



Forde's Radical Lutheranism & The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

1 A Three Pronged Approach to a 21st Century
Lutheran Reformation/Re-Formation 3

As submitted to the Augustana District by Gordon Huesby
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Lutheran Church in North America is becoming irrelevant. It is disintegrating, splintering, shrinking, drifting from its radical origins, its roots. As a result, the Lutheran enterprise has lost the respect of many Christians and non-Christians alike. It is seen as passé, as a kind of “gated community”, self-absorbed, without much to offer. That is the way many of its own members think of it, and so they also leave. They leave not only their church and join another (that happens), but some simply leave “the faith” (as they perceive it to be) altogether.

1st, this paper proposes to begin with Dr. Gerhard Forde’s accurate assessment of the condition of the Lutheran Church in North America: in order to stop their slide into religious oblivion, Lutherans do not need to become like other denominations, especially the ones which seem to be “successful”. Rather Lutherans need to become even more radical Lutherans, Lutherans who reclaim and embrace their radical faith as articulated by Martin Luther. The 2nd point of this proposal is this: such a renewal will require not only a 21st Century Reformation (a recapture of the meaning of grace and faith) but also a 21st Century Re-Formation, a reconstituting of Lutheran congregational life (from a “gated-community” mentality to a “missional membership mindset”). The 3rd point is this: The radical Lutheran Church’s invitation to all to “come and see” will then come from radical Lutheran disciples trained by radical Lutheran pastors who were schooled at radical Lutheran Seminaries so that all will know in depth what “Radical Lutheranism” means, and why it is so valuable.

THE FIRST PRONG

The First Prong

A RETURN TO THE RADICAL LUTHERAN REFORMATION FAITH:

The “Radical Lutheranism” as articulated by Dr. Forde is the model we should return to; preaching it boldly, teaching it boldly, consistently, from seminaries to pulpits to Sunday Schools to every home. Please refer to the essays titled “The Way Things Are – How the World Works” and “Reflections Based on ... The Bondage of the Will” as examples of the nature and purpose of the “radical” faith.

How The World Works Preface

Why this little essay? What's behind it?

Among other attitudes, we encounter the following ideas and opinions in our world today, such as:

1. It is said, “**We live in a post-Christian age**”. If we didn't know it or appreciate it before, our global travel and our global news carriers have made us see that the world is full of religions and believers of all sorts. And there is no shortage of people willing and eager to explain and defend that fact by saying that one idea, one system, one tradition, one religion, is as good or valid or valuable as any other. Take your pick. This essay does not share such a view. It should not take much to find credible examples to disprove such a conclusion.

2. It is said, “**We live in a post-denominational age**”. In our USA, at least, the historic roots of Christian groups are more and more seen as causes of disunity, as passé, as irrelevant, or at least confusing to a non-churched pedestrian. “We simply need to believe in Jesus who died for us”. Or, at least, “He is a good example to follow”. Keep it simple. Doctrines are hair-splitting details, academic games of the mind: you've got to believe this, or that, or something else, lots of “elses”. This essay makes the case that what we believe (doctrines) really does matter if the Gospel is to be heard and preserved.

3. It is said, “**Our 'spirituality' satisfies whatever religious dimensions we need in our lives**”. We tell ourselves we really don't need the institutional church of whatever historical roots. We tell ourselves we don't want religion to be “unreasonable”. We don't need to be “fanatics” about it. “Therefore my 'spirituality' is built on what I think is acceptable to me, mostly within my comfort zone, where I have some control on how things work when it comes to religion”. This essay seeks to point out how inadequate this approach is, and why it can't stand up to reality.

4. It is said, “**You must believe the Gospel**”; “**Salvation depends on your acceptance of the Gospel**”. “**You must make a decision for Christ**”. Although faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior is what we are meant to arrive at, this essay seeks to prevent us all from making the Gospel into another Law to be

kept: “You must believe this’. “You have to accept that”. No matter how sincere or pious we want to be, being religious is not the way to, or the goal of, life.

With this very brief introduction, it is important to understand that this essay is in no way an attempt to cover all the bases of Christian faith and life, not even all the fundamentals. It is not meant to address all the many very important elements of a Christian’s life in this world, elements which at some place and time rightfully should be addressed. Neither is it meant to avoid them. It is, however, one attempt to identify and describe our place in our world as creatures, within the Biblical context and framework so as to know a bit more about who we are and where we’re at.

The Way Things Are – How The World Works

A WORLD VIEW FROM ONE CHRISTIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

A. CREATOR, CREATION, CREATURES

1. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...." (Gen. 1:1)

The "heavens and the earth" is the realm of God, where He rules with total power and authority. The "heavens", the rest of this universe, the cosmos, with its galaxies and "dark matter", its suns and comets and planets, here and light years away, is also the realm of God. God owns it all. So also the earth: this planet. (Psalm 24:1) God has arranged and established it (among many others?) for the purposes of the gift of life: microbial life, plant life, animal life, marine life, avian life, human life.

