



Middle of the Road: Is That a Bad Thing? by Pastor Glenn Huebel

The term, “middle of the road,” is used today primarily in a pejorative sense, and sometimes justly so. But is middle of the road always a wrong place to be? Many people think so, but that sometimes places independent and objective thinkers in an unfair position. This happens both in the world and in the life of the Church – and always has. In this article I want to show first when and why “middle of the road” can be a very wrong place to be or to seek to be. Secondly, I want to show when and why very courageous and right-minded people have been found exactly there. Finally, I want to summarize it all by focusing on the Lutheran way to find out where you should stand and why.

For many, if not most, “middle of the road” is a synonym for self seeking, cowardly, spineless, double-minded people. And humanity has produced a large contingent of such self-centered wimpy people who seem to have no convictions beyond self-promotion or self preservation. In fact, they seem most willing to conform their stated “convictions” to whatever wind is blowing at the present. They are rightly accused of always having their finger to the wind. Those who stand in the middle of the road BECAUSE they love the praise of men and the honor of the world are rightly despised by Christians. The great humanist scholar, Erasmus, a contemporary of Luther, was one of these people. This brilliant man, whose work of rediscovering the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures immensely aided Luther’s translation, was held in honor by the Roman Catholic elite even though he had many of the same concerns as Luther



himself. Erasmus did NOT agree with the Romanists on many of the issues presented by Luther, but he did not take a stand on these issues or protest as Luther did. Nor did he publicly defend Luther. He stayed comfortably in the middle, “above the fray” as they say. He even chided Luther for speaking with such conviction and causing division in the Church. This led Luther to furiously denounce his cowardly “love” as a denial of the Gospel itself. Luther had absolutely no patience with Christians who had no convictions or were afraid to stand upon them. We can surely understand why. But we see the same reaction in Jesus, who utterly despises those who are “middle of roaders” in the sense here described:

“Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth (Rev 3:16).” Jesus did not approve of “reeds blowing in the wind” but sought those who would confess Him before men (Matt 10:32). Elijah the prophet set this course, saying to Israel, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, the follow him.” The writer then goes on to say, “And the people did not answer him a word.” OF COURSE, THEY DIDN’T!

With this condemnation ringing in our ears, what could I possibly say to endorse the middle of the road position? Well, I don’t intend to endorse the position itself as intrinsically right. In fact, I believe that those who intentionally seek the middle of the road in the human spectrum of opinion as the wise and correct position in all things are dangerously deluded. What I want to show is that the middle of the road is exactly where we find many faithful confessors, both in the world and in the church. We don’t usually recognize this because we don’t live in their environment, nor even know what they had to deal with. Do we recognize, for example, that there was a strong division in Jesus’ culture between strong and strident conservatives and loopy liberals? These political factions were every bit as fierce and hateful as the left-wing and right-wing are in American politics today. Jesus

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That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. —John 20:31

was utterly rejected by both parties because He did not fit into either camp theologically, morally, or socially. The Pharisees and Sadducees appear as a united coalition in the Gospels only because they shared a hatred for Jesus, but they were by no means united. The Pharisees were the “ultra-right-wing” of the day. They are the ones who held that the Scriptures were God’s Word and who insisted upon the 10 commandments and hundreds of other laws created in their councils to defend the commandments. They believed in the reality of angels and of the resurrection. The Sadducees accepted only the authority of the Books of Moses and rejected the doctrine of angels and resurrection as well as all the traditions created by the Pharisees. Though Jesus may have been considered a “conservative” by the Sadducees, he was rejected by the Pharisees as a despiser of the traditions. Though Jesus would have been considered a “liberal” by the Pharisees He was despised by the Sadducees as a false teacher and troubler of Israel. In this important political sense Jesus was a “middle of the roader” despised by both camps. The same may be said concerning the political party of the zealots, who advocated outright rebellion against Rome, and the elite leaders of Israel (like Caiaphas) who sought accommodation with Rome as the only way to preserve their power. Jesus was in neither camp. He despised any attempt to foster His kingdom with the sword and was welcomed by a host of “tax collectors” (such as Zaccheaus), yet was crucified under the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. On a political level Abraham Lincoln was a middle of the roader in many important ways, and was likewise castigated by both sides, even by many who voted for him. Known today as the “Great Emancipator,” the “radical abolitionists” of his day would laugh at the thought. When he enter the presidential office they were very disappointed that he did not use his power to simply set the slaves free and enforce it with military might. Lincoln refused to use his power that way. His singular

goal was preservation of the union. He knew that he did not have Constitutional authority to free the slaves. There should never be a question about Lincoln’s moral resolve. Lincoln confessed slavery to be morally repugnant early in his political journey and never wavered from that conviction. In fact, he knew that preventing the expansion of slavery would, in time, bring about its abolition, and for that he worked feverishly. Slave owners, on the other hand, hated Lincoln as a threat to their way of life. They were afraid that he would take power and use it to force his convictions upon them. Lincoln, however, was sincerely able to distinguish between his moral convictions and his constitutional authority. Nevertheless, he was despised and even hated by both sides as a middle of the roader. These are just a couple of examples to show that “middle of the road” is not intrinsically a bad place to be. Sometimes it takes great courage and conviction to stand in the middle of the road when extremes are violent and blind. We could add Luther to this list of middle of the roaders, but I will reserve him for my final summary section of this article.

