away from the narrow path of sound doctrine and into the broad morass of false doctrine.
 - b. Identifying the ditches – Staying on the narrow road of truth requires that we identify the ditches of heresy that close in around our path. We need to know whether the logical conclusions that we are tempted to draw are, in fact, consistent with the Scriptures or are really a slippery slope that will draw us into faith-destroying error.
3. Grappling with God
 - a. The Spirit of the Bible – The more one studies the Bible, the more one realizes that it is a book possessed by a spirit, in fact, the Holy Spirit. While individual verses are important to understanding the various doctrines and should not be dismissed as merely the insights of the ancient authors, there is a gestalt to the Bible into which all these statements fit which is greater than the sum of the parts. It was to encourage the Philippians to use this Spirit of the Scriptures that Paul alludes in his statement *“continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose”* {Philippians 2:12a-13}.
 - b. The spirit of this world – We know from cognitive psychology research that people automatically refine their own memories to enhance their self-image in past episodes in which they were involved. The spirit of the world is self-centeredness, which tries to change the physical and spiritual world to better serve self and discard anything that limits self, such as the Law of God. The Christian must continually actively struggle against this.

B. The “mysterious” Bible

1. What is the Bible? It is “God’s revelation of His own mind and heart and will.” If we humans try with our own reason without the Bible to understand God, we show ourselves to be fools {“*In the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him.*” 1 Corinthians 1:21}.
2. The Bible is difficult to understand because of the God it proclaims.
 - a. God is not like us, so we lack the experience needed to evaluate him {“*For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*” 1 Corinthians 13:12}.
 - b. God is so much greater than we are that we cannot comprehend Him {“*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*” Romans 11:33}.
3. The Bible is difficult to understand due to the way of salvation it announces.
 - a. God’s justice is absolute {“*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*” James 2:10 / “*For the wages of sin is death.*” Romans 6:23a}.
 - b. God’s salvation is free {“*Come now, let us settle the matter,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*” Isaiah 1:18 / “*But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Romans 6:23b}.
4. The Bible is difficult to understand because some do not want to accept what it teaches.
 - a. They seek contradictions in the Bible. Some who do not accept the Bible justify their rejection by pointing to things in the Bible which are inconsistent with human reason and use this to reject some or all of the Bible’s teachings. They use man’s wisdom rather than God’s wisdom in trying to understand the Bible.
 - b. They “demythologize” what they do not like. Some try to make the Bible more user-friendly by claiming things that do not meet their ethical standards are relics of an age when God had to deal differently with His people. To them such things are merely myths that must be reinterpreted in the parlance of modern knowledge.

II. Theological Ditches

A. The concept of the middle road

1. What is the middle? Nearly everyone claims that they want to be in the middle and not be considered an extremist. Yet, in practice, on most issues people tend to gravitate toward one side of the population distribution or the other. So, what does the middle mean in common usage?
 - a. The middle can be defined as the “average” or the “mean.” To find this quantity, one adds all the values in a set of numbers and divides by the number of values. For example, this is how the average income is determined.
 - b. The middle can be defined as the “median.” This is the value for which the same number of values is less than as is greater than this value. For example, this is how the value of the middle house number on a block is found.
 - c. The middle can be defined as the “mode.” This is the value which occurs most frequently in a set of values. For example, elections are settled by plurality, i.e., the candidate who gets the most votes wins.

- d. Aristotle taught that to find and practice the golden mean between extremes, such as between stinginess and prodigality, was the way of happiness.
- 2. The Scriptural middle
 - a. The narrow Lutheran middle is different than all the middles above. It is an understanding of the Bible that stands firmly and completely on what the Scriptures actually say {“*These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*” Deuteronomy 6:6–9}.
 - b. It does not add to, subtract from or change the contextual meaning of the Biblical text, even when that meaning does not make sense to our human reason. Context includes grammatical context, textual context, historical context and spiritual context {“*See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.*” Deuteronomy 12:32}.
 - c. The narrow Lutheran middle is not an elusive point of precise balance that we, if we could only find it, would be blessed with Aristotelian happiness in time and the necessary knowledge to perfectly please the LORD to merit eternal bliss. It is rather the Scripture-led road through life that we follow to avoid falling into the ditches of despair or of self-righteousness.
- 3. Reason as a ditch digger.
 - a. Human nature does not like to be told what to do. When given a set of rules governing some activity, reason will always seek ways of manipulating the rules to the advantage of the reasoner. For example, in court cases the opposing parties try to create nuances in statutes or in case law to gain an advantage in the case being tried. Human reason is likewise always trying to create exceptions in God’s Law to permit favorite sins.
 - b. People are, in general, incredibly gullible to ideas that appear to give them some type of advantage. For example, many seriously ill people regularly buy worthless medicines because they see a chance for a “miracle cure.” People use similar reasoning to accept incredible claims about “hidden facts” in the Bible.
 - c. Conversely, people often reject other people’s accounts of past events unless they can see something in those explanations to give them a reason to feel proud or important. Instead, they look for alternative explanations that make themselves feel clever for having “seen through” the official version of the past. For example, alternative theories of many historical events, such as the President Kennedy assassination, are continually being devised. People’s reason can easily convince them the accounts in the Bible are exaggerated stories.
 - d. Human curiosity drives people to challenge the granularity of explanations. If an account is simple and straightforward, reason suggests that unrevealed factors were important but untold by the reporter. If the account is complex and difficult to fully grasp, reason suggests that there is an underlying simple explanation to this and similar events. The devil thereby uses reason to dig ditches on both sides of an account and to push people down into one of them, depending on the way they are leaning.
 - e. Reason is not light but darkness when it attempts to rationalize and overrule Scripture. While reason can and must be used in a ministerial sense to understand the Bible, it is nevertheless always looking for its own advantage. For example, John Calvin was often drawn to use reason to try to explain the mysteries of God one level deeper than the Bible does. This led him to deny things which the Scriptures clearly state, such as universal atonement, because they would not fit with his reasoned models of how God would act.

4. Examples of flawed reason

- a. The two natures of Christ – No doctrine has caused Satan to use reason to generate more ditches than this one. The Bible states that Jesus was both fully God and fully human {“*But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.*” Galatians 4:4–5}. However, human reason cannot grasp how an eternal divine essence can be in the same person with a temporal human essence. It therefore creates false ideas that are more appealing.
 - God only dwelled in Jesus’ body but was not part of his person.
 - Jesus did not have a human body, but God only wrapped flesh around Himself.
 - Jesus’ divine nature was created like his human nature.
 - Jesus was not God at all, but only a man divinely led throughout his life.
 - Jesus’ two natures were like boards with different properties glued together.
 - Jesus was so good that He was adopted into the Godhead to save mankind.
- b. The creation and preservation of the world – God himself declared that He created the world in 6 days {The LORD said, “*For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.*” Exodus 20:11}. Moreover, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that we must accept this miracle of God by faith, not scientific proof {“*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*” Hebrews 11:3}. Yet Satan has led reason to create ditches on either side of our faith in God’s creation. In one ditch are those who claim that the physical evidence which they have found shows that the Almighty God could not have created the world in 6 days but that it must have evolved. In the other ditch are those who believe the physical evidence can be used to prove that God did create the world and to show how He has managed it since creation. Those in neither ditch grasp that an Almighty God does not need to act through the laws of nature and that these laws are only a mask that He uses for our convenience. God always acts through His almighty power.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

2. Beyond the Ditches & God's Promises

III. Beyond the Ditches

A. Denying the obvious

1. This is “sort of” my body.
 - a. The Bible could not be clearer that when Jesus said, “This is my body,” He meant this is my body. There is no hint that this is allegory in the texts of any of the places where these words are quoted. The verb “is” in Greek, which is not necessary in such statements, is present in all 8 of the this-is-my-body/this-is-my-blood statements, an emphatic endorsement that “is” means “is.”
 - b. Despite the clarity of the assertion, numerous of the non-Lutheran reformers developed dodges for the words of the Bible. Some redefined “is” as “signifies.” Some made the body and blood symbolic of the faith existing within the church. Some stated that Christ wanted the human spirit in taking the physical elements to rise to Him in heaven to receive His blessing. Human logic had to create answers to problems of its own manufacture.
2. Jesus rose only in the minds of His disciples.
 - a. The Bible clearly declares the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ in numerous places {“*The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.’*” Matthew 28:5–6}.
 - b. Despite this, some argue that the resurrection was only the return of the spirit of fellowship among the disciples that had existed during Jesus’ life that cause them to want to tell the world about His message {“*If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*” 1 Corinthians 15:14}.

B. Subtle seduction

1. Adding non-Biblical ideas.
 - a. Purgatory – a place between heaven and hell, because reason says that some people deserve punishment for their sins but not eternal punishment.
 - b. Help in high places – those already in heaven should be able to leverage God better than those on Earth, so their help might be sought through prayer to them.
2. Using Scripture to undermine Scripture.
 - a. Sovereignty of God – God is so great that He has absolute control over everything. Therefore, He has predestined everything that will happen in His creation, including those who will go to hell despite the fact that God wants all people to be saved {“*This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*” 1 Timothy 2:3–4}.
 - b. Conversion – The reason that only some are saved is because they choose to accept Jesus while others reject the salvation offered to them. Ultimately, salvation depends on man’s choice, because man is capable of choosing {Jesus said, “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.*” John 15:16a}.

