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RADICAL LUTHERANISM:

ANOTHER LOOK

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AELC	Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches
ALC	American Lutheran Church
CLU	Committee on Lutheran Unity
CNLC	Committee for a New Lutheran Church
CRLC	Commission for the Renewal of the Lutheran Church
ELCA	Evangelical Church in America
LCA	The Lutheran Church in America
LCMS	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
WELS	Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

ABSTRACT

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Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde proposed a radical Lutheran identity for the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1987. Integral to the concept of radical Lutheranism is the inherent obligation for the church to be radically different from other mainline Protestant churches, and to be an active agent for social justice within American culture. This analysis takes a fresh look at Forde's recommendations in today's context. It suggests that the time is ripe for change in our current culture, that the ELCA is primed for change more than it was three decades after its formation, and that it can become a formidable change agent for our time as a role model for all mainline Protestant churches in America. Based on an understanding of key Lutheran doctrine, Forde outlined a theological approach to social justice that is even more relevant now than it was when he articulated his vision for a unique Lutheran church identity. Forde's historically conservative approach to Lutheran social action is a contemporary guideline on how the ELCA can lead change efforts in our current environment.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1987, Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde (1927-2005) first postulated a theological Lutheran identity for what would be established as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). At the time, Forde recognized that the American Lutheran Church was experiencing an identity crisis as it evolved from a church functioning as a culturally based tradition to something different and, hopefully, more relevant for the emerging American culture. Building on his previous theological work, we will see that Forde suggested a radical Lutheranism to be preached from the pulpits and embedded in the DNA of the new church body. This idea of preaching or proclaiming is critical for Forde because it is the operative call to action for Lutherans to do God's will. He was adamant that a preacher's command to do God's work was essential to proclamation. While the Word reveals God, the proclamation further calls the church to action. Forde's idea of radical Lutheranism included the doctrines that Christians are fully justified, proclaimed a new people, and freed from personal free will to do the work of the divine. It was radical because it differentiated from other Protestant traditions and manifested a pure freedom to do God's work. This new church should be focused on the radical gospel of Jesus Christ and firmly established on the concept of sola fide (justification by faith alone.)

Forde's postulation implied that the American Lutheran church was in danger of becoming a sorry copy of a growing trend of bland, American Protestant churches with a watered-down theology more influenced by secular society than biblical teachings. He urged the new church body to adopt a more radical approach that would distinguish it from secularized American Protestantism. In Forde's point of view, the Lutheran church

had a unique opportunity to be different, impactful, and authentic to the roots articulated by Martin Luther (and even further back to St. Paul's description of a radical Christian religious approach mimicking the life and times of Jesus Christ.)

This analysis will explore the robust dimensions of radical Lutheranism and make a case for why the ELCA should continue to adopt radical Lutheranism today. Ironically, this topic is as relevant today as when Forde made his recommendations in 1987. At that time, a Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC) was working on establishing the ELCA, including its structure, theological underpinnings, and role and position in American culture. Today, the ELCA finds itself at a crossroads again and has established a Commission for the Renewal of the Lutheran Church (CRLC) with the expressed purpose to "reconsider the statements of purpose for each of the expressions of this church, the principles of its organizational structure, and all matters pertaining thereunto, being particularly attentive to our shared commitment to dismantle racism."[1] This analysis finds below that the ELCA missed an earlier opportunity to exhibit behaviors as radical Lutherans but always has another chance to steer a course forward, as articulated by Forde. Specifically, the ELCA missed the opportunity to differentiate itself from other American mainline Protestant traditions and be a more active proponent for social justice issues; instead, it settled on middle-of-the-road positioning that provided lip service to acting as a Christian change agent but did not provide any substantial methods to do so.

The intervening three decades since the establishment of the ELCA have seen tremendous changes in American churches and society. Additionally, several scholars

[1] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed November 7, 2023, https://www.elca.org/.

have examined Forde's impact on the initial establishment of the ELCA and the ongoing actions of the Lutheran church's body politic. These scholarly insights prove new framing for the ELCA as it continues to find itself. This analysis will leverage knowledge gained during the intervening decades to highlight those Fordian elements that must be reconsidered today.

Specifically, it is necessary to dive deeply into the theology of "radical Lutheranism." Today, the term generates more questions than it does understanding, much less approval. Radical Lutheran is defined by Forde as the orthopraxy of radical preachers and Lutheran practitioners of the gospel by justification by faith without the deeds of the law. Forde suggested pursuing a religious tradition as articulated by St. Paul in Romans and Galatians[2] when he saw that the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law involves and announces the death of the old being, and the calling forth of the new creature in hope.[3] This analysis will provide a detailed deconstruction of Forde's radical Lutheranism. Still, for now, we will suggest that Radical Lutheranism is daily living into the new being created by faith alone, based on Christ's redemptive resurrection. This definition forces us to be in Christ as we live our daily vocations. It means ignoring or putting to death our old being because we are sanctified by God's grace by way of faith. Forde intentionally forced the "radical" moniker to call attention to the idea of the old self being replaced by the new justified self. His call was to challenge the church to

[2] Marianna Forde, *Chapter 12: Radical Lutheranism, Lutheran Spirituality* (n.p.: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2020), 125, ProjectMUSE.

[3] Gerhard O. Forde, "Lutheran Faith and American Freedom," *Lutheran Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2017): 8, AtlaSerials, Religion Collection.

provide the framework for Lutherans to live into the promise of a radical Christ radically. This promise was to shake up the world order and habituate the doing of God's will here and now - daily and continually. His is a call for the radicalization of religion acting on and in American society.

Additionally, from a theological perspective, radical Lutheranism embodies big theological themes like justification, free will, and election pertaining to justice and social action. This analysis is restricted to these big themes to contain the analysis and avoid describing the complete Fordian systematic theology. Forde was intentionally circumspect about the theological themes incorporated into radical Lutheranism, as will this analysis.

This analysis serves to defend several points. First, radical Lutheranism is a powerful concept to influence social justice issues. Second, today's American culture surely needs agents who can act positively against our increasing divisions and social ills. Third, today, the ELCA is ripe for change and as attested to by the initiation of the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC.) Fourth, a radicalized ELCA will be an effective agent of change that it has heretofore not accomplished. Fifth, a radicalized ELCA can demonstrate to other mainline Protestant American churches how to do church today in ways that are unique, effective, and yet based solely on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Many religious leaders talk about the need for new church reform and renewal. A radicalized Lutheran ELCA could very well be the catalyst for such regeneration.

The structure of the remainder of this analysis starts with a detailed definition of radical Lutheranism. It introduces Gerhard Forde in Chapter 2 as theologian, his role in

the emerging ELCA, some of his theology, and the essential doctrines that underpin a radical Lutheranism concept. Chapter 3 focuses on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, starting with a historical overview, its purpose as a church body, and how it views itself as unique from other mainline Protestant traditions. Chapter 4 examines the ELCA as a change agent in our contemporary society and the potential impact a radicalized Lutheran church could achieve. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the essential findings and recommendations of this analysis.

CHAPTER 2. RADICAL LUTHERANISM ANALYSIS

The phrase radical Lutheranism always seems to get people's attention. The term radical often evokes ideas of subversion and revolution, and in some ways, these are apt notions for how radical Gerhard Forde envisioned Lutheranism in the later 20th century. He intended to promulgate a new idea, one that was unconventionally different from other mainline Protestant traditions of the period. However, in another sense, radical Lutheranism is as old as Christianity itself. As described in this chapter, Forde relies on his understanding of Lutheran doctrine that ties directly to Martin Luther and St. Paul's narratives in the scripture. Forde reintroduces the ancient idea of radical Christianity to a contemporary American culture that was, and continues to be, in a period of significant change. As will be discussed, Forde purposely chose to disclose a time-proven approach to living into a faith tradition as a necessary element of a new church tradition needing a unique identity.

Radical Lutheranism definition

When Forde wrote *Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America* in 1987, he was already an admired, conservative theologian and considered a leader of the radical Lutheran movement. At first blush, "radical" and "conservative" could be construed as opposing positions on the theological continuum. Still, Forde deftly articulates radical Lutheranism as a fresh point of view that adopts conservative principles and positions them in a manner that is at odds with what he saw as the bland, individualistic religion that had come to predominate American church culture. For example, as church leaders were preparing to establish the ELCA, there was "debate over whether the mission of the

church was to lean more toward proclamation or social justice."[4] As shown below, Forde held a unique position in the debate. Another Lutheran theologian, Martin Marty, "identified two leanings, "[r]eformed neo-evangelicalism" on the one hand, and "a kind of evangelical Catholicity" on the other."[5] Forde took a different view and labeled it "decadent pietism,"[6] which suggested that good Christians must get right for themselves and be affirming of all others' lifestyles because God is affirming toward humankind. Old pietism's focus on leading an upright life was anachronistic. A wrathful God no longer exists. Forde's criticism of decadent pietism is also integral to his radical Lutheranism postulation.

Additionally, Forde derives his conservative, theological value from such august figures as Martin Luther and St. Paul. In some respects, radical Lutheranism is a "turning back" to the unfiltered religion of the past. It is a return to "basics" in the sense of living into the Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment. Proclaim the good news while loving God and your neighbor. The idea of a decadent pietism[7] is seen as a corruption of traditional Lutheran pietism that Forde understood to have historically influenced all strains of American Lutheranism and was "manifest in a morally upright life of service." Decadent pietism was his description of the extant situation when God was love, and divine wrathfulness had fallen out of favor. Decadent pietism is "the way

[4] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 124.

[5] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 124.