2. This planet, this "corner" of creation has been formed and arranged for the benefit of its occupants (Isa. 45:18), chief among them being humanity. The earth is assigned to us by God to be humanity's realm, our "estate", to share, enjoy, preserve, develop, manage and preside over (Gen. 1:26, 28, 2:15; Psalm 8:6).

3. Unlike other creatures, humans alone have been gifted with the tools to "take charge" of more than the affairs of their own lives. (Psalm 8:3-8) They have the tools to care for their communities, their cultures, their environment, their realm. Endowed by their Creator with powers to think, decide, plan, sense, feel, dream, work, build, trust, confer, learn, they were called to fulfill their human potential to sustain, reproduce, subdue, have dominion over, and "dress, till, and keep" their realm. Beneath and within the overall realm of God, humans were given their own realm. God made this world, this planet, to be the place where life under His righteous reign would mean their/our fulfillment. He made them/us to be His creatures, nothing less, nothing more. This is why every human being has value and purpose and dignity.

B. HOW IS ALL THIS SUPPOSED TO WORK?

1. It can only work according to God's perfect will. That **IS** how it works. His good and gracious will for us is revealed to us humans as both promise and direction:

Promise – He will never abandon us. (Heb. 13:5b) He will forever love us and all of His creation. That is “good news” (gospel). He invites us to trust Him. We have His Word on this.

Direction – In ordering His world, He calls forth righteousness, justice and mercy from us. He will judge us when it is called for (Heb. 12:5-11). That, too, is love (law). We have His Word on this also.

2. With God, His perfect will is always at work, in all creation, all the time. How could it be otherwise? Who could trust a fickle god who now and then, “willy-nilly”, doesn't exercise his own will?

The realm of nature: microbial life, plant life, animal life, marine life, avian life, this realm is governed by “the laws of nature” (the will of God): the laws of survival, reproduction, predation, gravity, thermo-dynamics, genetics, momentum, climate, etc. Violation of the laws of nature will result in damage to, or destruction of nature and/or humanity.

The realm of humanity: personal and corporate/community human life is also governed by certain laws of nature, and by “moral law” as well (the will of God): the laws regarding human life and property. Violation of the moral laws will also result in damage to, or destruction of nature and/or humanity. (Gal.6:7).

3. Humanity's (every human; regardless of nationality, culture, current belief system, history, sexuality, race, age) assignment on this earth is:

Trust God's promises and Obey God's directions.

Take care of/for each other and preserve this “cosmic garden” (this earth).

Because of these assignments every human being has dignity, worth, and purpose.

Be satisfied as a human. Humans are the stewards of this earthly “estate”.

Be satisfied to **BE** a human. Humans aren't equipped to be more than human, to be “like God” (the 1st temptation: Gen. 3:5), to “lord it over” anyone. That is not their realm, their territory. That is the classic example of sin as “trespassing”.

4. Humanity's powers and humanity's limitations.

God has gifted humanity with the talents to deal with the affairs of this realm, this world. Humans have been given brains, intelligence, reason, conscience, and will-power to do this. Science and the Arts are the categories in these affairs.

The Arts allow us to give expression to what our senses and imagination reveal to us. The Arts are of human origin; from exquisite to grotesque.

Science (all branches] throws its considerable attention on all the elements, materials and powers pertaining to this realm. It serves God's gift of reason to sort out the "what, where, when, and how" of this cosmic planet and its cosmic "neighborhood"; from seedtime and harvest, to wildlife and wilderness preservation, to raw materials and oceans, to the bright and dark matters of space; in other words, nature and all its components. And that is as far as science can go. It is not in competition with the Bible.

Faith and reason are not enemies. Reason employs science in the management of this realm; not always perfectly, because we aren't perfect.

Faith is also a gift of god; indeed it was His first gift. Humans were created to trust God – both His promises and His wise guidance. Faith permits humans to "see" the "who" and "why" behind and above the "what", "where", "when", and "how" of our realm. Faith connects us with God's meaning and purpose and the fulfillment of our lives.

C. SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT!

1. All humans must and will believe. It's "in our DNA". On our own, our imaginations and reason and will-power will move us to believe something or someone. We are bound to. Unless God, the Creator, reveals Himself to us, we will inevitably settle for trusting someone or something in creation (the created rather than the Creator) to solve our ultimate predicaments. After all, what else is left to trust? Here we meet the limitations of all humanity.

2. The harmonies described in the opening chapters of Genesis established for human life have been disrupted. The carrying out of creaturely assignments to live together as caretakers has been interrupted and corrupted on this planet. Suffering, pain and alienation are known to everyone. An alien and hostile element has inserted itself into human existence, resulting in enmity, conflict, abuse, anxiety, disharmonies; what the news media reports daily, world-wide.
3. What is the source of evil, hatred, greed, fear, suffering? Here, all humanity collides with a most profound mystery. With or without any explanation, we know that somehow a powerful “spoiler” has invaded every human. Somehow we allow ourselves to be convinced that humanity is on its own. Everything depends on us. We must call our own shots. We decide how we are going to deal with ourselves and others. “After all, it’s OUR realm, isn’t it?” (Not ultimately!) We can do as we “see fit”. But, left to ourselves, defining what “fit” means causes arguments which lead to wars which lead to hatred. Deciding for ourselves what is “right” and “wrong” was never assigned to OUR realm. God retains that authority in HIS realm. He sets the standards.
4. The Creator’s word to us has been from the beginning: “Trust My promises. Trust (obey) My instructions. I tell you the truth: both are for the purposes of protecting and preserving your life, all life; providing for your good. Both are expressions of my perfect love for you and all”.