IV. The Broad Sweep and Scope of God's Promises

A. The LORD will not forsake us.

1. The physical universe will not overwhelm us.
 - a. The LORD controls the universe at all levels so that nothing can happen of which He is not aware {Jesus said, "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.* Matthew 10:29-31}.
 - b. The LORD is not affected by the size of the issues that might exist. He can override anything that natural or supernatural agents can use to attack His people {"*Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,*" says the LORD, who has compassion on you." Isaiah 54:10}.
2. The LORD will not abandon us when times get difficult.
 - a. Although circumstances may cause other people to forget their obligations to us, the LORD will never forget. Nothing is ever more important to Him than His children. He will never be distracted by things "more Godly" {The Lord said, "*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!*" Isaiah 49:15}.
 - b. Even if it seems like He is not paying attention to the things that are troubling us, He is, and He has promised that we can pray to Him at any time and He will hear and answer our prayers {The LORD said, "*Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.*" Psalm 50:15}.
3. We are engraved on the LORD's hands {Isaiah 49:16}.
 - a. The LORD did not forget about the Israelites when they entered Egypt. He led them out of that country, guided them through the wilderness and brought them safely into the land of Canaan {"*Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.*" Joshua 21:45}.
 - b. Even when they disobeyed Him and He punished them by sending them into exile, the LORD remembered His promises and returned them to Jerusalem and Judah {"*This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.'*" Jeremiah 29:10}. Recall also the valley of dry bones {Ezekiel 37}.

B. The LORD redeemed us from our sinfulness.

1. The promise of the Savior.
 - a. When mankind sinned, the LORD immediately introduced His plan of salvation to Adam and Eve, even before they repented {Genesis 3:15}.
 - b. The LORD then renewed that promise to Abraham {Genesis 12:3}, to Isaac {Genesis 26:4}, to Jacob {Genesis 28:14}, to David {1 Chronicles 17:14} and to the nation of Judah through Isaiah {Isaiah 9:6-7}.
 - c. The LORD gave details about the coming Messiah. Where He would be born (Bethlehem - Micah 5:2). Where He would live (in Galilee of the Gentiles - Isaiah 9:1). What He would preach (healing and deliverance - Isaiah 42:7). How He would suffer (pierced through and rejected by God and man - Isaiah 53:3-5, Psalm 22}.

2. The fulfillment of the promise.

- a. The fulfilment of the promise did not come immediately. For 1800 years the family of Abraham waited and waited. At times, when their fortunes were low, they must have wondered if God had not just been leading them on. However, the LORD followed His own timetable {“*But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.*” Galatians 4:4–5}.
- b. The fulfilment of the promise was effective, but it was not what they had expected. They had expected a regal king, and they got a servant king. They had expected power and majesty, and they got lowliness and gentleness. They had expected deliverance from the Romans, and they got deliverance from death and hell {“*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*” Philippians 2:6–8}.

C. The LORD brings His redemption to us.

1. Through Word and sacraments.

- a. The Gospel message of Jesus Christ brings His salvation to us when it is boldly and faithfully preached {“*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*” 2 Timothy 4:2}.
- b. Baptism washes away our sins and unites us with Christ so that we receive His righteousness in exchange for the guilt of our sins {“*We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*” Romans 6:4}.
- c. The Lord’s Supper shows Jesus’ personal love for us by allowing us to receive the body and blood that He used to redeem us {“*He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. ’*” Luke 22:19–20}.

2. In spite of our sins and the work of the devils

- a. All of us have sinned grievously, but even the worst of sins cannot separate us from the forgiveness won by Christ {“*Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*” 1 Corinthians 6:9–11}.
- b. Satan and the hosts of hell will attack us continually. There is no rest from their attacks, but Satan cannot overcome Christ’s redemptive work {Jesus said, “*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.*” Matthew 16:18b}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

3. Doubt & Presumption

V. The Ditch of Doubt [when it's about losing]

A. Uncertainty in the physical world

1. The spies' report on Canaan
 - a. Buyer's remorse is an underrated phenomenon. People may greatly desire something, but when they finally have an opportunity to obtain their objective, they begin to hesitate about taking the prize. They begin to wonder whether what they have desired is not fraught with undesirable aspects. The Israelites began to doubt God's promise when they reached the edge of Canaan {Number 13-14}.
 - b. After seeing great miracles performed by the LORD for more than a year, the Israelites still wanted to believe Dame Reason and their senses rather than their God. All of us face this problem when the challenges of life become large, and we want to run and hide rather than to rely on the LORD's promises. We, like the Israelites, become willing to accept a lesser prize because we do not trust God.
2. Storms on physical and emotional seas
 - a. Facing what appears to be almost certain death can paralyze people. They ignore using their best alternatives for safety and become resigned to their fate. Jesus' disciples were in this situation when storms arose on the sea, even when Jesus was in the boat with them {Luke 8:23-25}. They had His promises for their future work, but at the time, all of this did not square with their reasoning.
 - b. When we face storms, it is important that we remember Jesus is with us even though we cannot see him. While we do not have the same vocational promises that the disciples did, we still have the promise the all things work for good to those who believe {Romans 8:28}. In essence, earthly difficulties are temptations to doubt God. If we do doubt, then that doubt can quickly turn into frustration and panic. We become tempted to downgrade God from being almighty because we cannot see Him working behind the scenes {"*But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*"} 1 Corinthians 10:13}.

B. Spiritual uncertainty

1. The disciples hid when Jesus was taken prisoner.
 - a. When Jesus spoke to His disciples about His coming death, they found these to be hard words, so they tried to ignore them until they came true {Matthew 26:56}. Words related to God's **Law** are always hard, but we must not ignore them.
 - b. Some people will continue to try to ignore the demands of the Law until they reach Judgment Day and then try vainly to hide {"*They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"* Revelation 6:16}.
2. Doubting the good news about Christ.
 - a. The disciples had heard the promise of Jesus that He would rise from the dead {Matthew 20:19}. But because they did not believe He would die, they also did not believe that He would rise. Dame Reason told them that people do not rise from the dead. Therefore, they could not accept the message that He had risen, but they continued to resist the message by hiding behind locked doors {John 20:19}.

- b. While the **Gospel** is great news, it is also troubling news. The Gospel promises free salvation, but it also makes people repudiate their own efforts for salvation and to repent of sins. Dame Reason tells us that might not work. We can feel pretty good about our own works, and repentance means a struggle against some things that have become near and dear to our old self. It is easy to subtly doubt the Gospel message.

3. The cure to our doubts.
 - a. The cure to any of our doubts is always the Word of God. We need to study it continually {John 5:39}. This cannot be emphasized enough. In the Scriptures we learn how powerful God is and how committed to His people He is to help them with their earthly problems {Psalm 145:18-19}. Because the world is constantly trying to downsize God, Christians are tempted to doubt that God can and will help if they are not being reminded of God's almighty presence from His Word.
 - b. Even more important are God's spiritual promises. He has promised us salvation {John 1:12-13}. He has promised His Holy Spirit will always be present to guide us {Luke 11:13}. Focusing on these promises will keep us on the narrow road.

VI. The Ditch of Presumption [when it's about winning]

A. Overt rejection of God's commandments

1. David
 - a. Early in his public life, David was careful to consult the LORD before he acted {1 Samuel 23:9-12}. Eventually, he began to rely on his own reason because he thought of himself too highly, as when he seduced Bathsheba {2 Samuel 11} and when he counted the people {2 Samuel 24}.
 - b. The prophet Nathan's role in calling David to repentance {2 Samuel 12} was critical. Pastors must continue also now calling arrogant sinners to repentance.
2. The Levitical rebellion
 - a. Followers of the Levite Korah proudly asserted that because all Israelites were God's chosen people, they should also all have God's promise of the priesthood {Numbers 16}. It is presumptuous to tell the LORD what He owes us.
 - b. While David's adultery was a clandestine act, Korah's rebellion was very public. God called David to repentance, but He dealt with Korah emphatically.

B. Subtle undermining of God's truth

1. Ananias and Sapphira
 - a. Ananias' and Sapphira's sin was not giving less than they could have but pretending they gave more than they did (Acts 5). This was mocking God.
 - b. The "nobody will ever know" sins are dangerous attacks on God's majesty. In these sins we gain credit for ourselves to which we are not entitled while thumbing our noses at God {"He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed." Proverbs 3:34}.
2. Our sinning magnifies God's grace.
 - a. The ultimate presumption is that God is actually glorified when we give Him more and greater sins to forgive {"Let us do evil that good may result." Romans 3:8b}. St. Paul points out that people who say this are justly condemned.

- b. The reborn heart of the Christian does not want to sin because it knows that sin is offensive to God {"*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*"} Romans 12:2}.