[6] Gerhard O. Forde, "Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran identity in America," *Lutheran Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1987): 8, AtlaSerials, Religion Collection.

[7] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 7.

of … "affirming"… others in their chosen lifestyles." Such an idea comes across anachronistically today, but at the time, Forde's point was not to lose sight of the Lutheran mindset always to balance law and gospel in the church tradition. Herewith, the term "law" is used in the Lutheran and Reformed framework as adhering to the demands of meeting God's ethical will in contrast to "gospel," which is the promise of forgiveness of sin due to Jesus Christ and the crucifixion/resurrection. For the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, and as utilized by Forde, law (and gospel) is a hermeneutical lens for biblical interpretation, homiletics, and pastoral care. When Forde focuses primarily on the la, he further suggests that the law's goal "is to bring about the end of the sinners' trying to justify themselves before God."[8] He argues for a model where we don't concern ourselves about making ourselves righteous by our work, but rather our works are for God, doing God's will for our neighbor. Forde elaborated by noting that he "wants the 'real man of today to be 'confronted by a real theology' in order that a 'real event' might eventually occur."[9] Here, he suggests that congregants experience a "real event" of being set free of efforts to establish our righteousness within the theology of radical Lutheranism. We are liberated to do godly works on behalf of our neighbors. This liberation is a critical component of Forde's theology and a core element of radical Lutheranism. Within a radical Lutheranism church body, "Proclamation is letting the

[8] Mark Lewellyn Nygard, *The Missiological Implications of the Theology of Gerhard Forde* (Minneapolis, Minn: Lutheran University Press, 2010), 49.

[9] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 52.

biblical text "do the text" to listeners."[10] The "doing" is God's effort to free us to do the divine work.

So, what is radical Lutheranism? It is the reconceptualization of what our being can become based on the dogma of sola fide (faith alone.) The reconceptualization is living into the idea that our old self is dead by faith and we are born anew as the new self. Radical Lutheranism is living into the promise and purpose of the new self to the fullest extent possible while loving God and our neighbor. It is reimagining the possibilities of our entire being – our essence – dedicated to serving our neighbor in love as our approach and manner of loving God. Forde called Lutherans to be "practitioners of the gospel by justification by faith without the deeds of the law,"[11] meaning the law is superfluous. Building on Martin Luther's theology of the cross, Forde recognizes the old being under the law has been put to (a metaphorical) death. The analysis below will explore the theological and practical ramifications of Forde's point for the ELCA.

Gerhard Forde Introduction

The following section presents an exploration of Gerhard Forde as theologian. An examination of Forde's background and history is conducted to provide context for his radical Lutheranism recommendations. Additionally, the analysis looks at a small sample of Forde's doctrinal positions again as they influence radical Lutheranism. This is neither a detailed biography nor a review of his systematic theology but a cursory view only for contextual purposes.

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[10] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 112.

[11] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 8.

Forde Background

To fully understand radical Lutheranism, it is helpful to understand Forde's history and background. According to Marriane Forde, "Gerhard Olaf Forde (1927-2005) [was]...born in Starbuck, MN on September 10, 1927, to Gerhard Olavus Forde (1884-1964) and Hannah Halvorson Forde (1888-1928.)[12] He was the first of many children fathered by Gerhard Olavus. Gerhard Olavus "was the pastor of Indherred Lutheran Church in Starbuck, NM, for forty-four years (1917-1961.)[13] Gerhard Olaf's "....grandfather, Rev. Niles Forde (1849-1917), had been pastor at the same congregation for twenty-five years (1892-1917), making sixty-nine uninterrupted years of Fordes serving the Indherred church.[14] The Forde family "originally [came] from Norway"[15] and were part of the Norwegian Lutheran church tradition, which immigrated to the United States in large numbers in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

Gerhard Olaf's mother died while he was still a young child. Family members essentially raised him, later a stepmother, in a wholesome family atmosphere. However, the absence of his mother during his formative years left an indelible impression on the younger Gerhard. As he would claim later in his life, the "early absence of a mother created in him a certain independence of spirit, whereby he began to rely on himself in

[12] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 9.

[13] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 9.

[14] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 9.

[15] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 9.

his thinking."[16] He noted that he "always felt a certain independence, not of rebelliousness...but rather perhaps a skepticism, a reluctance to rely on or trust others completely, whether they be teachers or even friends."[17] His academic skepticism was in play in a 1977 essay where Forde noted that "The concern for objectivity and theological truth gave a decisive cast to the life of the Old Synod parish. There was a certain seriousness, the seriousness of the quest for truth, the truth of what God had done for sinners. The Pastor was one who was called to speak the truth of the gospel, not to entertain with emotional speeches."[18] We will see this penchant for truthful clarity in proclamation when we explore elements of radical Lutheranism below.

Forde also leveraged his academic skepticism to garner the most significant insights possible from his theological training. He "entered Luther College in June of 1945"[19] and later "enrolled in Luther Seminary in the fall of 1951."[20] Some of his "classmates [at Luther Seminary included] Robert Jenson [and] Carl Braaten,"[21] amongst other leading Lutheran theologians of the 20th century. After matriculating from Luther Seminary, Forde "began graduate studies at Harvard Divinity School, looking to continue

[16] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 9.

[17] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 9.

[18] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 12.

[19] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 27.

[20] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 28-29.

[21] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 28-29.

his theological quest in an atmosphere of relative independence."[22] Again, exploiting his desire for academic freedom, Forde "took interesting and broadening courses in other areas with Paul Tillich, Paul Lehmann, John Dillenberger, Richard Reinhold Niebuhr, George Florovsky and Virgil Anastos, but continued his own explorations without really having a doctor father" while at Harvard.[23] Forde was again enjoying a degree of academic freedom while learning with some of the leading theologians of the period.

For his dissertation, Forde focused on what continues to be a core Lutheran doctrine that continues to generate discussion and debate. Forde "published [his Harvard dissertation] in 1969 as The *Law-Gospel Debate*."[24] Much of the material he published over his career builds on the foundational doctrines from the dissertation. Some of these doctrinal positions are explored below as they have significance for understanding his ideas around radical Lutheranism. As an aside, before completing the dissertation, Forde joined other Harvard students (including his friends Robert Jenson and Sam Preus) to travel to Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, to join "the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his famous "I have a dream" speech."[25] Observing this early, poignant foray into social justice activity is insightful to this analysis. We will see this thread of social justice focus on Forde's later work of theological positioning.

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[22] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 29.

[23] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 30.

[24] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 30.

[25] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 41.

Finally, it is also critical to understand that Forde was a well-established theologian by 1987. His ideas of radical Lutheranism were based on a successful career as a leading Lutheran theologian. Nygard notes that Forde "exercised a significant influence on the life of the Lutheran church in America and beyond."[26] His voice was one of experience and theological authority. Forde was so well established that he had "become something of a household word among clergy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and that if one doesn't know something of what he represents, one is simply an outsider to the theological conversation."[27] Thus, when he wrote *Radical Lutheranism*, he did so as a seasoned insider. While the emerging ELCA was accused of ignoring some theological elements as it was commissioned, it might have been challenging to ignore one of the foremost Lutheran theologians of the period, particularly one intimately involved in forming the new church body. Trexler echoes this point by highlighting the "prominent [Lutheran] theologians chastised the ELCA for its ecumenical policies, its approach to social involvement [emphasis added], its mission philosophy, the content of its periodicals, its encouragement of inclusive God language and its alleged lack of theological direction…[these] problems...were caused by the church's failure to be faithful to biblical theology and Lutheran confessions."[28] This

[26] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 9.

[27] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 9.

[28] Edgar R. Trexler, *High Expectations Understanding the ELCA's Early Years, 1988 - 2002* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 19.

charge of ignoring theological input is a critical matter regarding how the ELCA began and what it could accomplish in the realm of social action in the years to come.

Doctrinal Position

As noted, to understand Forde's radical Lutheranism, it is also necessary to have a basic understanding of some core doctrines that are embedded within radical Lutheranism. The following summary touches only on those doctrinal issues integral to radical Lutheranism and is not intended to be a comprehensive view of Forde's systematic theology. Specifically, this analysis includes summaries of Forde's position on justification, free will, election, and works, including social justice efforts. As Nygard notes in his work regarding missiology, one can seek to penetrate Forde's view on specific doctrines, "But at a deeper level, it helps us make sense of his theology and imagine how it could take the shape it does," referring to both Forde's life experiences and his doctrinal positioning.[29]

Social Justice

We start the analysis of Forde's doctrinal positions related to social justice since they are core to this analysis. Interestingly, despite what appears to be a lack of proclamation to pursue social issues in *Radical Lutheranism*, Forde consistently espoused a theology that saw the church and church members as being directly responsible for social justice actions. Nygard notes, "Especially in the early half of his career, Forde draws repeated attention in various ways to the social problems confronting the world of

[29] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 13.

his day and the church's responsibility before them."[30] Nygard further notes Forde's emphasis on and "insistence on the freedom of the new person in Christ that may express itself in care of the neighbor and the earth."[31]

While we recognize Forde's reference to and endorsement of social action by the church in the radical Lutheran article, why is he not more explicit? Is there an assumption that the oblique references were sufficient to make the point that the new church (ELCA) had a social justice mandate? Did Forde believe that his role(s) in forming the new church would help ensure social justice actions were at the heart of the church mission? Or was there a sense of the church resting on its laurels? Trexler reminds us that "….Lutheran Services in America...[was] the largest nonprofit social and health services network in the United States."[32] Perhaps there was an unstated assumption that the Lutheran church bodies were already highly engaged in social action.