D. THE REAL PROBLEM

1. Evil raises its ugly head, camouflaged as a great new idea. Someone (Satan) said, “Humans can have more power and authority than they were led to believe they could. They don’t have to settle for being human, or being a caretaker creature. They can be ‘like God’, or at least like ‘a god’ – deciding for themselves what they are willing to accept as ‘right and wrong’, ‘good and evil.’” “Did God say...?” is their/our favorite phrase.
2. Humanity’s problem isn’t making mistakes, being uninformed, falling from some original state of perfection, and now only needs some correcting, repairs, and mending, some

“tweaking”, some “assistance”. Humanity’s problem is its fall from its primary posture of faith (yes, even in the “Garden of Eden”), from trusting God’s promises and God’s wisdom. It is a fall FROM faith.

3. Humanity’s problem is thus a misplaced faith, a displaced faith, a replaced TRUST, now inevitably limited to the realm of nature. Again, after all, what’s left? In ancient days, humans worshipped nature gods: fire, wind, mountains, rivers, stars, etc. Today, we still worship nature gods: science, for some, holds the answer to everything. Celebrities, athletes, astrology, earthly wealth and power, etc., all can also be false magnets of faith, false sources of meaning and value, false answers to our ultimate predicaments; all found in “nature”, the worldly order.
4. Humanity’s problem is its attempt to be something other, something more, than human; more than steward, manager, caretaker of this planet with all its wealth and resources and beauty and rights and privileges to enjoy life; trying to be something we can’t be: super-humans, god-like, assuming way more responsibility than our shoulders and wisdom can, or were ever meant to, bear. “Sin” is the Bible’s word for all of the above.
5. Humanity’s problem ultimately and finally and, worst of all, is its total lack of wisdom and power to fix any of this. It’s simply “beyond” us.

E. WHERE THIS LEAVES US

1. It leaves us alienated, separated, estranged from our Creator and each other; and we are lonely.
2. It leaves us “harassed, helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”. “Adrift, tossed about by every wind and whim;” “with eyes that cannot see”, “ears that cannot hear”, “loving darkness rather than light”. And, worst of all: He (the Lord) gave them up to their own devices”. His will will be done. He will judge us when it is called for. He will discipline us because He loves us. (Heb. 12:5-11)

3. It leaves us with a desperate need to realize our predicament; with a desperate need to find a genuine solution beyond and outside of ourselves because there is none in us or in all creation.
4. The most tragic, devastating and destructive consequence we are left with is our desperation to construct a religion of our own making. We all were, and are always, meant to be believers. It is the one unique characteristic of human existence. The God who made us all intends to walk with us in His garden, this “garden”, this planet, and beyond, to His new eternal GARDEN. But we would rather “walk in a garden of our own making”. And in our hubris and religious pretensions, we will construct every reason and alibi and justification to have it our way. All religions, local and world-wide, are nothing but our self-righteous, self-made substitutes at work. And devastating religious wars are the result. It’s what we do in “our garden”.
5. Our Lord will have the final word on all of this. Unless something else happens, it will not be: “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master”. God’s final justice awaits.

F. THE REAL SOLUTION

1. If the “fix” is really beyond our reach, what then is the solution? It is also found in the “will of God” where it has been and will always be found. “The good and gracious will of God is done indeed without our prayer. But we pray in this petition that it may be done among us.”
–Martin Luther.
2. The real solution remains in God’s control, God’s realm. He reserves the right, the authority, the power, and the glory in this matter because only His solution can and will be perfect. God has insisted on taking full responsibility for the solution. He refuses to share that responsibility with anyone. He doesn’t need or seek our “help”. Our “help” can only “get in the way”.
3. In order for us to know God’s good and gracious will, we will need to meet Jesus!