C. The narrow Lutheran middle

- 1. The burdens of life tempt us to doubt.
 - a. Dame Reason persistently directs us to our own efforts and away from God's promises when she tells us that we are not seeking adequate fulfillment in our lives. We need to stop wasting time on religion, she suggests, when God's way isn't working for us.
 - b. We must remind Dame Reason that "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness*" {2 Peter 3:9}.
- 2. The blessings of God tempt us to presumption.
 - a. Dame Reason reassures us of our own cleverness and of the excellence of the motives which we have for our actions. Even if others might sin in a particular situation, due to our stellar character, we are impervious to common temptations. And if we fall, that is what the forgiveness of sins is for.
 - b. We must remind Dame Reason that the divinely inspired St. Paul wrote, "*Let us, who are of the day, be sober; putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ*" {1 Thessalonians 5:8-9}.
- 3. Keeping our eyes fixed on the promises of God
 - a. The LORD promised David the kingship of Israel, but Saul was pursuing him to kill him {1 Samuel 23:25}. What a reason for doubting the LORD's promise! Then suddenly David received the opportunity to kill Saul {1 Samuel 24:3-4}. What a presumptive opportunity to take the future into his own hands and obtain God's promised kingdom! David neither doubted nor acted presumptuously. He trusted that the Lord would fulfil His promise in His time.
 - b. Dame Reason always gives us grounds to doubt the LORD, particularly when things look bad for us, and to be presumptive when we feel that we have full control of our environment. Both these ditches are, in reality, temptations to follow the devil to own destruction. David showed us how to handle these temptations. Jesus showed us what must be the real source of our strength {He answered, "*It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*" Matthew 4:4}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

4. Forgiveness & Carnal Security

VII. Forgiveness of Sins

A. What is forgiveness?

1. The nature of sin

- a. To sin is to miss the mark of perfectly conforming obedience to God's will {Jesus said, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Matthew 5:48}. Sin first happened when Eve ate the forbidden fruit {Genesis 3:6}.
- b. Once sin was committed, the soul of the individual became completely contaminated {The LORD said, "*Every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.*" Genesis 8:21b}. That contamination has spread to everything a person does and every offspring that a person has {"*By one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.*" Romans 5:12}.

2. Jesus' sacrifice for sin

- a. God responded to man's sin with the promise of a Savior {The LORD said, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" Genesis 3:15}.
- b. That Savior was placed under the Law of God and kept it perfectly (active obedience) {"*God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.*" Galatians 4:4b-5}.
- c. That Savior died in a manner to expiate the guilt of the sins of mankind (passive obedience) {"*The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*" 1 John 1:7}.

3. Objective and universal justification

- a. The guilt of all the sins of all the people who have ever lived, are living or will live has been removed {"*Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.*" Romans 5:18}. It is an accomplished fact.
- b. Because their guilt is gone, God has declared all people to be righteous in His sight {"*For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*" Romans 5:19}.

B. The great exchange

1. Subjective justification

- a. Objective justification is like money in our account at the bank. It is useless to us unless we know about it and believe it is there so that we can use it. To receive the benefits of objective justification, individuals must know about it and apply it to themselves {"*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?*" Romans 10:14a}.

- b. Because people are so contaminated by their sins, they are effectively dead and cannot accept the message of God's forgiveness {"*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*" Ephesians 2:1}. Only the Holy Spirit can change their hearts so that people receive, understand and accept this forgiveness {"*Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*" Ephesians 2:4–5}.
- 2. Repentance
 - a. Once people believe the message that Jesus has given them the gift of the forgiveness of sins, people realize that clinging to their sins is incompatible with accepting this gift {"*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.*" Romans 6:12}.
 - b. People therefore reject their sins as offensive and turn away from (i.e., repent of) them {Zacchaeus said, "*Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.*" Luke 19:8}.
- 3. The "new man"
 - a. In the conversion process, the Holy Spirit creates a new person within those who are converted. This person places God and the loving Jesus first in his/her life {"*Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*" Matthew 10:37}.
 - b. The person repudiates his or her own good works as worthless and even a hindrance to salvation {"*Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" Philippians 3:7–8}.
 - c. The person "takes up the cross" by being willing to confess, and to suffer for, Christ in this life {Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" Matthew 16:24}.

VIII. The Ditch of Carnal Security [when I know better than God]

- A. "I am not so bad."
 - 1. "There is no absolute moral law."
 - a. Denial of God – "The idea that we are responsible to a divine being is outmoded. Today we recognize the importance of personal freedom to mental health. Everything that doesn't harm anyone else is therefore acceptable." To deny that something is true does not make it false, i.e., the existence of a waterfall on a river {"*The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.*" Psalm 14:1}.
 - b. Denial of God's justice – "Even if there is a God, he couldn't punish everyone who didn't agree with Him. He would have to grade on a curve, really punishing only the Hitlers and the Stalins." {Jesus said, "*Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.*" Luke 17:26–27}.

2. "I do a good job of keeping the law."
 - a. Denial of the seriousness of sin – "Nobody's perfect, but I do a pretty good job of keeping God's laws." Pretty good is not good enough; people are thoroughly sinful {The LORD said, *"From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil."* Isaiah 1:6}.
 - b. Bargaining with God – "I am really active helping people, and surely God will count that as worth more than a few occasional sins." We cannot bargain with God, offering our worthless works to replace the obedience that He demands from each of us {Samuel said, *"To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."* 1 Samuel 15:22b}.
3. "I am better than a lot of other people."
 - a. False separation – "I'm one of the good guys. I'm a lot better than those people who are always skirting the law." It is clear that many people overvalue their works in the court of God's justice {Jesus said, *"Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'*" Luke 17:9–10}.
 - b. Better than the worst – "At least I never do the sins that the really evil people do." In God's eyes all sins are terrible and require repentance {Jesus disapproving quotes a Pharisee saying, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."* Luke 18:11–12}.

B. "I'm a good church member."

1. "My family and I have belonged to the church for many years."
 - a. On the books – "I try to go to church whenever I can, at least at Christmas and Easter, and I always take my children when they're home." Simple membership is not enough; the LORD requires active faith {*"Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."* Hebrews 10:25}.
 - b. In the right church – "I belong to a church that believes in the Bible and teaches the correct doctrine." That is good, but the right pedigree counts for nothing. One still needs a correct personal faith {John the Baptizer said, *"Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."* Matthew 3:9}.
2. Regularly involved.
 - a. Regular attendance – "I'm at church nearly every Sunday and for special services too." Sadly, most people who regularly go to a Christian church also go to hell. One must correctly understand the message and apply it to oneself {Of the Jews Paul said, *"Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts."* 2 Corinthians 3:15}. The same is true of Christians.
 - b. Faithful in stewardship – "I regularly contribute money, and I even help with events. I make a great hotdish." Physical service does not replace faith {*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one."* Luke 10:41–42a}.

3. Into the finer points of church.

- a. Worshiping the worship – “I understand and love all the nuances of all the various church liturgies.” Liturgies were developed over the years to help ignorant people better understand the message of the Gospel. These manmade worship procedures have no inherent merit before the LORD, who rejected even the liturgy that He had given when people thought they could gain His favor meanly by performing it {“*The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?*” says the LORD. “*I have more than enough of burnt offerings....When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you....Your incense is detestable to me....Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being....Even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening.*” Isaiah 1:11–15}.
- b. The form of the church – “We all worship God, you in your way and we in His.” The mission of church is assigned by the LORD and never changes. Our plans to carry out that mission are of human origin and can change with the world situation {“*Woman,*” Jesus replied, “*believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem....God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*” John 4:21–24}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

5. Despair & God's Perspective

IX. The Ditch of Despair [when the vastness of our sins hits home]

A. “The LORD cannot forgive me.”

1. “My sin is too great.”

- a. “My sins have had negative consequences.” No matter how bad the consequences, the LORD is eager to forgive them {Paul wrote, *“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am.”* 1 Corinthians 15:9–10a}.
- b. “My sins are so awful that they would ruin my reputation if they became known.” Our “awful sins” cannot be hidden from God. God will forgive even if people will not {David wrote, *“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.”* Psalm 32:3}.

2. “I am not winning the battle against my sins.”

- a. “I find sin too attractive to resist.” Perhaps, a radical change in lifestyle is needed to permit genuine repentance {Jesus said, *“And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”* Matthew 5:30}.
- b. “My sin has become an inherent part of me.” This is true of everyone, which is why it is necessary to turn to the means of grace {Jesus said, *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”* Matthew 15:19}.

3. “My sins are too public.”

- a. “Everyone knows about my sin X.” So what? God forgives and so will brothers and sisters in the church {*“As he [Jesus] walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.”* Mark 2:14}.
- b. “I am forced to cover my sins with other sins.” This is not true. Sin never blots out sin {Solomon said, *“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”* Proverbs 28:13}.

B. “I cannot forgive myself.”

1. “I cannot meet my own standards.”

- a. “I expect both myself and others to meet high standards.” Forgiving oneself starts with forgiving others {*“I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”* 1 Corinthians 4:3–4}.
- b. “I know right from wrong, but it doesn’t help.” Paul had the same problem, but God still forgave him {*“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”* Romans 7:19}.

- c. “Some of my sins are unforgivable.” No, if you had committed the unforgivable sin, you would not care {Jesus said, *“Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”* Luke 12:10}.
- 2. “I have undermined Christ’s church.”
 - a. “My sin put the church in a bad light.” Unfortunate, but it is not worse than Peter who publicly denied his LORD; yet he was forgiven {“*Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!”* Matthew 26:74a}.
 - b. “I have broken faith with God.” Yes, but he has not broken faith with you. He still offers forgiveness {Peter said, *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”* Acts 2:36}.