It is likely that it is some combination of all these factors. Forde was drawing on a long history of Lutheran churches extolling social action. Strom draws attention to just one of many examples when noting that a "1907…lecture to a Luther League assembly in Pennsylvania emphasized the "universal priesthood of believers" drawing on the importance of sacrifice and prayer but also social action."[33] More critically, social

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[30] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 122.

[31] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 15.

[32] Trexler, *High Expectations*, 165.

[33] Jonathan Strom, "How the Priesthood of All Believers Became American," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 2023rd ser., 37, no. 4: 442.

responsibility was core to Forde's thinking and his envisioned Lutheran church. He summarized this point by noting "…that because of the hope that is born in us we have the joyful responsibility of bearing witness to the world that Christ and his new creation is the hope of the world. Because this is true, because we trust God for what lies 'beyond,' we have nothing left to do but to care for our fellow men in *this* world."[34] [emphasis Forde's] Forde didn't overlook social justice in *Radical Lutheranism;* instead, it is the primary focus.

Justification

Forde's position on justification also has significant ramifications for radical Lutheranism. We can summarize his position by noting that since Jesus's crucifixion justifies us, we are freed to do God's work. Forde described sanctification as the "art of getting used to justification."[35] This process of getting used to justification is further defined as "a kind of growth and progress, it is to be hoped, but it is growth in grace—a growth in coming to be captivated more and more, if we can so speak, by the totality, the unconditionality of the grace of God."[36] Justification can also be considered an evolving change from our old selves, preoccupied with personal works and efforts, to our new selves, who can focus on and accomplish God's work in this realm because of divine sanctification. Forde summarizes his thinking when noting that we "Truly, … need to be

[34] Gerhard O. Forde, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 49.

[35] Donald Alexander and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 13.

[36] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 129.

saved from ourselves and in a sense, saved from the God who through wrath (his alien work) is working upon us to destroy our trust in ourselves, our own defenses, and our own powers, so that we might learn to trust in God alone."[37] Justification creates freedom for us. But is it equally important to understand that in "justification God creates a whole new person of faith within us side by side with the dying old Adam or Eve."[38] It is our new, justified selves that are freed to do God's will while our old selves continue to die in sin.

Free will

Like the justification doctrine above, free will is also critical to understanding Forde's point of view regarding radical Lutheranism. Nygard explains that for Forde, a "position of bondage of the will: "the only thing I can do---is the bondage. The bondage is not something I am forced into. It is a bondage of *the will*. [emphasis in original] I do what I want."[39] This is critically important for Forde as he explains that for free will, "in a pluralized society, the will is unable to make such a choice [for God] and can only lapse into a skepticism which has to settle for relativism. Whatever is right for you is the right choice."[40] Marianna Forde perhaps describes this idea of free will best when she writes, "We trust God for what lies 'beyond,' we have nothing left to do but care for our fellow

[37] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 381-382.

[38] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 383.

[39] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 100.

[40] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 8.

men in *this* world."[41] [emphasis in original] She also succinctly ties this thought back to social action by noting a fundamental Forde tenant: "God does not need our works but our neighbor does."[42] In other words, we can exercise free will to love our neighbor because God has already done all the work of justification by the divine sanctifying grace. Or, according to Marianna Forde, "If the gospel is the promise of the true end of the law, this has important implications for society."[43] But again, Gerhard has the final word. Radical Lutheranism creates an existential conflict between our old selves and our new selves such that the will of the old self no longer exists. Only our new self, living into God's will, remains. The implication is that such a freed will is set loose on society through love and social action.

Election

Related to free will is the doctrine of election. Again, for Forde, God's election is critical to understanding the potential impact of radical Lutheranism. In part, it is radical because as "Forde argues that the God of the scriptures is an electing God, Godself doing through Jesus Christ and the proclamation of Christ all that is necessary to claim his own."[44] Marianna Forde expands on this point while underscoring Gerhard Forde's idea that a need for proclamation from the pulpit drove radical Lutheranism. She notes, "God is a God of election, a living God who chooses and thus speaks. Since God is an electing

[41] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 49.

[42] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 49.

[43] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 49.

[44] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 9.

God, someone who can actually do the electing in the name of God must come to speak to us."[45] The preachers of the church bear responsibility for proclaiming election to church members. Congregants genuinely need to hear that they are elected "otherwise election is an abstraction that "threatens and destroys us."[46] The connection here is that congregants who hear the proclamation that they are free and elect have the obligation and capacity to act upon social justice issues. They do not need to wait for the church or the divine to equip them. God has chosen them to do divine work, and they are bound by their will to do so. As elected members in the body of Christ, they are free to do God's will here and now. Marianna Forde summarizes the point by noting the "most pointed fashion for our purpose here, ministry in the light of the Lutheran confessional theology is the actual doing of divine election in the living present by setting bound sinners free through the Word of the cross."[47] Her recapitulation of Gerhard's point is that the radical Lutheran preacher "does" God's election and frees church members to do God's will mainly as it related to loving neighbor and the social justice issues that then abound.

Ellingson also picks up on this election theme being proclaimed from the pulpit. They note that "for confessional Lutherans, the walk of the church members was tied to the minister's acts of declaring corporate forgiveness and in administering the sacraments."[48] As Forde envisioned, this element of tying election and proclamation

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[45] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 131.

[46] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 131.

[47] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 137.

[48] Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-first Century* (n.p.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 16-17.

together is integral to radical Lutheranism. In *Radical Lutheranism*, Forde notes that "one does not preach justification by faith alone or the bondage of the will and such doctrines. They are presuppositions for preaching. It is the proclamation that makes new beings, not theology, or even ethics."[49] Again, this is central to why Forde exhorted the ELCA to be a radical Lutheran tradition that started in the pulpit. He couches the idea in the context of Lutheran identity in America because he recognized that these theological doctrines could uniquely position the Lutheran tradition as an effective change agent in a rapidly changing society. This idea is explored in greater detail below.

Other considerations

Another area to explore is how radical Lutheranism contrasts with other Protestant American religious traditions. Is it different, and if so, how? How did Forde perceive potential differences, and why was the postulation of radical Lutheranism vital to him? In *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, written in 2007, well after the radical Lutheran article, Forde expounds on what he perceives as our culture's denial of threats to our security because of guilt and our ultimate deaths. He documents four ways we hide our denial of these threats to our security. First, Forde says that we "interpret guilt as a feeling or as a psychological state, and not primarily as an objective reality of human existence."[50] Our behaviors are judged with a therapeutic lens instead of a theological lens. Second, Forde suggests Americans display an overtly

[49] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 14.

[50] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 375-376.

optimistic mindset for "their capacity for social improvement… [denying] the power of death as a real threat to our being."[51] Third, Forde voices the inclination of individuality and unfettered self-expression "limited only by others' bodily injury."[52] We are good to go as long as we don't hurt one another. And fourth, Forde recognizes our tendency to victimhood if we are hindered in our self-fulfillment. Forde saw these American attributes as detrimental and standing in the way of our experiencing a close relationship with the divine. We can't get out of our own way to do God's will. These attributes that Forde lists put us at the center of the divine-human relationship, and we take God's place of importance. Forde describes this as an "anthropological predicament and paradox."[53] As we attempt to justify ourselves to God, we instead achieve for ourselves "alienation, guilt, lostness, and antipathy toward the gods that is pervasive throughout human society."[54] The very traits we hold dear as Americans – individuality, self-expression, and self-fulfillment lead us from God and away from work such as social justice action.

Forde also explores the issue of faith in general in contemporary settings. He argues that due to the "secularization in the academy, the social arena, the government, and the church,"[55] now our theology has a higher hurdle to get over from an apologetics point of view. Gospel messages must be couched in terms that typical Christians can

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[51] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 375-376.

[52] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 375-376.

[53] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 381.

[54] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 381.

[55] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 385.

understand and apply to their own lives based on "its credibility in the social or public arena."[56] In *The Preached God*, however, Forde is quick to point out that the focus on "self-actualization…[is] often guided [by] theological speculation."[57] To be clear, Forde is opposed to such speculation. He instead espouses an unadulterated theology that allows Christians to be moved to action by the Word through preached proclamation. As suggested, "Forde's anthropology is particularly at odds with the current North American emphasis on individualistic self-fulfillment.[58] He is opposed to "the dominant ideology of the North American social fabric … that self-fulfillment and self-expression should be limited only when others might be harmed by one's behaviors."[59] Again, this seems to be an essential element of radical Lutheranism. It encourages the faithful to use their liberated lives to support their neighbors instead of rampant consumerism and unmitigated self-fulfillment. Forde saw the latter as violating our stewardship of the earth and "of life that ought to define our human calling."[60]

Braaten proclaims a similar lament about the perceived role of the preacher in helping Christians achieve a life view that permits them to embrace God's work. More than a decade after the publication of the radical Lutheranism article, Braaten notes that it is not true that "the Lutheran pastor could be counted on to know the Bible, church

[56] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 385.

[57] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 385.

[58] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 388.

[59] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 388.

[60] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 388.

history, doctrinal theology, and the essentials of Word-and-sacrament ministry… the Lutheran pastor is no longer esteemed as a theologian."[61] Both Braaten and Forde lament that contemporary preachers are not up to the task of proclaiming a theology that frees us to be God's workers. Yet, this is the very core of radical Lutheranism. A different yet traditional theology moves Christians to God's work.