G. THE WORD OF GOD

1. Jesus is what God has to say to us about our condition, our human predicament. (John 1:1)
2. Jesus is what God has to say to us about our foolishness and failures, our self-righteousness and pretensions, our weaknesses and misplaced trust. Jesus is God's Word for us about His will for us. It is as if God were to say (the Old Testament prophets would have said, "Thus says the Lord"): "I know all about you and what you're thinking and what you're going through. I know all about your doubts and your frustrations, your fears and hopes and pretensions. I know all about the consequences you find yourselves facing. I'm really sorry you and your families and neighbors (world) have to suffer the way you do. I said you could trust me, but you didn't."
3. "Listen! What I made I loved. What I made I still love. Through your parents, I made you. And I love you. I always have and always will love you, weak and wounded though you are. Sometimes it will be 'tough love'. I still expect mercy and justice to be at the top of your earthly assignments list. (God is not mocked. Whatever we sow we will reap; Gal. 6:7.) Even then, my perfect love for you will come in perfect justice. My will will be done, for you.
4. "Though you must die, I still want you to trust me. I want you to believe my word about my will for you. I want you to know my love for you is without condition, without limits, without question. I have chosen to say that to you in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, my beloved son.
5. "Predictably, with your misplaced trust, you rejected Him. You killed Him. You thought you didn't need Him. You trusted your own solutions. You thought you were done with Him. But you weren't. 'I am the Lord; there is none besides me' (Isa. 43:11-13). 'I kill and I make alive' (I Sam. 2:6). Even here, in the death of Jesus, my will is done (Isa. 53:10-11). You killed Him. I raised Him from the dead. I said to Him, 'Well done, Son. Now they can know that nothing will keep them from our love'. Now they can know when I say I love you! I forgive you! I am serious; forever serious. You are forever loved. You are forever mine."

H. THAT'S THE GOSPEL TRUTH.

1. Is that Good News? What could possibly be better news than that Good News?! God has reclaimed us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That's His decision. That's done! He did that! Period! Not comma! Period!
2. Don't even think you can add anything to this to complete it, or improve it, or make it valid. You can't. When you try, you expose where you've really placed your faith. You demonstrate your insistence to trust something in yourself. To insinuate any human thought, word, or deed here is to retreat back into human effort. No matter how pious, it accomplishes nothing.
3. The Gospel, in "its truth and purity", is the Gospel without any human elaboration, embellishment or contribution. The gift of God's love, which means His grace and forgiveness and life in His presence is truly and purely and simply yours. "The King has spoken." His edict is issued!
4. Don't mess with it. Rejoice in it. Give thanks for it. It's yours because God said it's yours. Period!
5. This is why Martin Luther gave this explanation of the 3rd Article of the Apostles Creed: **I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, in the same manner as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.**
6. We may not realize it, but this act of God (the death and resurrection of Jesus) is the source of
 - the deepest love you can possibly have
 - the deepest joy you can possibly have
 - the deepest peace you can possibly have
 - the deepest reason you can live with thanksgiving everyday of your life.

I. HOW CAN WE KNOW THAT?

1. **The Word**: It's His promise – for all people – “we’ve got it in writing”, from His Word, the ancient Scriptures, the Bible (II Tim. 3:14-16). But, how can I know that promise includes me? I can know it because God has also chosen to bring this truth home to me as a “special delivery”, via:
2. **The Sacraments**: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the very promises in His Word are the same promises offered in the Sacraments and aimed precisely and personally at each of us.

Baptism: God says, “Let me underline my indelible, irrevocable promise given in My Word with earthly water at your Baptism. This water is splashed on your head. The Cross is traced on your brow. You were brought to Him. You were drawn to Him. This promise is “for you”. You are washed, named, claimed, “adopted”, forgiven, sealed in God’s love, now and forever. At your Baptism, God’s good and gracious will is aimed right at you, and delivered -- personally. His aim is perfect, then and there! Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!

Lord’s Supper: “It is finished” was true for Jesus. Not so for us. The devil, the world, and our own “flesh” still assail us. Their doom is sure, but it is not yet. So our Lord chooses to drive home His promises again and again and again, until He calls us home. The death He died, He died for you. His body broken, His blood shed, for you. He really died. And He was really raised from the dead and promised “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them”. So He gave them bread and wine and said “This is my body. This is my blood.” Remember this. This is always “For you”. “Do this for the remembrance of me.” So again, God aims His forgiving and life sustaining grace right at you. The bread is in your hand and mouth. The wine is on your lips and tongue. This is our “altar call” where God reminds us of His decision to hold us in His arms. His aim is perfect. His good and gracious will is aimed right at you, and delivered -- personally, right then and there. Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!

3. **And it’s unconditional**. There are no qualifying steps you have to take, no hoops to jump through, no “decisions” to make, no promises or pledges to keep. You simply have God’s

faithful Word which draws you to Him and creates faith in Him (Rom. 10:17), that faith which He so lovingly seeks in you because "...the words 'for you' require simply a believing heart". Thus you live in joy and peace and gratitude as you are gifted to do so.

J. WHERE THIS LEAVES US

1. It leaves us, in a certain sense, back in Genesis. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation". Faith enables us to "see" God's realm and our realm, and know the difference. We are enabled to see and know His good and gracious will, and our place in it. It finally "dawns" on us. (II Pet. 1:19)
2. In the first place, what this means for you as a Christian is that everything is new (Gal. 2:20; II Cor. 5:17). You have a new past. It is a forgiven past. And you have a new future. It is filled with hope and anticipation, not foreboding or despair. And you have a new now. You are captured by Christ's love for you. You hold a deep joy because He holds you. You now are given a peace which "passes all understanding". Your heart is at rest. You are a new you!