C. The narrow Lutheran middle.

- 1. We need to recognize the tactics of Dame Reason and look to Christ.
 - a. Dame Reason directs us to the ditch of carnal security by appealing to the *opinio legis*, that inborn feeling that we are inherently good or at least good enough, or entitled to a certain degree of latitude in our actions because of our status as the most advanced species.
 - b. Dame Reason directs us to the ditch of despair by appealing to the divine law written in our hearts, which tells us we deserve punishment for our many sins.
 - c. To stay on the middle road, we need to stop comparing ourselves to any form of law and instead trust solely in the promise of free and complete salvation through Christ Jesus {John 3:16}.
- 2. The example of Paul.
 - a. Paul had to deal with a double legacy of carnal security. He had been the most zealous Pharisee persecuting the church {“*I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.*” Acts 22:4} and the hardest working apostle preaching the Gospel {“*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.*” 2 Corinthians 11:23}.
 - b. Paul’s failure to live up to what he knew was the way of the LORD depressed him but did not cause despair {“*What a wretched man I am!*” Romans 7:24a}.

X. Considering God’s Perspective

A. Time

- 1. Time according to physics
 - a. Time flies like an arrow. Time moves in only one direction, and it moves rapidly forward. We cannot change its course.
 - b. Time flows like a river. While floating down a river, things pass by on the shore. We see them, and then they disappear. We try to remember them, but as we subsequently see more things, those memories become distorted or the things are forgotten completely. Because we entered the stream somewhere in its middle, we do not know where the river came from, and we do not know where it is going. We can extrapolate and we can hypothesize, but it is all speculation.

- c. Time does not flow uniformly. It is been discovered that time flows fastest in a reference frame at rest and where there is no matter. Both velocity and gravity (i.e., space curvature) slow the flow of time.
- 2. The LORD's view of time
 - a. Time is a creation of God. There was no time as we know it before God created the world. “In the beginning” {Genesis 1:1} literally means the beginning of time and space.
 - b. God is outside of time and space. If God had not created time, then He would be trapped in it as are we. He would be forced to move along the timeline, and what God did before creation would be a legitimate question, even if we could not answer it. God’s situation would have changed during that period, because we can only define time in terms of change {“*In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them, and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.*” Psalm 102:25–27}.
 - c. To God all time is current. He effectively sees our timeline end-on. Some people call this “the eternal now.” The LORD’s very name is “I AM” {Exodus 3:14}. Jesus said, “*Have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.*” Matthew 22:31b–32}. In the same way that He is everywhere, He is also “everywhen.”

B. The LORD’s promises

- 1. God’s promises and His actions
 - a. One does not promise things in the past. What has happened in the past is now a given. Whether or not it came about as the result of a promise, it is now part of our history. We rely on its validity because it is there before us or was there before our ancestors.
 - b. Whether we see something as past, present or future is irrelevant to God. Because all of time is before Him, when He promises at one time, He is fulfilling at the appropriate future time. From His perspective, God acts simultaneously throughout human history. Therefore, He is always faithful because His promises and His fulfilments are done together. As creatures of time, we must wait, but He doesn’t need to {“*Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.*” 2 Peter 3:8–9}.
- 2. God’s promises and His interactions
 - a. The LORD promises to always care for His whole creation and to provide for its needs {The LORD said, “*As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.*” Genesis 8:22}. This is His divine providence, and it extends to everything {“*The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.*” Psalm 145:15}, but particularly to His elect {Jesus said, “*I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.*” John 10:28}. He invites {The LORD said, “*Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.*” Psalm 50:15} and even commands us to pray {“*Pray continually.*” 1 Thessalonians 5:17} and promises to answer our prayers. He expects that people will thank Him for His providential care and for His answering of their prayers {“*Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Ephesians 5:20}.

- b. The LORD knows how people will respond to His providential care {“*If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?*” Psalm 44:20–21}, whether they will seek His aid in prayer and how they will react to His prayer-fulfilling actions {Jesus asked, “*Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?*” Luke 17:17}. He knows and has always known not only how they will actually respond to the situations which they will face, but to every possible situation they might face, even those they never actually face {David wrote, “*Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.*” Psalm 139:4}. This means that the LORD can guide the course of people’s lives by the choices that He provides for them {“*Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.*” Psalm 119:133}.
- c. People respond to the LORD in the way that He knows they will respond, either wisely or foolishly {“*The LORD knows all human plans; he knows that they are futile.*” Psalm 94:11}. They are not forced to respond as they do, because people are free to make their own decisions. He establishes the situations, and they react accordingly {Jesus told us to pray, “*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*” Matthew 6:13}.
- d. The LORD responds to the actions that people take and blesses or disciplines them according to their actions in light of both His justice and His mercy {“*You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*” James 4:2b–3}. In all situations, God is in control, but people are free to act as they desire {David wrote, “*But I trust in you, LORD; I say, ‘You are my God. My times are in your hands.’*” Psalm 30:14–15a}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

6. God's Providence & Prayer

XI. Divine Providence

A. The LORD's gracious hand extends to everything.

1. The world at large
 - a. The LORD not only created the heavens and the earth, but He also preserves them in all their complexity. In Job 38-41 the LORD challenged Job with all the marvels of the universe which He controlled, both animate and inanimate, and He asked whether Job could likewise control them. Job couldn't, and neither can we.
 - b. The LORD not only works on the huge stage of nature, but He works with the individuals of every species trying to survive on Earth {"*All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.*" Psalm 104:27-29}.
2. All People
 - a. In handing out earthly blessings, the LORD is not stingy to anyone, but often gives people good gifts whether they deserve them or not {Jesus said, "*He [God the Father] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?*" Matthew 5:45b-46}.
 - b. The LORD pays particular attention to those who are often neglected by others {"*The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow.*" Psalm 146:9}.
3. Especially to believers
 - a. David understood that even in God's nation of Israel, not everyone was committed to the LORD. The LORD, however, knew His own and would extend His divine providence over them {David wrote, "*The LORD preserves those who are true to him.*" Psalm 31:23b}.
 - b. Paul reminded the believers in Rome that despite their many troubles and concerns, their LORD would not leave them like sheep in the desert {"*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" Romans 8:28}.

B. The LORD's gracious hand extends to every need.

1. Our physical needs.
 - a. The LORD watches over the mundane things in our lives so that we obtain what we need on a daily basis {Jesus said, "*So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.*" Matthew 6:31-32}.
 - b. The LORD also controls the big things in our lives, in the face of which we seem helpless {Jesus said, "*You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.*" Matthew 24:6-7}.

2. Our spiritual needs.

- a. The LORD's concern for our spiritual welfare is eternal. While we are still on the earth, He has prepared for our eternal residence in heaven. Therefore, we should be sure of His care for us {Jesus said, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."* John 14:1-3}.
- b. In the many struggles which we will have against the devils, the LORD urges us to be wary but assures us that He has the situation under control {"*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*" 1 Corinthians 10:12-13}.

C. The LORD's gracious hand extends to times of good and ill.

1. When the LORD gives blessings.

- a. The LORD protected the people of Israel and gave them sustenance while He led them to the land of Canaan {"*The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything.*" Deuteronomy 2:7}.
- b. The LORD helps people in even the smallest tasks of life to find happiness and satisfaction {Jesus said, *"Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'*" Luke 15:8-9}.

2. When the LORD gives challenges.

- a. The LORD sometimes puts us in situations to test us and to strengthen our faith {"*We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!*" Hebrews 12:9}.
- b. The LORD also provides us on an individual basis with those troubles of life that keep us from becoming egotistical {"*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*" 2 Corinthians 12:7}.

XII. Prayer

A. Dame Reason versus God's promise

1. Dame Reason's case against prayer

- a. God has promised that everything will work out for your good, so why should you waste your time and God's by praying for what He will do anyway?
- b. God has already planned everything, so prayer accomplishes nothing.
- c. God expects you to handle the trivial matters. Don't be such a wimp!
- d. Praying only draws God's attention to your sinfulness and your whining.

2. The LORD advocates continual prayer.

- a. He uses Paul as an example of frequent prayer {"*How constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times.*" Romans 1:9b-10a}.

- b. He assures us that sincere prayer is effective {"*You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*" James 4:2-3}.
- c. He asks us to pray about every matter and for all people {"*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.*" Ephesians 6:18}.
- d. In the Lord's prayer we pray for the forgiveness of sins {Luke 11:4}.

3. False understandings of prayer
 - a. One can pray in impurity, without first having repented of one's sins.
 - b. One can cut a deal with God through prayer to get what one wants.
 - c. If one doesn't get an answer, one hasn't prayed/believed strongly enough.
 - d. One can get better results by getting more people into a prayer chain.
 - e. When I pray, God speaks to me and directs my life.
 - f. Prayer changes the one praying rather than having any effect on God.