This idea is consistent for Forde and brings us to the core question of this analysis as it relates to social justice. As Nygard notes, as early as Forde's "doctoral thesis, Forde made the case that the church "has the responsibility of bearing witness to the proper use of the law … [he] notes here the 'great possibilities' this vigilance portends for a positive engagement by the church in social justice…"[62] Rather than shifting positions on the church's role in social action, the radical Lutheran article is a refinement of the idea that the church has a role and mandate to be involved in social justice issues. Doctrinally, Forde notes, "The proper use of the law is all about the care of the neighbor rather than the preservation of the self. The world around us becomes 'God's other real' where the law becomes 'God's other way of fostering justice' for the time being."[63] Forde leveraged his traditional theological point of view to urge the Lutheran tradition not to fall victim to a contemporary whitewashing of the Christian understanding of the church body. For Forde, the church is vital in today's social justice issues.

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[61] Carl E. Braaten, *Because of Christ: Memoirs of a Lutheran Theologian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), Location 347 of 2579.

[62] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 82.

[63] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 80.

CHAPTER 3. EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN AMERICA

Now that we have developed a basic understanding of radical Lutheranism, we shift our focus to the emerging Lutheran church tradition that became the ELCA. Like many Christian church traditions, it is steeped in historical changes and evolving permutations. As examined below, the new Lutheran tradition was not exempted from the push and pull of ecclesial polity. Further, its nascency was significantly influenced by the tidal shifts of the extant American culture. The combined influences of American culture and existing American Lutheran traditions defined its genesis. The analysis below purposefully ignores the individual impact and contributions of many key stakeholders in the new church and instead looks at institutional and cultural influences on the ELCA.

American Lutheran history

The Lutheran tradition has a long and rich history in the United States. The first Lutherans were amongst the new territory's earliest immigrants. By the founding of the United States of America in 1776, "there were only 120,000 Lutherans in a population of 2.8 million."[64] Most of these Lutheran immigrants arrived from northern European countries, thus making the tradition a predominantly ethnic one for much of American history. Surges of Lutheran immigration continued from the 17th century until the early parts of the 20th century.[65] Each group of Lutherans arriving in the United States brought their languages and nationalistic "pieties, forms of worship, and theological

[64] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 28.

[65] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 28.

orientations,"[66] thus challenging the development of an "American" Lutheranism. Each had different pieties, forms of worship, and theological orientations. Theologically, they differed significantly on a continuum of pietistical and ecumenical traditions. Some were high church, some were low church, and many fell somewhere in between. While the Lutheran immigrants came to the U.S. with differences, some of which were significant, they also shared a characteristic of being a confessional tradition tied to the Augsburg Confession and some degree of being a unified church body.

Throughout U.S. history, various Lutheran groups formed and broke apart but generally developed into larger regional church bodies over time. Typically, there was momentum to overcome the "differences in doctrine and worship practices to create a more uniform and unified Lutheranism."[67] This unification process continued until the late 1980s when the ELCA was being formed. At this time, there existed approximately forty North American Lutheran church bodies. Still, most membership was attributed to the ELCA, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS.) The ELCA was formed by combining the "American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Lutheran Church in America."[68]

Specific to the ELCA, examining the theological background of the joining church bodies is worthwhile. Differences in theological understanding were issues that

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[66] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 28.

[67] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 29.

[68] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed December 6, 2023, https://www.elca.org/.

required resolution at the time of ELCA's origination, but these differences continue to echo in the ELCA organization today. The American Lutheran Church (ALC) was a German ethnocultural tradition with some Danish and Norwegian elements included, too. It was predominantly a conservative church tradition based in the U.S. Midwest region. The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) was a German, Finnish, Danish, and Swedish ethnocultural tradition in the eastern U.S. The LCA churches often included high liturgical services, were moderately liberal to neo-orthodox, and included some pietistical churches in rural areas. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) was a splinter group that left the LCMS over bible inerrancy and ecumenism and was predominantly a German ethnocultural tradition. They were of a moderate church tradition and more modernist in their theology. Thus, the fledgling ELCA was predominantly a German and northern European tradition but was formed when the church was purposefully moving toward a non-ethnocultural model. In some ways, the Lutheran church was becoming "more" American and trying to harmonize various theological positions. It is precisely these two issues, what will be described here as Americanism and a faith harmonization, that Forde was specifically addressing in his *Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran identity in America* article in 1987. Forde saw the intersection of church identity and doctrinal adherence as critical to the future success of the new ELCA. As noted, Forde purposely defined a further alternative consideration for the American Lutheran church between Pietistical and Ecumenical positions. He saw both emphases as diluting and misdirecting the uniqueness and focused mission of the Lutheran tradition.

ELCA establishment

Forde was intimately involved in the establishment of the new ELCA tradition. His name is often mentioned in Trexler's *High Expectations Understanding the ELCA's Early Years, 1988 – 2002*, which chronicles the discussions and machinations that went into creating a new church tradition. Further, one of the elements that was important to Forde's thinking was the assumed identity the new church was taking on. He titled his Lutheran Quarterly article *Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran identity in America* with a specific goal. Namely to suggest that the new church had an opportunity to assume a new and unique identity in the American culture. Below, we further explore this identity issue and how it evolved.

Purpose

According to the ELCA, its purpose is to "Share the story of Jesus and the ELCA by engaging with 1 million new people as we grow the church together."[69] This evangelical statement is compounded with the goal to increase church membership with "new people." Likewise, the ELCA's purpose is to "Activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice, and love."[70] This purpose statement has an element of proclamation and oblique references to community and justice. Is this a subtle or compromised statement about social justice? Presumably, this reference to community and justice is a tepid attempt to position the church with some

[69] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed December 13, 2023, https://www.elca.org/.

[70] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

light role in social justice issues. The long list of exiting ELCA position statements, many related to social justice issues, would seem to bear out this hypothesis.

From the ELCA Constitution, which runs 238 pages, nearly four pages are devoted to the church's purpose. Interestingly, the purpose articles start with proclamation, evangelism, serving our neighbors' needs, worship, nurturing members, and living in unity. One could read some social justice implications into the category of serving neighborly needs, but it is a weak presentation. The subsection reads:

> "Serve in response to God's love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity, justice, and equity for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, caring for the marginalized, embracing and welcoming racially and ethnically diverse populations, and standing in solidarity with the poor and oppressed and committing itself to their needs."[71]

Other than being "welcoming" and "standing in solidarity," there is little emphasis on pursuing social justice for those oppressed or deprived of fundamental human rights. The Constitution goes on to describe its mission related to social issues to "Lift its voice in concord and work in concert with forces for good, to serve humanity, cooperating with church and other groups participating in activities that promote justice, relieve misery, and reconcile the estranged" and "Study social issues and trends, work to discover the causes of oppression and injustice, and develop programs of ministry and advocacy to further human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace in the world."[72] Again, the emphasis seems to be simply showing up, but this text cannot be read to suggest that the church

[71] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

[72] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

wishes to be an active change agent for social justice issues. The ELCA Constitution is much less ambiguous when describing how it will work in society. Section 4.03.n says the church will "Work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, *maintaining institutional separation of church and state* [emphasis added] in a relation of functional interaction."[73] Finally, the ELCA presents its vision as "A world experiencing the difference God's grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation."[74] Again, this is so broad as to be weak in its execution. Thoughts about the ELCA's future vision, purpose, and mission are explored below.

Also, it is essential to recognize that this purpose, as "weak" as it may be now perceived, was drafted and adopted with Forde's voice being present and active. Nygard notes that Forde's "service on the Commission for a New Lutheran Church (1982-1988) that proposed the shape of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a commission on which he exercised strong leadership, "especially in the formation of the statement of faith and purpose."[75] It is incongruent that Forde was a strong leader and acquiesced to a purpose statement that was lukewarm in its social justice aspects. Nygard further notes, that Forde's "language was "the ancient catechetical tradition" of his youth, and he was always suspicious of the possibility of flights of fancy with the new talk,"[76] yet the new

[73] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

[74] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

[75] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 23.

[76] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 20.

talk in the initiation of the ELCA seemingly reflects more fancy talk than it does catechetical exhortations.

Cultural influences

However, the ELCA was not constituted in a vacuum. The ELCA was necessarily a creation of the polity of the three combined Lutheran church traditions, including each church's ideas, goals, and practices. Perhaps compromise is the key concept that permitted the successful creation of the ELCA as well as managing the continuing hurdles, as Trexler points out when he notes, "the lack of agreement…lurked behind many of the difficulties."[77] But we must recognize another vital factor. The ELCA was created in a specific time and place and was affected by the cultural attitudes and influences of the late 20th century. Here, we explore the implications of social justice issues and attempt to contextualize the extant American culture.

Marianna Forde notes that one of the questions of the time of *Radical Lutheranism* was related to "whether the mission of the church was to lean more toward proclamation or social justice or who in the "opulent religious cafeteria" of the day the Lutheran Church was to be."[78] Many church traditions asked similar questions about their fundamental mission during this period. And theologically, many church traditions struggled to balance historical points of view that aligned with the evolving American culture. For example, Ellingson notes, "Some commentators suggest that we are seeing a

[77] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 255.

[78] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 124.

shift from a diverse array of Protestant traditions to a more unified Protestant tradition that is grounded in nondenominational evangelicalism."[79] Another religious and cultural trend that began changing during this period relates to partisanship and ideological alignment by Americans. For example, according to Pew Research, "Republicans and Democrats were equally likely to express strong personal religious attitudes in 1987 and 1988, but Republicans increasingly became more unified in their beliefs around religious attitudes."[80] The groups that helped establish the ELCA struggled and debated religious attitude issues, and some would argue that the ELCA tradition settled on compromise rather than resolving ideological differences.[81] Questions of church dogma and ideology were clearly present in the run-up to the establishment of the ELCA but preceded the tremendous partisan divide in society we see today. Perhaps it was prescient that the ELCA completed its initiation and merger work when it did in the late 1980s, as it may have become more challenging to accomplish in the 1990s and 2000s.