All because you have been given the gift of faith, the same gift God gave Adam. Your trust in him is precisely what God has always sought in all his human creatures. You become the very kind of creature God seeks to bless: bathed in His grace and promises, and robed in His righteousness, you have a new vision, a new heart, a new mind. You have been made new.

3. It also means for you as a Christian that you are made free. (John 8:32; Rom. 8:1-17; Gal. 5:1) Free from pervasive guilt (your new past). Free from the fear of death (your new future). Free from being self-absorbed, wondering, fretting, worrying about whether you have done enough, been sincere enough, good enough, faithful enough, nice enough (your new now). You are freed from such self-centeredness, so "self-conscious". You don't need to worry about whether you qualify for God's grace. You don't! Jesus claims you anyway! You have His word on it. (See above).

Such freedom allows us to see our world, our realm, as the arena of our proper and assigned stewardship. Here our life takes on meaning and purpose. We are free from worrying

about ourselves and our spiritual destiny to seek the welfare of our neighbors. We are free to engage in the affairs of our communities. Indeed, we are free to live our lives with our vocations, at our stations in life, our “standing places”, as expressions of God’s good and gracious will for us in our daily actions and involvements: family, schools, government, work and play, here to be humans, truly humans, simply humans, His creatures living and trusting Him for the outcome of all things; nothing more and nothing less.

4. Our Lord will have the final word on this also. “In my Father’s house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you...I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also”.

K. IN THE MEANTIME

1. We live in “the meantime”. **We live between the time** when Jesus “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,” (now exalted “to the highest place... with...the name that is above every name”) **and that time** determined by the will of God, when “at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:8-11). The will of God moves His world, our realm, inexorably toward that end, the fulfillment of our history, the fulfillment of our lives.
2. Until we arrive at that fulfillment, that climax of history and all things pertaining to this realm, our gracious Heavenly Father has given us “rest stops” and companions along the way. Every Lord’s Day, the weekly celebration of Jesus’ resurrection, we, together with our brothers and sisters in the faith, are invited to “the foretaste of the feast to come”. Here God has promised to meet us in His Word and Sacraments, to be proclaimed and administered in their “truth and purity”; faithful to the Gospel of “comfort and joy”, faithful to the prophetic Word moving us to acts of mercy and justice, faithful to the mutual edification of/for/from our brothers and sisters in the fellowship we share as we live out our salvation as disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

3. For the time being, we hold a dual citizenship; here in this “kingdom” and in “His Kingdom to come”. In this “meantime” God has called His people into His Church, “the assembly of believers where the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel”; which is where we also confess our faith, bear witness to God’s saving acts in Jesus; hear His Word proclaimed for our growth and development in this faith. There is no other type of community, institution, organization, or source, where this Biblical view of our world and our lives in it will be proclaimed. Until “His Kingdom comes”, and the great bell of this age tolls one final time, this is where we belong.

L. SO, DEAR READER, I COMMEND THIS WORLD VIEW TO YOU

I have nothing of greater value to give to you than this: what I have written for you to cherish and hold to all your life. I am indebted to many pastors and teachers who shared their insights with me through the years. I am especially indebted to Dr. Gerhard O. Forde, deceased, former Professor of Theology at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. His insights from two of his publications have been especially helpful in clarifying for me the great truths of the Christian faith. I commend them both for your growth in Christ.

They are:

- Where God Meets Man, Luther’s Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel, 1972, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, MN
- On Being a Theologian of the Cross, 1997, Bethany Press, St. Paul, MN

Additional efforts of mine may be helpful. They may be obtained upon request:

- The Shape of Our Witness, 2009
- A Missional Format for Congregations, 2009
- A Missional Membership Mind-set, 2013
- Why We Worship the Way We Do, 2013

Reflections Based on Martin Luther's "Greatest Work": The Bondage of the Will

INTRODUCTION

The title of Luther's work may strike our 21st century ears as negative, morbid, almost ghoulish. That's because we are so used to hearing about something called "our free will". That sounds so much more pleasant, so expansive, so appealing. Yet, Martin Luther put his finger on something here which is at the very core of Christian faith. We will do well to understand what he was getting at.

Getting this right (understanding what Luther meant by "the bondage of the will") will mean:

- being truly free instead of being a captive
- being confident instead of being an anxious skeptic
- having faith instead of having disturbing doubt
- knowing love instead of knowing nagging fear
- knowing real joy instead of wearing a forced smile
- knowing true peace instead of anxiety
- Having a sound mind instead of an unsettled mind
- KNOWING WHY THE GOSPEL LIVES UP TO ITS MEANING: "GOOD NEWS"

Getting this right also implies we can get it wrong. As strange as it may sound, "the bound will" is not merely the opposite of "free will". We need to get both right.

We use the phrase "free will" fairly often. For example: "They took a free-will offering to help pay for the lunch". Or "I finished the project on my own time, of my own free will. No one forced me. I volunteered". Or "Don't pressure me. I'll become a Christian if and when I want to. That will be a decision of my own "free-will". One might ask, "So, what's the problem?" "Isn't bondage a problem?" How can something that sounds like the title to a Grade B Hollywood horror movie made for Halloween be so terribly important? And, lurking in the shadows behind this is a rather scary sounding thought called "predestination", an idea that sounds like fatalism, like we have no freedom at all, like everything we do or encounter has been predetermined, that we're only automatons going through the motions which someone else has as already required of us, like puppets on a string.