B. How prayer complements divine providence

1. It refocuses us on our relationship to God.
 - a. In prayer we remember the works that God does in fulfilment of His promises {"*Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.*" Deuteronomy 8:18}.
 - b. In prayer we thank the LORD for His goodness and faithfulness {Ethan the Ezrahite wrote, "*I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.*" Psalm 89:1}.
 - c. In prayer we acknowledge that it is the LORD who must save us {David wrote, "*As for me, I call to God, and the LORD saves me.*" Psalm 55:16}.
2. It strengthens our knowledge of our dependence on God.
 - a. When we pray, we turn our attention to God for help, reminding ourselves that He made the heavens and the earth. There is no one like Him {David wrote, "*Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.*" Psalm 124:8}.
 - b. When we pray to the LORD, we acknowledge our weakness and have a firm hope in His help {"*He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.*" Isaiah 40:29-31}.
3. It directs us to a life of thanksgiving.
 - a. We boast of the LORD's deeds {The sons of Korah wrote, "*In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.*" Psalm 44:8}.
 - b. In particular, we rejoice in the LORD's spiritual blessings to us {"*Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" Colossians 1:12-14}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

7. God's Control of Nature & His Will

XIII. God's Control of Nature

A. A matter of physics

1. Deterministic systems
 - a. Newtonian mechanics – These laws explain how low-to-moderate masses of matter and low-to-moderate amounts of energy behave at low-to-moderate velocities and under low-to-moderate magnification (e.g., high school physics experiments). They assume time flow and the properties of space are linear.
 - b. Relativistic mechanics – These laws explain how time flow and the properties of space are distorted by large masses of matter, high-velocity masses and large amounts of energy (e.g., black holes).
 - c. Chaos – These laws explain how systems of multiple components cannot be predicted beyond a limited timeframe due to the complex interactions among the components (e.g., the “butterfly effect”).
2. Non-deterministic systems
 - a. Randomness – When an event occurs, it will produce one of a limited number of possible outcomes that is independent of the previous outcomes of the event (e.g., the roll of a die).
 - b. Quantum mechanics – These laws explain how particles, waves and natural forces behave on the atomic and subatomic scales where entities have the properties of both particles and waves. The occurrence of an event is unpredictable (e.g., the nuclear decay of a specific atom).
 - c. Scatter – These laws explain how systems that experience continual local growth and decay will change over time (e.g., localized rain showers) and are modeled by using genetic algorithms.
3. Miracles
 - a. Overt – These are events involving aberrations to the laws of nature that are so obvious that they can be recognized by an untrained observer.
 - b. Covert – These are events involving aberrations to the laws of nature that are so slight or infrequent that they cannot be detected even by systematic observations.

B. The LORD's fingers in the pie

1. Sustaining power
 - a. The Bible often calls the LORD “Almighty” {e.g., Genesis 17:1, Exodus 6:3, 2 Corinthians 6:18}. For God to be almighty means that He must have all the power available - not just more power or superior power, but all power. Nothing can resist the LORD {“*The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.*” Nahum 1:5–6}.

- b. If the LORD has all the power, nothing else can have any power. In fact, the very ability to exist depends on the LORD {“*When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.*” Psalm 104:29–30}. In fact, the very existence of the whole creation is depend on the power of God, just like it was at its creation {“*The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*” Hebrews 1:3}.

2. Directing power
 - a. The LORD uses His power to direct the course of nature. He keeps extremely detailed control over all the events that happen in the universe {Jesus said, “*See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?*” Matthew 6:28b–30}.
 - b. The LORD also directs the affairs of men, putting in power those whom He wishes {“*Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others.*” Daniel 2:20–21}. The Old Testament is full of references to what God will do to the various nations of the Middle East and how He uses one to punish another.
 - c. The difference between the realm of nature and the realm of man is that inanimate objects (e.g., electrons, stars) know nothing and must be continually guided by the word of God’s power, while the LORD has given animate entities varying abilities to react to their environments (e.g., germs, people). Everything that is inanimate acts only at God’s command, while everything animate acts only with His permission.

XIV. The Will of God

A. The antecedent will of God

1. Version 1 of God’s will
 - a. The LORD God cannot tolerate sin {The LORD said to Abraham, “*I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.*” Genesis 17:1}. Everything He does is perfect. At the beginning of time He created a perfect world which was to serve as a stage for the life and work of His perfect creature, man {“*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*” Genesis 1:31}. God therefore had to be prepared for man to obey Him and not fall into sin.
 - b. If people had not sinned, they and their descendants would have lived forever in the presence of God, either on Earth or possibly in another realm that God would have prepared for them, as His faithful servants {“*Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.*” Romans 5:12}. Another realm might have been necessary if some people subsequently fell into sin while others didn’t {Ezekiel 18}. We will never know anything about this scenario because the sin of the first people eliminated it.
2. Version 2 of God’s will
 - a. That the LORD through His foreknowledge knew that man would fall into sin meant that if He did not will a plan of salvation for fallen mankind, all people would fall under His eternal wrath. Therefore, He announced a plan of salvation immediately upon encountering Adam and Eve after the Fall {Genesis 3:15}.

- b. He systematically carried out His plan, using His almighty power to arrange history to accomplish all the necessary details in the world for its success {"*But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.*" Galatians 4:4–5}.
- c. With the completion of His plan of salvation, the LORD declared all people to be righteous in His sight and once again heirs of salvation {"*Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.*" Romans 5:18}.

B. The consequent will of God

- 1. Man's failure to accept God's plan of salvation
 - a. If someone does not accept God's plan of salvation, that is a human decision, and it cannot invalidate God's plan of salvation. It does, however, prevent the person from receiving the benefits of that plan. God's plan is therefore not jammed down man's throat {Jesus said to Jerusalem, "*How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate.*" Matthew 23:37b–38}.
 - b. To refuse to accept God's plan of salvation is to mock God {"*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction.*" Galatians 6:7–8a}. The patience of God is incredible, but there is an end to it.
- 2. God's warnings turn into God's judgement
 - a. The LORD in the Old Testament warned people about specific sins, often many times, and when they did not stop their sinful behavior and repent, he finally punished them for these sins. Paul tells us this was done as a wake-up call for us {"*Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.' We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.*" 1 Corinthians 10:7–10}.
 - b. Conversely, the LORD is not obligated to give specific warnings about every type of sin people might commit before declaring them to be under His wrath {"*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*" Romans 1:18}.
 - c. If the LORD becomes sufficiently angered by someone's refusal to heed His warnings, He may remove the freedom to respond to those warnings, {"*But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.*" Exodus 10:27}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

8. The Freedom of Man & Me or God

XV. The Freedom of Man

A. What the will of God controls

1. The universe as a stage (almighty power)
 - a. Its creation – The universe came into existence solely because of the will of God *{In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1}*.
 - b. Its continual existence – The universe will continue to be preserved in its current form as long as God wills it to exist *{"As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." Genesis 8:22}*.
 - c. Its destruction – The universe will cease to exist when the will of God chooses to end it *{"The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare." 2 Peter 3:10}*.
2. History as a tool
 - a. Times and nations – God has affected the events of history to the necessary degree that His will was carried out *{"He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others." Daniel 2:21a}*.
 - b. Chosen people – God selected a people as His instrument to prepare the way for the arrival of His Messiah *{"The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." Deuteronomy 7:7}*.
 - c. Chosen time – God moved events in a manner that allowed His message of salvation to be proclaimed in the most suitable environment *{"The message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith." Romans 16:25b-26}*.
3. The church as an agent
 - a. Its commission – The church was commissioned as Christ's agent to carry His message to the ends of the Earth *{Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19-20a}*.
 - b. Its leadership – The church is supplied by Christ with the leaders required to do its work *{"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Ephesians 4:11-13}*.
 - c. Its promise – The church has Christ's promise that nothing Satan can do will prevent it from carrying out its mission *{"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, '...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'" Matthew 16:16-18}*.

4. The individual as the focus of God's will (almighty grace)
 - a. The commitment – God desires universal salvation {"Who [God]wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." 1 Timothy 2:4}.
 - b. The election – God chose us in Christ because of His own purpose before He created the world {"He has saved us...not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time." 2 Timothy 1:9}.
 - c. The call – God calls each person individually to faith and repentance {"To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints." Romans 1:7}.
 - d. The conversion and preservation – God is completely responsible for effecting our conversion and also preserving us in the faith {"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." Hebrews 12:1-2}.

B. What God does not control

1. Man's sin
 - a. God created man sinless {"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27}.
 - b. God warned man about sinning {The LORD said, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." Genesis 2:16b-17}.
 - c. God does not tempt people to sin nor chose to have them sin {"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." James 1:13}.
 - d. God does not facilitate sin at the level of purpose {"Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." James 1:14-15}.
2. Man's choices ("wiggle room")
 - a. God has not predestined damnation {"He [Jesus] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." 2 Corinthians 5:15}.
 - b. God permits choices in temporal matters {"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." Colossians 2:16}.
 - c. God restricts harmful choices {"When you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." 1 Corinthians 10:13}.

C. Where things are uncertain

1. What the will of God is except in the cases in which He reveals it {Romans 11:33-36}.
2. The degree to which God stage manages the world (active versus passive oversight) {Proverbs 16:1, 9, 33}.
3. When does God's knowledge of how we will choose cause Him to manage our lives {Psalm 139}? In reality, how free are the major choices in our lives?
4. Whether God's containment of evil is focused or regional {Psalm 91:10}.