We can also look at other pertinent cultural issues that may have impacted the creation of the ELCA and are represented somehow in the radical Lutheranism article. Interestingly, some of the problems discussed below continue to be hotly debated today. For example, debates around racism and immigration have become key topics of the 2024

[79] Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 7.

[80] *Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized; 2004 Political Landscape*, 67, Pew Research Report.

[81] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 255.

election discussion. Implied racism is a particularly troublesome area for the ELCA and suggests the ELCA is out of step with Forde's notions of radical Lutheranism.

Questions regarding racism were an important topic in the 1980s. The emerging ELCA spent a lot of time and energy trying to address an equitable solution to racial inequality in the new church body, perhaps with the motive to be a role model to society. In the 1990s, Pew Research reported that "African American support for racial preferences [was] lower … than in the 1980s, a majority (55%) still [favored] preferences as means to improve the position of blacks and other minorities."[82] At the time, a majority (74%) disagreed with this assessment. Additionally, quotas were ineffective in helping the ELCA achieve its diversity goals. A lack of progress can also contribute to a perception of systemic organizational racism that the ELCA continues to struggle against. For example, "By the ELCA's 10th year, 1997, the movement toward the 10-percent goal still lagged far behind…African American membership in ELCA African American congregations declined by 6,000…The only real growth in minority membership…came in mostly white congregations.[83] Or, more troubling, Trexler further reports that the "…ELCA's greatest learning in its first 15 years is that its ethnic membership increase occurs largely through the welcoming of people of color by predominantly white congregations."[84]

[82] *Evenly Divided*, 8.

[83] Trexler, *High Expectations*, 186.

[84] Trexler, *High Expectations*, 188.

As explored below, the ELCA decided to rely on an arbitrary quota system with articulated goals to address existing diversity and inequality issues. As we have recently seen in the Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, any reference to affirmative action is still in the news and perhaps not viewed as positively as in the late 20th century. For the ELCA, a quota system was not overwhelmingly accepted and was a sticking point for many representatives of the CNLC and barely passed. Ironically, the ELCA and subordinate synod bodies continue debating and editing quota goals and measures today despite having nearly no record of success in the preceding thirty-plus years. In the 1980s, the ELCA attempted to be a social leader for racial inclusion and diversity, yet it still struggles with the issue today. Perhaps instead of being a social leader, the ELCA is backsliding into being a historical relic. Similarly, a sense of racial othering may be growing within American culture. Again, Pew Research reported that "in 1988 a quarter of Americans said they had little in common with people of other races; [in the early 1990s,] just 13%"[85] said that was the case. Race was a critical dimension in establishing the ELCA and a social issue crying out for action. It still is.

Another issue social issue of the time that continues to dominate cultural debate is immigration. While the nascent ELCA nor Forde's radical Lutheranism article directly addresses immigration issues, it was a topic of the day. Perhaps it did not get any attention because a nearly equal measure of Republicans (82%) and Democrats (76%)

[85] *Evenly Divided*, 45.

believed immigration controls were necessary at the time.[86] But even in the 1990s, this issue was becoming more divisive, with Republicans increasingly shifting to a view that "immigration controls should be tightened."[87] The ELCA did not issue a social message (which is different and serves a different purpose than social statements) on immigration until 1998.[88] Coincidentally, the ELCA recently emailed members a draft social statement (*A Draft Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith*, January 17, 2024), stating, "Social statements are important documents because they govern church teaching and policies, and support ministries. They also serve as discernment tools for ELCA members as they think about social issues such as civic life."[89] Despite the stated importance of social statements, the ELCA has been somewhat parsimonious in creating them over the last three decades. Below, we will explore the impact radical Lutheranism may have and can have on immigration issues in the U.S.

A final issue to examine was a relevant topic during the formation of the ELCA but received little attention in church formation or resulting social statements and messages is related to poverty. Soon after the formation of the ELCA, poverty issues became a hot topic for Democrats, according to Pew Research. They reported in the early 1990s that Democratic support to increase government assistance to alleviate poverty grew from 58% to 72%, "by far the highest level of Democratic support for that idea in

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[86] *Evenly Divided*, 33.

[87] *Evenly Divided*, 33.

[88] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

[89] ELCA Task Force for Studies on Civic Life and Faith, comp., *Draft of a Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith* (n.p.: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2024), Email dated January 17, 2024.

the Pew values surveys"[90] to that time. Again, we see a rapid cultural shift in considering critical social issues, but the ELCA didn't issue an Economic Life social statement until 1999. (It did, however, issue a social message on homelessness in 1990.[91])

Regarding the ELCA's stance on social action issues, the new church body was finding its way in a rapidly evolving cultural setting. It was obligated to address sometimes competing social positions from the former merged church bodies. Rather than starting with a blank slate and establishing itself as a social change leader, the ELCA emerged with a more blunted approach to social action. Despite the best intentions of the members of the CNLC, critical doctrinal issues and standing on key social issues were dampened to reach a consensus. Nygard notes that this dilution of position is problematic for Forde. Reporting Forde's frustration with the ELCA's ecumenical efforts, Nygard notes that Forde became critical of the church's efforts, calling them "blurring and confusing in its effect…one sees that the drive toward consensus has created of kind of mythological middle kingdom in which deliberate ambiguity is practiced."[92] In hindsight, it is perhaps easier to conclude that many of the ELCA's positions and efforts included a force of deliberate ambiguity. We explore this idea below regarding the future of the ELCA.

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[90] *Evenly Divided*, 7.

[91] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

[92] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 41.

CHAPTER 4. POTENTIAL IMPACT OF RADICAL LUTHERANISM

So far, this analysis has revealed Forde's commitment to a new kind of Lutheran church tradition based on sound, historical Lutheran doctrines and to be relevant and unique in the extant American culture. Forde likely imagined the significant impact a radical Lutheran church would have in a secularized and pluralized society struggling with various social issues. As described below, a radical Lutheran approach is as appealing today as when the ELCA was established. Further, now might be a better time for radical Lutheranism than in 1987 because the ELCA has several decades of organizational experience to rest on and can be more objective about its unique role in American society. Establishing the ELCA was a gargantuan task, but it was successful despite the inherent challenges. As society continues to change and church membership declines in the U.S., now is an excellent time to rethink radical Lutheranism and the potential for change it represents.

Radical Lutheranism and Social Justice

A new consideration of radical Lutheranism as the ELCA reimagines its go-forward mission offers many opportunities. Here, an examination of the possibility of more impactful social change is presented. American culture has shifted in the approximately 36 years since Forde's's *Radical Lutheranism* article. Our society is more polarized, divisive, and less religious than when Gerhard envisioned the future ELCA. Additionally, the ELCA has over three decades of experience operating as a mainline Protestant church tradition in U.S. society. One of the areas where the ELCA has the most experience is in using quota systems to be a more inclusive church tradition that

better reflects the makeup of the U.S. society. As will be shown, despite using quota systems even before the formal initiation of the ELCA, little cultural change has been accomplished within the ELCA church body. People of color still make up a smaller percentage of ELCA congregants than are represented in the general population. This failure is also valid for gender equality. Yet despite these discouraging results, the ELCA artificially uses quota guidelines to demonstrate inclusivity.

As noted, the use of quotas predates the ELCA. According to Trexler, the Committee on Lutheran Unity (CLU) used and argued over quotas from their earliest meetings.[93] In the archived communications of the CNLC, it is cited as one of the primary concerns of all those who wrote opinions and feedback to the CNLC. Those elected to the CNLC were particularly proud of using a quota system described as a "'revolutionary quota system' [when] first introduced in November 1981 CLU meetings 5-year planning meeting in Milwaukee."[94] Again, this is a bit of anachronistic thinking. The model adopted by the CNLC consisted of "four racial/ethnic communities -- Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian – [to] be represented in the formation of the new church."[95] This breakthrough was significant for a church tradition firmly entrenched in an ethnocultural mindset for the previous several centuries. But with hindsight, the simplistic approach was unlikely to engender substantial change.

[93] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 35.

[94] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 34.

[95] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 35.

Furthermore, the ELCA embraced a rudimentary quota system, recognizing it should take some positive action to address diversity, equity, and inclusion. Early discussions before the formation of the CNLC noted issues related to a dwindling church population for a uniquely Lutheran church. This argument was crucial for persuading the ALC, LCA, and AELC to combine. One leader noted that the church bodies "don't have forever to talk about how we make a Lutheran witness in this culture, and we better not make it separately. We lose even more if we do."[96] The momentum to combine was partly driven by a recognition that it was critical for future relevance in American society to be more inclusive and representative of the American demographics. This idea of relevancy is essential in understanding the emphasis on using quotas. Not only was this an approach meant to support inclusivity, but it was also intended to reflect the heterogeneous nature of American society. Herein was the challenge. American society demographics were widely different from the Lutheran churches, and American culture was changing more rapidly than the church membership.

Another prominent social aspect in developing the nascent ELCA was that the new church body should be able to speak out on social issues in addition to religiosity and theology. From the Committee on Lutheran Unity (CLU) opinion poll, it was noted that "the [future] church should not become so decentralized that it cannot speak with one voice on social issues and advocacy." [97] CLU members, already church leaders of their respective traditions, were convinced that the future church body must ensure "mission

[96] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 19.