And to “pile it on”, Lutherans (followers of Luther’s thinking) often begin their worship services with these words: “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves....”

Nevertheless, it is the contention of these reflections that when we have examined the theme “the bondage of the will”, we will not be depressed at all. Rather, when the meaning of this dawns on us, we will be filled with unexpected (de)light.

We can pursue this task by arranging it in three sections:

1st – We begin with “predestination”, perhaps an unexpectedly bright place to start.

2nd – We continue by examining the “black hole” which accompanies all human existence.

3rd – We conclude with the realizations of the purposes of both the “bound” and the “free” will.

We shall not be left in despair. We shall find ourselves in the sunshine of true and lasting freedom.

Jesus promised, “...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-36).

So we proceed.

PART ONE: PREDESTINATION – THREE BIBLICAL PICTURES

1. The 13th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew records a number of Jesus’ parables. The 1st is known as the “Parable of the Sower and the Seed”. Later, in that same chapter, Jesus directs the story into what we have come to call the “Parable of the Soils and the Seed”. In both, the seeds are meant to be understood as God’s word; what he wants to reveal to us.

The 1st parable concentrates on the sower. By anybody’s standards, he is not normal. This sower (God) throws seed everywhere; on the road, on rocky land, in brier patches, and then, once in a while, some seeds land on good soil. In other words, God’s message (the Gospel: His love and saving words and works) is meant for and directed at everyone regardless of where they are in life, regardless of what their circumstances and conditions are, regardless of where they find themselves.

The upshot of all that is: God has not predestined some people to arrive in heaven and other people to arrive in hell. This parable teaches us God’s good will as promised is directed at every creature that ever existed, or does exist, or will exist.

2. The Apostle Paul conveyed the same message as Matthew, only in more direct fashion. The 1st chapter of Ephesians puts it “point blank”: “For He (God) chose us in Him (Jesus) **before the creation of the world.....**In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons (and daughters) through Jesus Christ...” In reading the 1st 14 verses of chapter one, there can be no other conclusion than this: Our heavenly Father’s (the Creator God of this universe) will for us, all of us, is to share His gift of life --- forever.

There are numerous passages scattered throughout the New Testament which repeat this theme.

3. The very 1st story of God’s purposes for his creation, the story of Adam and Eve, delivers the same promise unmistakably: “And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the garden—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were 1) the tree of life and 2) the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen.2:9). The second tree was off limits. That was reserved for God; His territory. The first tree (of life) was meant for them, and all of us, and all humanity, from the beginning.

To repeat, God has not predestined some people to arrive in heaven and other people to arrive in hell. This story also teaches us God’s promises are directed at every creature that ever existed, or does exist, or will exist: an unexpectedly bright place to start, indeed.

This is the central point St. Paul makes in his letter to the Romans. Multiple times he drives home the point of God’s good and gracious will for His creatures. And just before he turns his attention to some practical matters in his letter, he breaks out in a hymn of adulation and exultation:

“O, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?

*For **from Him and to Him, and through Him are all things.***

To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” (Rom. 11:33-36)

Now, what preceded and triggered this explosion of praise and adoration? It was what he said in the verse immediately ahead of this hymn, Vs. 32: **“For God has bound all men over to disobedience, so that He may have mercy on them all.”** We must explore how these texts relate to each other.

First of all, it means that God’s predestination of us all is meant for the good (“mercy”) of us all. It also means we need to understand the benefits of recognizing our bound will in order to understand the nature and reality of being set free in Christ. To do that, we must proceed into the Biblical understanding of the nature of human existence. Here we enter into the darkness of --

PART TWO: HUMAN EXISTENCE – BOUND IN A TRAP OF HUMANITY’S OWN MAKING

The Gospel writer, St. John puts it point-blank also: “...but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil (John 3:19).

St. Paul said something quite similar, but in very personal terms:

“We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For, I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:14-24).

The answer to that will follow in what is coming. For now, who has not experienced what St. Paul admits is his experience? He (Remember, this is the most famous disciple of Jesus, responsible for the most wide-spread missionary work of the 1st century) bears his soul. He says he is “...sold as a slave to

sin". He confesses he is **bound** to be the way he is. Sin corrupts our thoughts, words, and deeds, also our motives, emotions, even our will, so that, on our own, our will seeks (is bound) to resist God's will.

We must wonder how did it get that way? The answer is found back in the book of Genesis again, and in that exquisite story of "the Garden of Eden".

The story of Adam and Eve is about us, all of us:

"...the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his mouth, and man became a living being. Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there He put the man He had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground –trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.....The lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden. But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:7-9, 15-17).

"The serpent said, "You will not surely die...when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5).