XVI. Me or God

A. The theology of me

1. Looking out for No. 1
 - a. The young girl wearing a T-shirt saying “It’s all about ME” clearly states the widespread practice of putting oneself first. After all, it is argued, my first obligation is to myself because I cannot help others if I am not strong, wealthy, etc.
 - b. My actions are intended to enhance my wealth or status, using whatever means ranging from humility to arrogance seems most appropriate to the situation.
 - c. I do things to help others when it also benefits me in some way – financially, emotionally, politically, etc.
2. “Me rules” of theology
 - a. What is right and what is wrong are obvious to me. I do not need any outside reference to validate my understanding of them. (If it feels right, it is right.)
 - b. Rules made by others are to be obeyed only when the risk or severity of punishment for breaking them exceeds the gain from ignoring them.
 - c. I am useful to others only to the extent that my environment is useful to me.

B. The theology of the LORD

1. It is written.
 - a. All that is known about the LORD comes from the written record in the Bible. What is in the Bible can only be understood in terms of the context of the Bible. Anything in conflict with what is written in the Bible is sinful and/or idolatrous {“*Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.*” *Isaiah 8:20*}.
 - b. The LORD, the God revealed in the Bible, demands the first place in the life of all people. It is the first commandment. Anyone unwilling to give the LORD the first place in his or her life is therefore God’s enemy and under His eternal wrath {“*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength....For the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.*” *Deuteronomy 6:4-15*}.
2. It is about God’s Messiah.
 - a. The whole of Christian theology rests on Jesus Christ. Anything that is not compatible with the message of free salvation through Christ is heresy {“*Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!*” *Galatians 1:8*}.
 - b. The message of the Scriptures contains both Law and Gospel. It tells of God’s requirements, our failure to meet those requirements and God’s plan to save us through the work of Christ. It is only by accepting God’s Justice and God’s Mercy, which meet at the cross, that one can be saved {“*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” *Romans 6:23*}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

9. Bad Good Works & Good Good Works

XVII. Bad Good Works

A. Civil Righteousness

1. Contributing to one's social profile

- a. In a Humanistic society, one gains stature by being an all-around good guy/gal. When volunteers are needed or a donation or an endorsement of a worthy project, some people think they can gain God's favor by jumping at these opportunities {"*His [the LORD's] pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.*" Psalm 147:10-11}.
- b. Some hope to gain God's recognition by merely standing on the sidelines but loudly applauding the good efforts of others. They are "good neighbors," at least in spirit {"*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" James 1:22}.

2. Bettering the world

- a. Those who regard themselves as champions of their fellow man engage in well-publicized efforts to solve some substantial problem, either local, nationally or globally. Many think that the popular acclaim that they get from such efforts will put them into the high regard of God just as it does of men {"*When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others.*" Matthew 6:2}.
- b. Many of the foot soldiers in these projects also feel that they are earning merit before God by their selfless devotion to such efforts. The bigger the project, the bigger the reward they hope to reap by being part of it, even if they do not get the worldly recognition of the notables of such projects {"*Know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*" Galatians 2:16}.

3. Making sin respectable

- a. Everyone knows that sins of various types will occur in the world, and some of those sins are very emotionally unsettling. For example, women drowning their unwanted children or suffering permanent harm from a back-alley abortionist is abhorrent, so some feel they are gaining favor with God by making abortion safe and legal {Jesus said, "*You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.*" Matthew 23:27}.
- b. A favorite ploy is to convert morally bad behavior into an alternative lifestyle {"*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.*" Isaiah 5:20}. By redefining good and evil, many social reformers feel that they are carrying out God's will by helping those who are frowned upon by society.
- c. Another ploy is to redefine certain temptations to sin as a mental or emotional issue that should generate sympathy rather than repentance. By shielding people from shame, they feel they are practicing the love that God demands of all of us {*The LORD said, "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.*" Jeremiah 6:14}.

B. Churchly Righteousness

1. Social Christianity

- a. Social Christians are faithful church members. They are careful to do what the Law of God asks, but they do it out of an obligation, not out of love {Jesus replied, “ ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” Matthew 19:18–20}.
- b. Social Christians want to hear a message in church that will not challenge their image of themselves. It can include strong law or weak law, as long as it doesn’t disturb their lives {Jesus said, “...There were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.” All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.” Luke 4:27–28}.
- c. Social Christians want to be rewarded based on *ex opere operato* {The LORD said, “Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.” Isaiah 1:13}.

2. Hypocrisy

- a. Some people hide their sinful lives under what appears to be a very pious life in the church {Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” Mark 12:38–40}.
- b. Some people hide their lack of faith from themselves {Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ” Matthew 7:21–23}.
3. Heresy – The saddest form of bad good works is the minister who preaches false doctrine because it pleases his hearers and builds his reputation, thereby destroying the souls of his members {“For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” 2 Timothy 4:3}.

XVIII. Good Good Works

A. Christ and Us

1. Christ **for** us

- a. For anyone to be saved, a perfect keeping of God’s Law has to be credited to him or her. Jesus lived such a perfect life **for** us {“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Hebrews 4:15}.
- b. To be justified before God, the guilt of all our sins has to be atoned for by a blood sacrifice of sufficient merit to satisfy God’s justice. Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection did this **for** us {“He [Jesus] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” 2 Corinthians 5:15 / “Who [Jesus] was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” Romans 4:25}.

- c. To be saved an individual must know and believe the message of Christ's salvation. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit **for** our conversion {Jesus said, "*When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.*" John 15:26}.

2. Christ **in** us
 - a. When we are converted to faith through the work of the Holy Spirit, our old self must die and a new self must be born **in** us in whom Christ lives {"*Do not lie to each other; since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*" Colossians 3:9-10}.
 - b. This presence of Christ **in** us is something different than His presence in all things. Nor is it something which only happens to us at our conversion and/or baptism, but something which will remain in us as long as we believe the saving message {Jesus said, "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" Matthew 28:20}.
 - c. Because Christ is **in** us, He will change our lives in response to the great love which He showed us in redeeming and converting us {"*Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.*" Romans 13:13-14}.
3. Christ **through** us
 - a. Christ also wants to work **through** us to show forth the glory of the marvelous deeds of His Father to the whole world. Therefore, we will want our actions to reflect His work **for** and **in** us {Jesus said, "*In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*" Matthew 5:16}.
 - b. Because the Gospel is meant for the whole world, not just for us who currently believe, Christ wants to work **through** us to reach those who have so far not heard about His salvation {"*Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'*" John 20:21}.

B. Us and Good Works

1. The anatomy of a good good work
 - a. Works that are considered good and acceptable to God can only be done by a believer in Christ {"*Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*" Hebrews 11:6} No work done by a sinful human being can ever be perfect before God, but He looks at the good works of believers through the prism of Jesus' blood.
 - b. To be a good good work a work must be inherently good in God's eyes, not something that we have defined as good in human terms {"*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.*" Isaiah 5:20}.
 - c. Two people can do the same work, but for one it is a bad good work and for the other it is a good good work. It all depends on whether the work is motivated by self-interest or by our love for Christ {Jesus quoted the Pharisee, "*I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get*" Luke 18:12. Despite this, Jesus said that his works were not good works before God.}.

2. The venue of good works

- a. Good works should be done on behalf of any of the people in this world, including personal enemies and enemies of God {"*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.*" 1 Thessalonians 5:15}. [Golden Rule applies.]
- b. Good works should be especially done to help fellow believers both physically and spiritually {"*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*" Galatians 6:10}. [Platinum Rule applies.]
- c. Works are good only if they are done to the glory of God, no matter how insignificant the works might seem {"*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*" 1 Corinthians 10:31}.

3. Attitude concerning good works

- a. Because all we have comes from the LORD, we should never boast about anything we do or have {"*Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*" Galatians 5:26} / {"*Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.*" Isaiah 5:21}.
- b. We should be thankful for every opportunity that the LORD grants us to serve Him {"*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*" Colossians 3:17}. It is a privilege to serve Him.
- c. We are the children of the Almighty and All-merciful God. We were elected in eternity and redeemed at great expense to our Heavenly Father. We should therefore serve boldly as heirs of the kingdom, knowing that in the end the heavenly kingdom is ours {"*Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.*" 1 John 3:18-19}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

10. Contentment & Idolatrous Love for the World

XIX. The Narrow Lutheran Middle - Contentment

A. Being satisfied with God's gifts

1. Wealth and status
 - a. Wealth can be defined as anything of value to us that enhances our lives. Being wealthy is not a sin because wealth is a blessing from God {"*Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.*"} Genesis 13:2}.
 - b. We need some degree of wealth to survive in the world, but how much? Perhaps we can judge by considering the extremes {Agur son of Jakeh wrote, "*Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.*"} Proverbs 30:8a-9}.
 - c. We become rich as soon as we can buy whatever we want. We become richer sooner if we want little. We are rich when we can be content with less {"*But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*"} 1 Timothy 6:6-8}.
2. Physical blessings
 - a. A body healthy enough to serve God {"*He [the LORD] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*"} 2 Corinthians 12:9}.
 - b. Sufficient good things to meet our daily needs {"*All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.*"} Psalm 104:27-28}.
3. Spiritual blessings
 - a. The forgiveness of sins {"*'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.'*"} Isaiah 1:18}.
 - b. The opportunity to serve {"*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'*"} Isaiah 6:8}.