[97] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 32.

and evangelism [as] top priorities for the new church."[98] This point of view is critical for this analysis of radical Lutheranism because it was a top priority in the earliest discussions about a future church body. As shall be shown, several issues related to the new church body entailed protracted debate and inconclusive direction – including a firm theological underpinning. However, a social-first mindset was never an extensive discussion for the new church.

Yet, despite this resolve, the ELCA struggled to live into its proclaimed social mission. Again, the matter started even before the ELCA was established when the "CNLC struggled with issues related to "church and society."[99] Good intentions were insufficient to make the new church a social force in American society. Perhaps more progress was not made due to the theological underpinnings that each contributing body brought to the Commission and church planning dialogue. Recall that Forde was reacting to issues of faith harmonization across the Lutheran traditions. Likewise, the Commission members needed to harmonize pietistic versus ecumenical threads. Some parts of the emerging ELCA were conservative, some moderate, and some modernist. Rather than muddle the merger discussions with difficult social policy issues, the CNLC and later the ELCA settled on the least divisive positions related to church and society. One part of the problem for the CNLC was captured in criticism of some Commission members who

[98] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 32.

[99] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 53.

noted that "its sociological (rather than theological) approach to social involvement"[100] was a significant limiting factor.

Another criticism at the time concerns the individuals called to serve within the CNLC. The quota system described above was also rigorously applied to the lay persons and rostered clergy ratios. While this approach of ensuring significant layperson participation helped with inclusivity, it also brought voices to the discussion that supposedly had more limited awareness or understanding of critical issues, according to the CNLC critics. Trexler notes, "As early as the work of the CLU [there were] three guiding principles that extended into ELCA including 'grass roots input, a theological base for actions, and decisions by consensus.'"[101] It is difficult to determine the full extent of the charge that lay people helped dilute difficult positions, but it seems likely a contributing factor to several important issues. Similarly, "suggestions for including theologians and seminary professors or other types of churchly expertise, such as staff, was largely absent"[102] would strengthen the argument that compromise positions were adopted on social issues that caused the least consternation. One notable exception to this charge was Gerhard Forde, an active member of the CNLC.

Time for Change in American Culture Ripe

American culture's pluralistic, secular, and divisive attributes are headlined in popular media nearly every day. And many "experts" offer paths to resolving the inherent

[100] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 56.

[101] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 23.

[102] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 37.

conflicts in our society. Many faith-based commentaries offer cries of lament and righteous piety, but few provide actionable alternatives. This analysis attempts to move beyond rhetoric and suggests that the divisiveness so common in today's public discourse is a sign that our society is ripe for change. Rather than viewing divisiveness as an obstacle to overcome, it is an opportunity to find healing. Instead of picking one party's view as right or wrong, bad or good, conservative or liberal, it is time to change the direction of the discourse toward our common goals and existence.

The one critical trait that needs addressing is the strong individualism embodied in American culture. How can this trait be addressed in the context of potentially shaping future dialog within American society? For this analysis, how might Forde balance social policy issues versus social action?" What does Forde's point of view from radical Lutheranism say about advocating for national policy changes around homelessness versus managing a local homeless shelter? How should the balance between supporting social issues versus "clothing the naked" be?[103] This analysis suggests a shift in perspective from the "individual" to the broader "church body" as consistent with Forde's radical Lutheranism. The implications of Forde's framework of proclamation suggest that the ELCA can successfully shift to a "church body" perspective, particularly as it applies to social justice issues.

To move toward a focus on the church body versus a church focused on individuals and a glorious religious experience, the ELCA would also need to address the

[103] "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Mt 25:43 NSRV

paradoxical need to address both person and community in its faith practices simultaneously. As Ellingson notes, "This religious eclecticism [and the rise of religious consumerism] may undermine the authority and integrity of given tradition because it pulls individuals out the community that preserves and practice tradition."[104] But he also hints at an approach that may support the person and community simultaneously. As he further notes, Americans "not only switch from one church body to another but [also] pick and choose among doctrines, practices, beliefs, or values…to form a religion that meets individual's needs."[105] But consider a radical Lutheran church tradition that is foundationally based on a few critical doctrines – justification and free will – that enfranchises members to love their neighbor and do God's work. Other Lutheran doctrines still exist but contextually are not as critical to a radical Lutheran church body. Ellingson cites research that supports this alternative model of what a Lutheran church might look like. He reports that congregations in a survey "seemed more interested in downplaying the distinctive marker of Lutheranism to make their congregations appear relevant to members and prospective members."[106] Admittedly, Ellingson focuses on Lutheran megachurches, and the survey was conducted in a "broader context of irreligiosity and the unchurchedness in the San Francisco Bay area,"[107] however there appears to be a thread of hope on how to approach churchy-ness in contemporary American society to realize a radical Lutheran approach.

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[104] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 6.

[105] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 6.

[106] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 184.

[107] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 184.

Changing the ELCA

The ELCA may be at an inflection point in its history. On July 13, 2023, ELCA's Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church met for the first time. Part of the Commission's agenda was discussion for:

> "Reviewing the memorial from the 2022 Churchwide Assembly and considering the group's purpose. Dreaming about the future of the ELCA and discussing what those hopes look like. Discussing the group's charge to commit to anti-racism and committing to further listening and education to fulfill that role."[108]

We should note the specific social justice stance implicit in the "anti-racism" point above. According to the CRLC, "dreaming about the future of the ELCA" can be read as an invitation for a new start.

Also, as noted, the ELCA recently released a draft social statement on civic life and faith. This analysis will not examine the draft statement in depth but will note that it directly appeals to a worldview that the ELCA should "respond boldly and join all others of goodwill to work toward the aspiration and responsibility of "we the people" through wise civic participation."[109] This wording seems more likely to be the tone of the social statement Forde may have expected when postulating radical Lutheranism. Instead of being marked as a church body categorized by deliberate ambiguity, radical Lutheranism is a mandate to "respond boldly" and to be constant participants in ongoing public

[108] Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

[109] ELCA Task Force for Studies on Civic Life and Faith, *Draft of a Social*, 11.

discourse. Forde may have gone further, and radical Lutheranism suggests that this attitude of boldly responding to calls for social action starts in the pulpit as a way to free congregational members. Perhaps the ELCA, as a mature church body, can toss aside any deliberate ambiguity and focus on supporting preachers in activating church members to respond boldly.

In a sign that the ELCA may be evolving into a more activist church tradition akin to that defined as radical Lutheranism, Braaten in 2010 remarked on the state of Lutheran seminary life that was besieged by "procedures, rules, and regulations [and] a lack of trust and loyalty. Everything functions by bloated committees determined by the quota system, combined with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" moral discipline."[110] Yet, in recent discussions with the admissions director of a traditional Lutheran seminary, expressions of thoughtful change, an outward focus, and an eye toward a public discourse that will change the ongoing narrative were the framework for evaluating new doctoral candidates. The tone of this recent discussion with the admissions director was the antithesis of the hierarchical Lutheran educational model described by Braaten. Could this perceived organizational change also reflect a changing ELCA? Is Lutheran higher education beginning to reflect an evolving church attitude?

While there are some signals that the ELCA is changing and is ready for change, it is worthwhile to consider classic change management guidelines considering the ELCA church body. In order to get people and organizations to

[110] Braaten, *Because of Christ*, 298.

adopt changed behaviors, it is necessary to identify and declare a need for change, showcase current behaviors that must be changed, describe desired future behaviors, reward stakeholders when those behaviors are successfully exhibited, and cycle through these steps until the change is positively attained. Successful change management must consider the personal impacts of change, involve leadership and all levels of the organization, communicate change messaging consistently, and build a case for change ownership.

Regarding change within the ELCA, we already see some signs of traditional change management techniques in play. As previously noted, the ELCA has established and proclaimed the Commission for the Renewal of the Church, signaling open communication and leadership involvement. Also, the recent draft Civic Life social statement is an example of creating a sense of ownership, e.g., the ELCA Task Force for Studies on Civic Life and Faith, which produced and distributed the draft statement. By asking local churches to review and respond to the draft, the ELCA encourages participation of all levels of the church body. These are positive change management efforts. However, what is not as frequently displayed and is arguably one of the essential elements of change management is exercising that cycle of exhibiting changed behavior and cyclically receiving positive reinforcement. Like most organizations, the ELCA may struggle with this ongoing, at times, lengthy process to make behavioral change occur. Finding ways to observe and provide positive reinforcement must be provided throughout the ELCA. From the Presiding Bishop to the Conference of Bishops and from the local pastor to congregation members, changed behavior

must be observed and reinforced; otherwise, real change does not occur. A social statement on Civic Life will be another institutional heirloom if ELCA stakeholders do not embrace the mission, purpose, and actions implied in the statement. The ELCA is not immune from exercising traditional change management techniques if a change is truly to occur.

ELCA as a New Change Agent

How could a radically Lutheran ELCA be a national change agent in America? What would this look like? Who would be involved? What are the risks and rewards for a church body that acts as a change agent in a deeply divided, pluralistic society? Here, we look ahead to what might be if a more radical Lutheranism were adopted. Perhaps the place to start this visionary analysis is to describe what attributes may go away. As a starting point, maybe those doctrinal statements related to social action could be given more prominence in the church's life. Justification, free will, election, and proclamation are not simply nice-to-have theological topics. These tenets are core to the identity of Lutheran believers and create the framework for how Lutherans should interact with one another and the world they live in. If they are indeed so critically important, they need to be moved to the center of the Lutheran faith. As described by Forde, radical Lutheranism is a theology that sets church members free to do necessary social work. To be effective, the ELCA must more visibly embrace those doctrines that make Lutherans unique and positioned as positive social agents.