Here, in this account, God's word sets a mirror before us to see, as Pogo's old comic strip once put it: "We have met the enemy, and they is us". What happens to them (Adam and Eve) happens to us. They (we) were predestined to enjoy (the tree of) life. That was a promise they (we) were meant to heed and trust. But they (we) listened to a different voice, a voice that seduced them (us) into self-centered pride. They (we) wanted "to be like God". They (we) wanted (**willed**) to set the terms they (we) would live under.

And they (we) "fell", but not so much downward, as into lusts and baser behavior, although often that is part of the consequences. No, rather they (we) "fell" UPWARD", (if you will) into a state of pretensions and hubris, thinking they (we) can "lord it over others", making them (us) in effect equal to lords (gods), "like God", an arrogant self-delusion which God will not ignore. "...you shall surely die..." is their (our) certain future. Darkness is descending.

We are now in “over our heads”. Knowing good and evil, i.e. determining right and wrong was not assigned to us . It is beyond our human wisdom. We have set a course into an ever-darkening tunnel. Where this takes us is not pleasant. It gets ugly. St. Paul tells us how ugly: He writes – “...it is written:

*There is no one righteous, not even one,
there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.
All have turned away; they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good, not even one.
Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit.
The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,
and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.
Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that
every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God”
(Romans 3:9-19).*

As unflattering as it sounds, if we’re honest with ourselves, every one of us can relate to this. It probes into our hearts and core attitudes, not just our words and behavior. This is not hyperbole. St. Paul refuses to relent here. Remember, he summed it all up saying, “God has bound all men over to disobedience...”, making it clear that from the Garden of Eden to this very day, our insistence to trust ourselves instead of God is the root of all sins. The absence of trust in God, His promises and His precepts, is our undoing. Indeed, we “shall surely die”.

The blackness of the grave looms ahead. We are bound for the cemetery. There is nothing we can do, nothing we can say, “...every mouth silenced...” No excuses, alibis, justifications, placing blame on others, **nothing**. There is no cure for death. The patient must die. This is the “black hole” of human existence. There is no exit. Not even light from it (us) can escape. This is how St. Paul portrays the new Christians in Ephesus when he first met them. It would have been the same for us:

*“As for you, you were **dead** in your trespasses and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts (will). Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:1-3).*

No human effort changes the situation. No “new years resolutions” to try harder, no “turning over a new leaf”, no “determined willpower” provides a way out of this dead end. Dead people can’t try harder. Thinking that can only make matters worse. Our wills are bound. They are useless in this case...

PART THREE – THE PURPOSE OF THE “BOUND” AND THE “FREE” WILL

...because the purpose of the “Bondage of the Will” is to clear the fog, clear the deck, clear the table, clear the debris of human self-righteousness, human pride, human pretensions, human rebellion. At one stage in St. Paul’s life, he was very proud of what he had, and had wanted to accomplish. But he came to realize that what he claimed to be so great and important: sincere religion and spirituality, actually turned out to be nothing; at best, rubbish to be swept away when compared to the promises of God (Phil. 3:4b-11). When we are rendered spiritually helpless, naked, broken, we are then open to hear God’s perfect promises, recognize God’s perfect faithfulness, discover God’s perfect gifts, and marvel that His call to us is irrevocable (Rom. 11:27). “He bound all men over to disobedience that **HE** may have mercy on them all”. His will is to claim you for that mercy. It’s yours. You can count on it.

When there is no room for us to add anything to what God promises and does, our (bound) willpower is trumped by His resurrection willpower. “You did not choose me. I chose you...” (John 15:5). When we think we have to make a decision, a promise, an act of sincerity, anything, we open the door to the inevitable questions about whether we did enough, or whether our motives were pure enough, or if we’ve been consistent enough. We can never know. Anything we think we can add here can only contaminate things; can only add the inevitable uncertainties which cling to our own efforts in all of this. So, here’s the “bottom line”: God’s perfect, eternal, loving will has been announced. God has carried out His will for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, wrapping his arms around us in absolute

and perfect love, making us His children, drawing us to Him, drawing us to trust Him, creating a life of faith in His will and ways and reconciling power.

Therefore, “don’t mess with it! Rejoice in it! Give thanks for it!” It’s yours because God said so. Your “free will”, your “decision”, isn’t asked for or required. In Christ, the gift of His love, forgiveness, compassion, mercy and life is truly, simply, and purely yours. The King has spoken! His edict is issued.

So the **“bondage of the will”** serves its intended purpose by tying us to our helplessness, to our sins, to prevent us from thinking we need to “be like God”, and thus miss the point, the “good news”, the Gospel. Now that our eternal destiny has been promised to us, **now we are free to turn our attention away from fretting about ourselves** and thus to think about our neighbors, our neighborhoods, indeed our world, our “garden”, this planet. **This world is where our free will does work**, within moral and legal limits. Here and now we are free to make the decisions regarding our daily lives and all that comes with that. Of course we will pray for God’s wisdom and will to be done in all things. Of course we will seek His counsel from His Word. But, we discover that **trusting God’s word is living according to God’s will**. It finally “dawns on us”:

*“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (our will).....And we have the words of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts”
(II Pet. 1:3-4, 19).*

Indeed, now the Gospel “dawns” on us. This is a new day and it is bright. We have every reason to rejoice. Here is true and lasting freedom. Unexpected (de)light, indeed!