Let us focus upon the Lutheran – and Christian – way to find out where you should be standing. First, we need to recognize and keep in mind that truth does not arise from and depend upon the collective wisdom of men. The Bible distinguishes “wisdom from below” and “wisdom from above” (James 3:15-17). The wisdom from below is the collective wisdom of the human race. The wisdom from above is revealed by God through Jesus and presented to us in the sacred writings of Holy Scripture (2 Tim 3:15-16). This truth from above may not find any comfortable place in the spectrum of human opinion, but when it is manifest in a particular issue it may appear ANYWHERE: Right, left, or middle. We do not choose where to stand on the basis of the needle of human opinion. That’s too easy. Then all we would have to do is ask “what is the consensus of the right, or left, or middle, or LCMS, etc on this question?” The first and central

question must always be, “what does God say about this?” When we do this we may sometimes find ourselves placed in strange company, agreeing with people we “expect” to disagree with. Or we may find ourselves in tension with friends we love and trust. That’s OK because we need to keep each other “honest to God.” If the purpose of Scripture includes “rebuke and correction” we should expect that this includes not only outsiders, but especially insiders. Scripture is not the exclusive domain of any political party in State or Church. Enter Martin Luther, the old “liberal” of the 16th century who fomented division and “revolution” in the Church. He was first shocked when the very “custodian of Scripture,” the Roman Catholic Church, wished neither to hear or contemplate the clear word of Scripture to examine any doctrine of the Roman Church. Later in life he discovered that many who supported him and praised him as a reformer went so far in the other direction that he could neither support nor even tolerate their fellowship and refused to add his name to any coalition of churches which departed from the basic doctrine of the Gospel. Luther found himself at odds with Rome on the right and its fire-breathing dragon, the Pope and the radical prophets of the left who believed that Luther’s reformation was too conservative, and that he did not remove himself fully from Rome. Rome on one side, Protestants on the other Poor Luther in the middle, excoriated by both. That’s still where we stand today. Though we seek in our pluralistic society to dialogue in genuine love and to treat one another civilly, we must always beware of the temptation and seduction of being drawn into either camp to reduce the tensions. Much of Lutheranism is, in fact, being drawn to one side or the other. It is terribly uncomfortable to be in the middle of the road, alone with our Scriptures..... but if that’s where God has placed us, we say “Here we stand.”

AMEN.

10 Christian Resolutions for 2018

by Pastor Tom Chryst

*With the Lord begin your task;
Jesus will direct it.
For His aid and counsel ask;
Jesus will perfect it.
Ev'ry morn with Jesus rise,
And when day is ended,
In His name then close your eyes;
Be to Him commended.*

*"With the Lord Begin Your Task",
Lutheran Service Book #869*

A happy and blessed 2018 to everyone!



Some years ago a local newspaper in my town ran a series of articles titled something like, "Top 10 New Years Resolutions". The New Year seems the natural time to start new, good habits, and put away the old. While many people resolve to quit smoking or lose weight, I thought I'd springboard off of this with some suggestions for you – "10 Christian Resolutions".

But I don't want this to be a new list of commandments, or a law-filled harangue. Many of these you are already doing, and joyfully so! If so, keep up the good work!

Some of these, maybe we could do better. In all things, we do what we ought simply as a response of faith. Christ has done it all for us! To live lives filled with love for God and neighbor is just what we Christians do. So here it is. Take it in the tone of joyful encouragement that I mean:

1. Be Faithful
2. Come to Church
3. Sing! (Especially Dads)
4. Bible Study – AND DONUTS

5. Daily Prayer/Devotions
6. Confess.
7. Invite!
8. Give.
9. Phone a (missing) Friend.
10. Be Faithful.

1. Be Faithful

This is something less a "to do" than a "to be". Being a Christian is first of all, a state of being. It is a passive reception of the gifts of faith that God bestows on us through Christ. We have been called. We are baptized. We receive his forgiveness, life and salvation. Being a Christian is first of all, NOT about what we do, but what Christ has done for us. And so the first resolution is a non-resolution. It's not a work at all. It's simply being faithful. It's recognizing with a thankful heart the blessings that are bestowed on us every day. Your sins are no more! Christ has defeated death for you! You are a child of God! Be faithful.