This focus on effectiveness also implies that the ELCA must prioritize its mission elements. The ELCA has shown great success in its ecumenical efforts and developed a

global reputation as an ecumenical leader. It has also been a somewhat early adopter of raising up some social justice issues, but often not as a first responder or with a singular change agent point of view. In other words, ELCA is seldom the first voice heard in the public square, and it rarely establishes new, radical positions. Perhaps the ELCA is wary of being too far in front of social discourse for possible backlash and the need to defend itself from critics. Yet, the Christian and Lutheran traditions are built on radical positioning. The ELCA may be uniquely positioned to be a national change agent on social justice issues. Who else to lead a new reformation than the church tradition that embraced the reformation of the Roman church in the 16th century?

Another risk to be considered must be the perspective of the rank-and-file Lutherans, who are indeed the church's core. It seems likely that church leaders remain reluctant to move too far or too fast on the social issues continuum for fear of alienating and losing membership. Yet, the church also conflates social justice with political posturing too often. A frequent exhortation is for the church leaders to avoid the perception of political bias. Yet, like society, the Lutheran church membership contains many political expressions. It seems that the church, from pastors to bishops, then walks this fine line between political extremes, looking for that common ground that will offend the fewest church members.

Further, this admonition ignores the fact that the Christian church has always been somewhat politicized. Braaten addresses this point most eloquently when he notes that "God is viewed not only as "above us" or "within us" but also as "ahead of us"…The rebirth of eschatological faith -- of the biblical vision of the kingdom of God – gives birth

to a politics of hope and an ethic of change."[111] To be an effective change agent, the ELCA should better distinguish between conservative/liberal duality and instead focus on the moral and ethical choices that face our society. There can be no political agenda if the church's voice is focused on speaking truth to injustice. This action seems to be one of the primary purposes of the church.

Role Model for Protestant Mainline Traditions

Building on this thought of focusing on a theologically based moral mission, the church must also consider the impact of a "me too-ism" exhibited by many mainline Protestant churches. It seems all Protestant churches want to focus on the good news of Christianity without embracing the doctrinal elements that make the good news possible. While Christianity is undoubtedly a feel-good religion, promising eternal life, American Protestantism frequently falls back on antinomianism tendencies. Instead of demonstrating the value of both the good news of Christianity and the need for legalistic moral, religious, or social norms, the law is mostly ignored. In part, this model is a reaction to the rampant individualism in American society, but it comes at a considerable cost to individuals and the broader culture. Instead of various Protestant denominations, we see a shift to nondenominational evangelicalism. Forde recognized this, too, which explains his focus on Radical Lutheranism and Lutheran church identity. But Ellingson also describes what a difficult task it is to retain "an authentic self-identity and

[111] Braaten, *Because of Christ*, Location 967 of 2579.

boundaries while at the same time making [the church] relevant and open to outsiders and the society….[because] religious traditions seem as ephemeral as the latest fashion trend."[112] But even fashion recognizes the timelessness of certain vestments. Rather than the ELCA succumbing to a "me-too" model, it can shift direction and be known as the church body that recognizes and proclaims the need and purpose of legalism. Using a radical Lutheran model, the ELCA can show American society that legalism has positive benefits and that the balance of law and gospel is a place to start societal healing.

Becoming a vocal proponent of social change based on strong religious norms might be a lonely position to take. Yet, few other organizations the size of the ELCA seem willing to tread such a path. Forde recognized this need with his "evangelical passion for the rekindling of the world-shattering force of the gospel message in the church today. He [was] looking for 'the fire, the passion.'"[113] At a time when a lot of social discourse is mired in the notion that things are so broken that they will never be fixed, a passionate, radical Lutheran church can stand out as a national change agent for positive social advancement.

Radical Lutheranism for today's pluralistic culture

Finally, a deep dive into some critical issues related to implementing radical Lutheranism today is in order. While neither simple nor easy, such an approach is worth considering because of the possible positive and world-changing implications. This is to

[112] Ellingson, *The Megachurch*, 24.

[113] Nygard, *The Missiological*, 101.

suggest that the difficult work of radical Lutheranism would be worth the effort and the risks involved.

Radical Lutheranism relevance

Forde wrote in Lutheran Quarterly over thirty years ago; therefore, it is appropriate to ask what relevance this analysis has for the ELCA today or even what it means in our current American culture. Is radical Lutheranism, as defined by Forde, still relevant today? The short answer is that it is appropriate, perhaps even more so than in 1987. As noted above, the ELCA is at a crossroads in defining its mission, community, and underpinning theology. The Commission for the Renewal of the Church is a testament to the fact that the ELCA believes there is a need to adapt. American religious culture is more pluralistic than before. Christian churches are experiencing a continued decline in attendance.[114] Fierce individualism continues to be the dominant worldview of many Americans. Our society's political divisiveness and tribalism continue to impair meaningful dialog on contentious issues. As the ELCA looks outside its churchly realm, it can't help but see opportunities to be an agent for positive change.

One of the most relevant aspects of radical Lutheranism that is most appealing is that it is indeed radical. Mimicking the radical approach of Jesus, the ELCA can feed the hungry, offer drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality to foreigners, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and support the imprisoned. By acting as the "new man" with more than several million members, the ELCA can be uniquely positioned to impact social justice

[114] "U.S. has changed in key ways in the past decade, from tech use to demographics" Pew Research Center, February 5, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/12/20/key-ways-us-changed-in-past-decade/.

issues radically. Instead of internally analyzing and dialoguing about gender, ethnic, and racial quotas, the ELCA can get on with the business of reshaping the society in which it finds itself. By adopting the "new man" mentality of radical Lutheranism, the ELCA can refrain from its internal focus by putting the "old man" to death. As Forde points out, the "old man" spends so much time and energy justifying themselves, by aiming "to "think positively," not let life "get us down," be virtuous, "revise our notions of God," recognize that death is "natural," or realize that guilt is but a feeling that we should "rid ourselves of" that we don't get around to doing God's will.[115] Likewise, the ELCA acts like the "old man" and loses energy and focus to the needed work of the "new man."

Another aspect of relevance of radical Lutheranism is one of differentiation. What makes Lutheranism unique? The answer is that is has lost much of its unique differentiation. American Lutheranism is another of the many mainline Protestant traditions with a watered-down, feel-good theology. Forde explicitly called for the ELCA to adopt radical Lutheranism from the pulpit out to the membership. For him, radical Lutheranism was part and parcel of changing the approach the Lutheran pastors take in sermonizing. Forde's view was one where the pastors explicitly called on the membership to put the "old man" to death and to live into the "new man" in full embodiment of Jesus' call to mission. Forde genuinely meant for the church leaders and members to take a new, radical approach to their religion.

What might this radical differentiation look like? Forde didn't directly answer this question, but we can speculate and show some examples that may get to his point. For

[115] Forde, Mattes, and Paulson, *The Preached*, 381-382.

example, a congregation can host a regular discussion group at the community youth center instead of a weekly internal Bible study. Instead of a congregational potluck dinner, members can cook and deliver food to the local homeless shelter. Instead of ignoring social justice issues from the pulpit, pastors can call their congregations to be engaged and active in local justice issues. The critical point in these examples is to turn the focus outward as much as possible. Radical Lutheranism can be fundamentally different from the other mainline Protestant churches. Radical Lutheranism would put the church in the streets, in the shelters, in the prisons, and in the crime-ridden neighborhoods. In contrast, the other churches remained comfortable in their various church buildings. Radical Lutheranism would fundamentally make the church members shift the focus away from hard-to-maintain facilities, declining membership, and fewer contributions. It would walk away from bureaucracy and live into gospel-inspired actions.

Radical Lutheranism for today's and tomorrow's ELCA

Where does the ELCA stand today regarding the tenets of radical Lutheranism? Is the church at a point where it can become progressively more radical? As noted herein, the ELCA seems uniquely positioned at a time ripe for positive change in American society. One area to assess the ELCA as a possible change agent is the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church (CRLC.) The CRLC presents its purpose to "reconsider the statements of purpose for each of the expressions of this church, the principles of its organizational structure."[116] It also states that the Commission should be "particularly

[116] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

attentive to our shared commitment to dismantle racism."[117] Finally, it notes that the CRLC "will present its findings and recommendations … in preparation for a possible reconstituting convention."[118] At first glance, this suggests an organization preparing for significant changes.

Yet, closer examination makes clear that the CRLC's mandate is not as broad as it could be. The focus on a shared commitment to dismantle racism is internally focused on the ELCA church body. In a recent meeting, the CRLC "**voted on and passed** [emphasis in the original] language that clarifies the mandate of the CRLC as being focused on governance."[119] In this same meeting, the CRLC established and made assignments in CRLC committees of Who We Are, i.e., manifestations of the ELCA; How We are Governed, i.e., governance structures; Why and What, i.e., purpose; Dismantling Racism [within the ELCA]; All Ears, i.e., listening; Communications Team, i.e., all messaging from CRLC; and Planning and Report, i.e., project management and report development. Sadly, the only committee that seems to partially consider racism in society is Dismantling Racism, which is still more specifically focused inward on the ELCA.

Two passed motions from the CRLC's report of the recent meeting are worth noting. Motion 1 addresses the need to replace a committee member to "maintain representation from the Indigenous perspective."[120] Motion 2 "petition[s] the Church Council to appoint

[117] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

[118] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

[119] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

[120] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

two additional members to the commission, including one who is Arab/Middle Eastern and one who is of African national descent."[121] These motions address a quota structure that permeates much of the ELCA's internal machinations. Quota discussions were central to the dialog and compromises that helped establish the ELCA, continue to be an essential element of ELCA introspection, and are likely critical to CRLC's future recommendations. Forde was an "impassioned"[122] opponent of quotas and argued that the work of the CNLC accomplished little over three years "except one new idea – inclusiveness."[123] It seems ironic that a system that was established more than three decades ago, purportedly to address racism and inclusivity, is still relied on to fix the system it was meant to avoid from the beginning. It is unclear how a renewed focus on the governance of a quota system may address racism within the ELCA.