B. Trusting that God is in control

1. Of our personal life
 - a. Whenever {David wrote, "*It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights.*"} Psalm 18:32-33}.
 - b. In times of trouble {David wrote, "*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*"} Psalm 23:4}.
2. Of our environment
 - a. Our physical world {The sons of Korah wrote, "*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear; though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.*"} Psalm 46:1-2}.

b. Our human environment {Jesus said, “*When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.*” Luke 21:9}.

XX. The Ditch of Idolatrous Love the World

A. Greed for Wealth and Fame

1. The love of money
 - a. In a worldly sense, the person who has money has everything. The rich person can address almost every problem by offering others money to fix or eliminate that problem. Therefore, to have money so as to possess this ability is an easy trap in which to fall. People strive to get more money in the hope that it will make their lives trouble-free {“*Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*” 1 Timothy 6:9–10}.
 - b. The great temptation in seeking wealth is not knowing when to stop. Like the end of the rainbow, the security sought in money is a moving target which can never be reached {Solomon wrote, “*Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.*” Ecclesiastes 5:10}.
 - c. In addition, no matter how much one has, there is always someone with more. Worse yet, that “someone” seems to have acquired that wealth by dishonest means. Where is the justice for relative virtue? {Asaph wrote, “*For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked....This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.*” Psalm 73:3–12}.
 - d. Of course, once one has wealth, one is tempted to appear to use it in the public interest while hoarding as much of it as possible {“*Peter asked her, ‘Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that is the price.’*” Acts 5:8}.
 - e. Human wealth will be of no help when we are called to judgment before the throne of God. Like people who build beautiful houses which are swept away by a flood, so will our wealth be swept away when we are called before God. {Solomon wrote, “*Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.*” Proverbs 11:4}.
2. Fame
 - a. Individuals like to have their charitable deeds recognized. They use what should be an act of humbly giving a portion of what God has given them to promote themselves, not God {Jesus said, “*So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others.*” Matthew 6:2a}.
 - b. Others want to gain renown from their military, technical or business abilities which they proudly display to all {“*Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.*” Genesis 11:4}.
3. Power
 - a. Some seek power to inflate their egos by gaining power over others or at least the trappings of power {“*In the course of time, Absalom provided himself with a chariot and horses and with fifty men to run ahead of him.*” 2 Samuel 15:1}.

- b. But the power of even the greatest soon fades away. Even the monuments to that power become comical with the passage of time (Percy Shelley wrote, “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert....’My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’ Nothing besides remains.”)
- 4. The good life
 - a. In contrast to the person who can never get enough, there are the self-satisfied rich people who turns their backs on the rest of the world once they have accumulated their wealth {Jesus tells of a rich man, “*Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’*” Luke 12:18–19}.
 - b. Even worse are those believe that everything that they have has come from their own efforts and not the blessings of the LORD “*When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*” Deuteronomy 8:12–14}.

B. The Waste of Resources

- 1. Money
 - a. Money leads to the temptation to believe that one can do anything. One then rushes ahead relying on the idea that the money will never run out, only to be shocked when it does {Jesus said of a tower-builder, “*If you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you.*” Luke 14:29a}.
 - b. Even in a worldly sense, we do not get to benefit from all the wealth we have accumulated. Whatever is left when we die will not help us, and we may simply end up leaving it to fools who waste it on selfish pursuits {Solomon wrote, “*I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish?*” Ecclesiastes 2:18–19a}.
- 2. Time
 - a. Everyone striving for success knows that it requires a lot of hours of work to break the old patterns of the past and create the new framework which will permit personal, profession and even common-welfare gains. When one begins to believe that such efforts on our part are necessary for the LORD to take care of us, then we have deluded ourselves {Solomon wrote, “*In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.*” Psalm 127:2}.
 - b. The time spent on worldly endeavors, whether for business or for pleasure, is time taken away from the work of the Great Commission. Our time is limited and the harvest awaiting our efforts is great {Jesus said, “*As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.*” John 9:4}.

3. Spiritual life

- a. The entitlement culture causes people to be self-centered and to expect others to support them. This does not lead to more time spent on the LORD's work, however, but endangers their souls with idle pursuits {"*For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.*"} 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12}.
- b. Others take care of themselves to such a great extent that they ignore their duty to help their families. They cannot be bothered because they have become self-centered {"*Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*"} 1 Timothy 5:8}.
- c. Anything in the world around us can turn our attention away from the LORD. Satan is working continuously to find something through which we can be lured from our faith. Friends, family, business, money, lust, fame, hobbies or secret longings can be tapped by the devils to lead us to damnation {"*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*"} 1 John 2:15-17}.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

11. Ungrateful Contempt & The Ministry

XXI. The Ditch of Ungrateful Contempt for the World

A. The evil in the world

1. The gross sin
 - a. The world abounds in sin. We should not use this as an excuse to withdraw from the world because God will judge sinners at the proper time {"*Do not fret because of evildoers or be envious of the wicked, for the evildoer has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.*" Proverbs 24:19–20}.
 - b. Moreover, we should not keep hoping that things will get better. In fact, sin will increase, and people will become bolder at doing wicked things {"*Evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it.*" 2 Timothy 3:13–14}.
2. The helplessness
 - a. Some of the people in the world in general and in our own lives are horrible. We have to endure this situation, and there is nothing we can do about them {Jesus told the parable of vineyard owner, "*The husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another; and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.*" Matthew 21:35–36}.
 - b. Even when we try to proclaim God's word to this sinful generation, they do not listen, and they despise us for bringing the message of salvation to them {"*The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.*" Ezekiel 2:4–5}.
3. The unfairness
 - a. The fact that many evil and dishonest people prosper tempts us to hate the world and long to put it right by any means necessary. This problem has always troubled believers {*Yet I would speak with you [the LORD] about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?*" Jeremiah 12:1}.
 - b. There is nothing to show for our service to the LORD in this life. Even at the end of life, there is no final earthly blessing for the righteous versus the wicked. {Solomon wrote, "*For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die!*" Ecclesiastes 2:16}.

B. The evil in the self

1. The battle with sin
 - a. Knowing what things are sinful is important in understanding how deeply sin affects us. Nevertheless, we should not expect sin will go away just because we can identify it {"*For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.*" Romans 7:18–19}.

- b. We always lose the battle against sin in one way or another. This, however, is not an excuse to give up, but to seek forgiveness from the LORD and to continue the struggle {David wrote, “*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*” Psalm 51:3–4}.
- 2. Paralyzing self-pity
 - a. Faced with temptation that won’t quit, we would like to run and hide from God’s presence like Adam and Eve. It didn’t work for them , and it won’t work for us {David wrote, “*If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*” Psalm 139:11–12}.
 - b. Nor can we just collapse in a heap and expect pity {Solomon wrote, “*Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.*” Proverbs 10:4}. (Remember Elijah at Mount Horeb.)

XXII. Universal Priesthood and the Office of the Ministry

A. Universal priesthood

- 1. The role of the Levitical priest
 - a. The primary role of the priest was to offer sacrifices (animal and food) for the sins of the himself and his people {The LORD said, “*Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering for the generations to come.*” Exodus 30:10a}.
 - b. Because priests were sanctified through their sacrifices, they were in a position to intercede with the LORD on behalf of their people {Numbers 14:13-19}.
 - c. At the times of festivals and battles, they were to blow the trumpets to proclaim the glory of the LORD {The LORD said, “*The sons of Aaron, the priests, are to blow the trumpets. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you and the generations to come.*” Numbers 10:8}.
- 2. How Christians are priests
 - a. Christians no longer have to offer sacrifices for their sins because Christ’s sacrifice was all-atonement. Instead they offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving {“*Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.*” Hebrews 13:15}.
 - b. Being justified before the LORD, Christians have direct access to the throne of God and should pray for themselves and for others {“*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.*” Ephesians 6:18}.
 - c. In this world, the Gospel is always necessary, so Christians should proclaim it whenever they have opportunity {“*Jesus said, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.’ ” Mark 16:15 / “Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ ” Luke 9:60}.*

B. The office of the ministry

1. Established by Jesus
 - a. Jesus began the office of the ministry by training ministers and sending them out to proclaim His saving message. They are His ambassadors to the world {Jesus said, *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* Matthew 28:19–20a}.
 - b. Through His guidance of the affairs of men, Jesus provides those whom the church needs to minister to it {“*So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.*” Ephesians 4:11}.
 - c. Those in the office of the ministry are directly responsible to God for their actions or inactions {The LORD said, *“When I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.”* Ezekiel 3:18}.
2. The call to serve
 - a. A ministry is established by a call to serve. When that call comes directly from Jesus, we say that it is a “direct call,” as in the case of Paul {Jesus said, “ *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,*” he replied. *‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’*” Acts 9:5b–6}.
 - b. Those calls into the ministry, however, which are made by people who want to have someone serve in a particular capacity related to the proclamation of the Gospel, are called “indirect calls.” These calls are as valid as calls made directly by God {Peter said, *“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us...he must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”* Acts 1:21–22}.
 - c. A call is defined by a specific set of duties that the called person is to perform and where they are to work {Paul said, *“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’*” Acts 22:21}. Someone trying to work outside the area of their call cannot use their call as justification for their activities.
3. Is there a “mark” that makes someone a minister?
 - a. The Roman Catholic Church has long claimed that the sacrament of Holy Orders (ordination) places an indelible mark on men who are then able to perform the sacraments of the church.
 - b. The Lutheran Church denies ordination creates such a mark, but it effectively treats theological training that involves learning to read Biblical Hebrew and Greek to be such a mark.