2. Come to Church

In order that we receive this faith, this good news of salvation in the Gospel, the Lord has given us pastors and congregations. We are blessed to hear the word with our fellow Christians, our church family. We are blessed to join them at the altar and feast on the Holy Supper of Christ. We join together as one body, and a local expression of that One Body the church in this place. But to be a part of it means to show up! Most of us could do better in our weekly church attendance. Busy life with all its distractions tries hard to keep us from Christ. What can you do to be in God's house, with his people, more often this year?

3. Sing! (Especially Dads)

Most of us do, and with joy! And I don't mean (only) join the choir (but I'm sure Vicki wouldn't mind a few more voices). One scholar who studies church demographics over the generations recently made this observation: The best predictor of a child's continued participation in church as adult is if his or her father sings in church! Dads, what an influence you have on your family. What better example to show than to

not only come, but to participate in the life of the church with joy?

4. Bible Study – AND DONUTS

Apart from the church service itself, Sunday Bible Study is one of the best things we have going here at Messiah, and yet only about half of us make use of it! Someday I might address some of the objections and/or excuses people have about attending. But let me say these few things here. One, you are never too old to learn, nor have you ever learned it all. Two, don't be intimidated – no one will put you on the spot. And three, we can't cover everything we want to in the sermons (which aren't really the same thing as a Bible Study anyway). So come and learn and grow with us. Oh, AND WE HAVE DONUTS!

5. Daily Prayer/Devotions

Being a Christian isn't just for Sundays, though. Why not feed your faith with a time of daily prayer and meditation, or even a formal practice of devotions? It doesn't need to be complicated. If you need a resource, we have plenty. Many use "Portals of Prayer" booklets. Others use the app "Pray Now!" based on the book, "Treasury of Daily Prayer". Still others get daily devotions via email or social media. Need a suggestion? Ask a pastor.

6. Confess

Most of us born-n-bred Lutherans are used to confessing our sins on Sundays as the "first order of business" in the liturgy. It's a strong confession that covers all the bases - "thought, word and deed" sins "done, and left undone", we haven't loved God or neighbor as we should. But sometimes a sin bothers your conscience in a particular way. Sometimes the corporate absolution given in church seems too generic. When sin and guilt plague you in this way, consider making an appointment for private confession with the pastor. This practice, which has for many years fallen into disuse, can be an extremely comforting way to

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Sunday School & Adult Bible Class: 9:30 a.m.

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“unload” that sin or those sins that keep you up at night. If you're curious about it – the exact format is printed in the hymnal on page 292. The point of Individual Confession and Absolution is not to be Roman Catholic and give you penance to work off your sins – but rather for the Pastor to speak the comfort of the Gospel and to apply Christ's forgiveness to you in a very personal way.

7. Invite!

Traditional churches like ours often get accused (sometimes rightly) of a laziness when it comes to outreach. Because we don't pander or use the latest fads to get people in the door, it can be harder for us to even get

Resolutions, cont.

people to visit, let alone see them join our congregation. While we do some great things toward community outreach, we can always do more. But one of the best ways we can all help in the effort is to simply invite people we know to church. Friends, co-workers, neighbors, relatives.... Observers of church often note that for most people, it's the personal connection that brings someone to church for the first time and keeps them there. And I always say, sharing your church is like sharing your favorite recipe or some other best-kept secret. Word of mouth really is the best advertisement, even when (and maybe especially when?) it comes to your faith and your church home. So, invite! Invite! Invite!

8. Give.

Many of us give generously. Many of us could give more. Your offering is, of course, between you and the Lord. But a New Year is the perfect time to re-evaluate your level of support to the church. Even an increase of a few percent is typical in the world of business and salaries. What about your Father's business? Has God blessed you richly this past year? Then consider increasing your joyful, first-fruits giving to support the work of His kingdom in this place.

9. Phone a (missing) friend.

Have you ever come to church and noticed that someone you usually

see isn't there? Wondered if they were sick, or out of town? Why not give them a call? It's amazing how far a personal touch like this can go toward encouraging your fellow believer and letting them know the church cares for them. And it also means a lot more than when it comes from the pastor. Even if the person is fine, it's always nice to know when you are missed. And sometimes it takes a special effort like this to find out when someone is sick or something is wrong. So let your pastors know if this is the case, too!

10. Be Faithful.

Yes, I know I started the list this way, but it bears repeating. None of these things on a “to-do” list will merit salvation, earn God's favor, or probably even impress even your fellow man. Faith is what counts, first and foremost. Your salvation is sure, the work is already done. These words of encouragement, however, are to put your faith in practice and do the good works God has prepared in advance for you to do (Ephesians 2:10). We won't be keeping score or looking over your shoulder. We know that all of us fail and could do better. But that's why we're here, anyway, isn't it? To receive from God what we all need more than anything – the forgiveness that comes only through Christ crucified and risen. So live it in 2018 and always, Christians!



MLCA IS NOW ENROLLING FOR 2018/19!



The mission of MLCA is to mold and shape the minds and spirits of all students to become what God has created them in Christ to be.