Without putting too much emphasis on the efforts of the CRLC, it begs the question of whether the ELCA is ready to be a national change agent for social action. While internal examinations certainly have a place in church polity, such efforts do not seem aligned with Forde's idea of radical Lutheranism. On the contrary, a radical Lutheran approach appears likely to focus more on our external neighbor and less on the church body itself. How can a church body that admits to a flawed, racist organizational model (implicitly implied by the creation of the CRLC) hope to be a leader against racism in the broader society? While racism should be addressed wherever it is found, the

[121] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

[122] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 172.

[123] Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger*, 172.

ELCA continues a shallow external positioning on the subject while spending valuable time and resources on an internal issue.

It seems the ELCA exhibits signs of organizational irrationality. With one concerted effort, the CRLC is asked to address an issue that should have been actively addressed in 1987 at the ELCA's inception. Likely, the deliberate ambiguity that Forde observed is partly responsible for the ELCA not adequately addressing internal racism. However, the ELCA also issued the *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* social statement in 1993. Apparently, no other externally facing statements have been made. Paradoxically, the ELCA continues to focus on quotas and internal racism while paying minimal attention to societal racism.

The question remains whether the ELCA can adopt a more radicalized Lutheran theology that focuses more on the church and church members freed to do God's work, particularly social justice work. Despite some signs that the ELCA could change, significant organizational momentum must be overcome to facilitate positive change and support more action on social issues. The ELCA seems content to draft, publish, and then sit on social statements and social messages. Unfortunately, a catalyst to encourage real activity by the church and church members is missing. It is appropriate for the ELCA to consider its own reformation. Like Luther in the 16th century, who was in part motivated by his church members being exploited by the practice of purchasing indulgences to pay for internal church projects, e.g., St. Peter's Cathedral, the ELCA must look to its church members in the context of the society they are living. ELCA church members and their neighbors are suffering from injustice, oppression, racism, heterosexism, genderism,

poverty, unequal access to healthcare, and all the other social ills apparent in the U.S. today. The church should be the voice to cry out for equal justice for its members and society. Advocacy for social action is the DNA of the Lutheran church.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

As the 20th century ended, many mainline Protestant traditions felt the need to merge and create new, bigger, and hopefully better church bodies. The Lutheran churches in America were no exception. In the early 1980s, the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) merged to create the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with over five million members across the U.S. That period is also denoted as a time of increasing religious plurality, the beginning of extreme partisan polity, and the growth of (real and perceived) social issues. For example, the emergent ELCA had to struggle to cope with questions related to female clergy and homosexual church members, both ordained and lay. In other words, from its inception, the ELCA was forced to deal with complex social issues in a manner that did not exclude points of view from its merged church bodies.

Further, Trexler notes that the "American culture is generally indifferent to religion -- turning often to a superficial piety that has virtually no understanding of sin or grace, repentance and renewal, or doctrines and dogma, of depth and substance. An increasing disinterest in denominations is difficult for a denomination like Lutheranism for whom doctrine is foundational."[124] In other words, the circumstances surrounding the formation of the ELCA were complex, challenging to maneuver through, and rapidly changing. The ELCA used compromise as the de facto strategy to respond to social change and support

[124] Trexler, *High Expectations*, 207.

the health of the church body. The ELCA has mainly been successful in this compromise strategy, but likely at the cost of more social activism.

One central character involved in the creation of the ELCA was Gerhard Forde. At the time, he was a well-respected theologian and a thought leader of a traditional, conservative Lutheran school of thought. To be a Lutheran theologian or student of theology at the time, one had to be engaged in dialogue with Forde's thinking. Likely because of his stature as an august theologian and preacher, Forde was called to participate on the Committee for the New Lutheran Church (CNLC), was a commissioner with the American Lutheran Church (ALC), and was on occasion spokesperson for the ALC. In addition to his role(s) with the CNLC, Forde published an article, "'Radical Lutheranism'" [which] was the lead article in Volume I, Number 1 (Spring, 1987) of the Lutheran Quarterly, New Series."[125] Marianna Forde titles the chapter of her book on Gerhard *Radical Lutheranism, Lutheran Spirituality*, underscoring the critical position Gerhard foresaw for radical Lutheranism. It was an essential framework for understanding and living into Lutheran spirituality. Paulson reinforces this idea when he writes that:

> "Something ... dramatic happens with God, however, because the law truly comes to an end. What lies beyond the law is not evil chaos, or harsh determinism, but a promise that is absolutely certain. Luther found that beyond the law one finds not the mystical silence of participating in a gracious law but a person—Christ—who speaks his singular absolution through a worldly preaching office. Salvation is not silence but new speech."[126]

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[125] Forde, *Gerhard O. Forde*, 124.

[126] Steven D. Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 61.

It is this dramatic opportunity, given in salvation, for Christians, and as described here, the ELCA, to engage in the "new speech" mainly targeting social justice issues surrounding the church.

As explored in this analysis, radical Lutheranism is a theological approach based on Christians being set free to do God's will. It is radical in that it goes far beyond the call of most mainline Protestant traditions that focus on the benevolence of a loving God, forgiving all, and encouraging each saved Christian to lead their best life; however, it may be individually defined. Forde espoused a radical Lutheran theology that provided a counterpoint to an individualistic society that was not so concerned with questions of moral, religious, and ethical guidelines. In *Radical Lutheranism,* Forde clearly noted that by proclamation of God's word, church members were made new creatures. Like the new Adam, they were emancipated from the bondage of their free will and could focus on doing God's will.

Despite a vocalized penchant for theology that was invested in social action from his earliest work, Forde was more circumspect in *Radical Lutheranism* about what this freedom to do God's will had to do with social activity. Forde may have assumed it was so apparent that a theology of radical Lutheranism and social action were fully integrated, so much being the same thing, that he did not waste much text on the topic. For the most part, it is treated as a given except near the end of the article, where Forde describes his desire to "cease the silly debates about whether the church's mission is proclamation *or* development, personal salvation *or* social justice [emphases in the original], etc., and get on with the business of taking care of this world and the neighbor as lovingly, wisely, and

pragmatically as our gifts enable."[127] Forde's theological vision rejected an either/or mentality. It was all part of our salvific responsibility to care for the world and neighbor by doing God's will.

Another element to note about Forde's ideas in *Radical Lutheranism* is the mission's expansiveness to care for God's work. Forde explicitly includes the world and the neighbor wherever we find them. This inclusive worldview affects how we should think about radical Lutheranism regarding social actions. A strict reading of Forde's point of view suggests that any effort toward a single social issue du jour is misguided. Instead, any injustice, oppression, or inequality must be addressed wherever it is found, both globally and individually. Forde's radical Lutheran theology empowers the church to fight injustices everywhere and at any time. By contrast, the emergent ELCA, which publishes periodical social statements and social messages, seems out of place and out of touch. Forde refers to this notion as "radical unconditionality,"[128] where we do good "spontaneously and naturally."[129] This is a call to social action for all injustices at all times. It is radically all-encompassing.

As argued above, the ELCA is uniquely positioned to be a radical change agent for the social injustice issues that plague our contemporary society. The ELCA has the calling, the theology, and the history to work towards God's will for radical social action. However, it requires significant changes to how the ELCA governs itself and the role it

[127] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 17.

[128] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 16.

[129] Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 16.

sees for itself in our partisan society. The ELCA should renounce all practices that make it a "me-too" mainline Protestant tradition. Lutherans should live into their confessional faith as a unique and called tradition to change the world and love our neighbors. The ELCA should find ways to spend less energy on internal matters, e.g., the Commission on the Renewal of the Lutheran Church (CRLC) focusing on internal racism. This ongoing navel-gazing does nothing to promote and support actual social actions that can benefit the ELCA's neighbors today. Rather than a radical approach of living into the Lutheran faith, the ELCA often pursues a middle-of-the-road approach that accomplishes little and only pleases the organizational bureaucrats. Again, reflecting Forde, a sense of deliberate ambiguity obscures the ELCA's purpose and mission as the body of Christ.

Not only should the ELCA be a change agent for social action, but it should also work to establish itself as a national role model of how a religious body can address myriad social injustices. Like other Protestant bodies, some in the ELCA seem more concerned about declining enrollment than they are about escalating injustice. Instead, the ELCA should vocalize its priorities with the love of God and neighbor first, membership counts, and church quotas last. By establishing a radical departure from the policies of most mainline Protestant churches, the ELCA could stand apart and stand for religious values. Instead of middle-of-the-road polity and diluted theology that often seems to support antinomianism, the ELCA can stand alone as the defender of God's creation's inalienable rights.

While Forde advocated for Radical Lutheranism more than three decades ago, the ELCA has done little to adopt its fundamental tenets. Instead, the ELCA has evolved into a Protestant denomination that is little different from its peers. As Forde suggested in

1987, little separated us from other Protestants, yet the possibility existed to become radically different. That possibility still exists today; frankly, it is more necessary than in Forde's writing. Injustices and partisanship have increased, yet the American church, including the ELCA, continues to lament that the church body is shrinking, making it harder to be relevant. It is time to dust off *Radical Lutheranism* and instigate the changes necessary to make it a reality.

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