C. Ministry in the WELS

1. The WELS was originally organized as a ministerium, and things haven’t changed much. In a ministerium, all pastors are equal in rank and are generalists. A separate teaching ministry exists for educating children and adolescents, and some men are members of both. It is rare for someone to hold a formal permanent call for church work among adults in America that does not involve general pastoral responsibility.

2. All WELS ministers are trained in the same curriculum at the seminary. There is no separate training for evangelists, deacons, theologians or missionaries.
3. The pastors of the WELS are highly interrelated, with at least 85% of the seminary graduates being members of “ministerial families.”

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

12. Election & The Worship Wars

XXIII. Election and the Great Commission

A. Election

1. God's plan
 - a. God's election of those who would be saved took place before (in God's sense of time) He created the world {"*He [God the Father] chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*" Ephesians 1:4}.
 - b. The election of people to salvation took place "through Christ" {"*In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*" Ephesians 1:5-6}.
 - c. God's election was independent of anything we have done to merit it {"*In order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls.*" Romans 9:11b-12a}.
 - d. God established a complete plan for the salvation of each elected individual {"*In him [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*" Ephesians 1:11-12}.
2. God's actions
 - a. God acted on His election plans by redeeming us through Jesus' sacrifice {"*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.*" Ephesians 1:7-8a}.
 - b. God next announced His plan of salvation through His messengers {"*With all wisdom and understanding, he [God the Father] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*" Ephesians 1:8b-10}.
 - c. God then converted those who had been elected to faith in His Son {"*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.*" Ephesians 1:13-14}.
 - d. God completes His plan of election by preserving the elect in their faith {"*May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*" 1 Thessalonians 5:23b-24}.

B. The Great Commission

1. Why we do it
 - a. Because all have sinned, all need to know about God's justification of all mankind through Jesus Christ {"*There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Romans 3:22b-23}.
 - b. They can only learn about God's plan if the message is brought to them {"*How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?*" Romans 10:14b-15a}.

- c. We therefore follow Christ's command to spread the Good News to all people {"*Jesus said, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.'* " Mark 16:15}.
- 2. What our commission implies
 - a. We have been commissioned to preach to all, not judging whether we think them worthy {"*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews....*" 1 Corinthians 9:19–23}.
 - b. We are to spread the message under all conditions, in good times and bad {"*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*" 2 Timothy 4:2}.
 - c. We are to spread it even in the face of persecution {Jesus said, "*They will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me.*" Luke 21:12b–13}.
 - d. We are to do it even when it is clear that most people will not listen {The LORD said, "*And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.*" Ezekiel 2:5}.
 - e. We trust the LORD of the harvest to create fruit even when our work seems to be a failure {"*The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*" Acts 2:47}.

XXIV. The Worship Wars

A. God & public worship

- 1. Order of service
 - a. The LORD's directives for the worship life of the Israelites in the Old Testament involved not only the orders of service, but also when and where services were to be held and what was to be offered at each service. The details are given in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.
 - b. No order of service has been given for the Christian church in the New Testament; consequently, the form of worship is free to be chosen by the members of church as long as things are done in an orderly manner to promote understanding {"*Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.*" 1 Corinthians 14:40}. The church liturgy is therefore an adiaphoron.
- 2. General elements of worship
 - a. Jesus' ministry was a teaching and preaching ministry. To be saved people must understand the message of the Gospel, so it is necessarily of first importance to clearly proclaim this message {Jesus said, "*Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.*" John 8:47 / Luke wrote, "*Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*" Acts 17:11}.
 - b. The Gospel message causes sinners to repent of their sins. While this does not have to be done publicly, public confession reminds everyone of the importance of repentance in the life of the Christian {"*From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" Matthew 4:17}.
 - c. Jesus requires that we confess Him publicly, so it is reasonable to do so in the worship service {Jesus said, "*Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.*" Matthew 10:32}.

- d. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He started the prayer with “our Father.” Joint prayer is a bond of support for each other’s needs among the members of the church {“*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” Acts 2:42}.
- e. Because of all the LORD has done for us, we should give Him praise on all occasions, including public worship {“*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” 1 Peter 2:9}.
- f. Although the sacraments can be used in private, the public celebration of them creates a bond of fellowship not only with Christ, but among the members of the congregation {“*In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*” 1 Corinthians 11:25–26}.

B. People & public worship

- 1. History
 - a. The order of worship, i.e., the liturgy, has been in constant flux since the beginning of the Christian church. It was developed to meet the needs of the laity and to help them understand the message being preached, but during much of history it has been the domain of those interested in ceremony.
 - b. In the Roman Catholic Church, the liturgy remained in the Latin language long after most people no longer spoke Latin. It was used merely to give the laity a way to feel holy by the principle of *ex opere operato*.
 - c. In the 16th century, the Lutheran reformers removed incorrect doctrine from the liturgy, translated it into the language of the people, added hymns and placed the emphasis on the sermon.
 - d. Because the elements of the various liturgies are heavily laden with traditions, revisions to the liturgies have not kept pace with the needs of the church.
- 2. Key questions about the liturgy
 - a. Various pericopes have been developed to cover the “whole counsel of God’s word.” However, do pericopes cause pastors to fail to preach to the real problems of their congregations?
 - b. Luther introduced congregational hymns so that people would learn them by memory and use them to “sing their way into heaven.” Do the numerous and frequently changing hymns in hymnals today still preserve this purpose?
 - c. Over the years various “transitions” for the movement of ministers within the chancel, as well as prayers and readings (propers), were included in the various liturgies. Do these make any sense to most of the modern worshippers?
 - d. The congregation participates in most liturgies to a greater or lesser extent with spoken or sung responses, but sometimes much of the service is performed by musicians and cantors. How does this affect the laity’s worship?

- e. Does the laity understand what is happening in all the parts of the various liturgies? How much time is worth spending to teach them about these vis-a-vis giving instruction in Christian doctrine?

The Narrow Lutheran Middle

13. The Final Stretch

XXV. Eyes on the Prize, Feet on the Road

A. Heaven is in our future

1. What will heaven be like?
 - a. The greatest thing about heaven will be the presence of God. Finally, we will see our LORD and be overcome by His majesty. We cannot imagine the sight {"*I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.* Revelation 21:22-25}.
 - b. Having lived all our lives in this *Träental*, it is impossible for us to understand what it is like to not have to be concerned about anything {"*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'* Revelation 7:16-17}.
 - c. When one has longed for and worked hard for something for a long time, the obtaining of that something creates a joy which is beyond explaining {"*You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.*" Isaiah 9:3}.
 - d. We know that we will praise the LORD in heaven {"*Then a voice came from the throne, saying: 'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both great and small!'*" Revelation 19:5}. What else we will do will amaze and delight us, but the LORD is saving it as a surprise for us. We can only speculate.
2. Heaven's growing presence
 - a. As our lives pass, we need more and more to turn our attention to the life we will live in God's eternal kingdom. We need to become "heavenly minded" in our behavior {"*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.*" Philippians 2:3-5}.
 - b. We need to prevent our earthly affairs from being so entwined that we think that only we can manage them and therefore refuse to face the reality of our coming death {"*The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him [Hezekiah] and said, 'This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.'*" Isaiah 38:1}.
 - c. We need to settle grievances so that we do not leave stumbling blocks for others when we are called from this world {Jesus said, "*If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*" Matthew 5:23-24}.

B. There is work in our present

1. The temptation to loaf
 - a. We need to make sure we do not become “so heavenly minded, that we are of no earthly use.” The outward things of the church have some importance, but they should not prevent us from living a Christian life anchored in God’s word {Jesus said, “*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.* Luke 10:30–31}.
 - b. As we age, we finally understand that we cannot permanently solve the problems of this sinful world. We are tempted to put our feet up and declared it doesn’t matter what we do, so why should we do more than we absolutely have to {“*All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.* Ecclesiastes 1:8–9}.
2. The temptation to despair
 - a. When all our efforts are not enough, we must resist the temptation to throw up our hands and withdraw ourselves into a shell {“*And the word of the LORD came to him: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’* 1 Kings 19:9–10}.
 - b. When the LORD allows suffering to come over us which prevents us from doing His work and serving others in the way we would like, we need to remember that we and all things are still being guided by His divine providence {“*My skin grows black and peels; my body burns with fever. My lyre is tuned to mourning, and my pipe to the sound of wailing.* Job 30:30–31}.

XXVI. Final Thoughts

A. Staying on the road

1. We cannot overestimate our need to study the Scriptures if we are to remain on the narrow road to salvation {“*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.* Psalm 119:105}.
2. We must do more than just read the Bible. We must struggle to gain a proper understanding of all it has to reveal to us {“*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.* Philippians 2:12–13}.

B. Staying on task

1. As age saps our strength and abilities, we must not allow ourselves to grow weary of the constant and recurring problems of life. The LORD will decide when we have finished the work that He has assigned to us {“*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* Galatians 6:9}.

2. In a distance race, the tired runner tries to muster a finishing kick, a final burst of speed to reach the finish line. We need to put ourselves into this position to produce that final burst {“*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*” 2 Timothy 4:7–8}.