THE SECOND PRONG

The Second Prong

RECONSTITUTING A RADICAL LUTHERAN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE:

As Americans, we have organized our lives together according to the model of a constitutional format. Thus, our church constitutions express what needs to be said to make us legally qualified as bonified and recognized community organizations. They tend to support a “business-as-usual” approach to church life. They are usually not strong statements bearing witness to a “missionary outpost” attitude. Please refer to the notebook titled “The Shape of Our Witness” as an example of a radical congregational approach to a “Missional Membership Mindset”.

A Missional Congregational Framework The Shape of Our Witness

Both the nature and the purpose of the Church can be communicated clearly to the members and potential members of our congregation(s) in such a way as to continuously, openly, and specifically guide their activities toward the fulfillment of Biblical directions and priorities. **The proposed framework presented in this paper serves three Biblical foundational goals:**

1. **Discipleship.** Jesus commanded His Church to “make disciples” (Matt. 28), not simply to add “new members” on church rosters.

2. **Fellowship.** “Koinonia”, the Greek word for fellowship, in the New Testament, can refer to:
 - a. the participation in the Lord’s Supper (I Cor. 10)
 - b. the participation in mutual life together with “fellow-members of the body of Christ” (I Cor. 12)
 - c. the very deep and personal unity with God; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in faith, hope, love and devotion (Matt. 6, Phil. 2, I John 1)
 - d. the participation in contributing to the relief of others in want (Rom. 15)These references clearly point to more than just pleasant coffee hours and social halls.

3. **Stewardship.** Genesis 1:27-28 calls every one of us to be responsible for how we use what we touch. That assignment has never been rescinded. Servanthood is the posture of the Christian in society. Our faith is active in love to neighbor. We’re “mid-level managers” of 100% of what is “ours”. That is more than money for the Sunday offerings.

These three goals can and need to be seen in relationship to each other. It is this interrelationship which is the framework of a missional church. It becomes the “shape of our witness”.

In the simplest of all terms, these goals can be expressed as follows:

1. What comes in.
2. What goes out.
3. How and where it happens.

In other terms:

1. In – Nurturing: the goal is Discipleship
2. Out – Serving: the goal is Stewardship
3. How/where -- Facilitating: the goal is in-depth and purposeful Fellowship.

In more specific terms:

1. Nurture: Word and Sacraments, Teach and Equip (w/both Law and Gospel)
2. Serving: Word and Deed (local, regional, global; individually and collaboratively)
3. Facilitating: People, Property, and Resources (congregational life together, shared relationships “on the trail”)

SUMMED UP: “BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING” (Gen. 12:1-3, Eph.2:8-10)

In the words of the Old Covenant (Testament): Gen. 12:1-3.

In the words of the New Covenant (Testament): Eph. 2:8-10.

This framework is built upon the “Chief Cornerstone” – Jesus, the Word, on the foundation of the final authority of the Holy Scriptures, on the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions.

In congregational practice, it means that these goals shape the way the congregation constantly sees and understands itself and its actions.

Congregational life and action can then be appropriately organized with this framework:

1. A Discipleship Ministry (in)

All matters related to Worship (Word and Sacraments)

All matters related to Teaching (edifying and equipping)

2. A Stewardship Ministry (out)

All matters related to Local Service (word and deed)

All matters related to Regional and Global Service (word and deed)

---All both personal and collaborative

3. A Fellowship Ministry (how/where)

All matters related to Hospitality and Friendship

All matters related to Membership and Leadership

All matters related to Congregational Property

All matters related to Congregational Finance

These ministries could be guided by stand-alone committees or boards; or they could be groups tasked for such guidance on a unified Church Council. In any event a congregational president, secretary, and treasurer would most likely be required for good order. There is nothing new about congregational councils or committees. What is important is to see how these aspects of congregational life **depend on each other**, how they **serve each other**, how they **derive their meaning from each other**, and **add meaning to each other**.

Not one of these three goals or aspects or facets of congregational life is less or more important than the others. Not one of these goals can be dismissed or neglected without great damage to the health of the congregation. There is no function here that is more “spiritual” than any other. Every one of them needs mature, wise and faithful leaders and members, from the newest to the most mature disciple.

Of course, the Pastor(s), as the Shepherd(s) of the congregation would be as directly involved as time and talent would dictate. That is simply common sense, and a given.

Prayer: Under girding all of this is the absolutely essential “army” of pray-ers. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain”. Thus, every member of the congregation holds an on-going, never ending, prayer meeting with our Heavenly Father. There are some whose only service possible may be prayer. They are, perhaps, of greater value to the missional life of the congregation than all other activities. St. Paul’s prayers for some of the congregations he helped establish (see Eph., Phil., Col.) are rich models for the goals represented by this framework. Let this praying never cease.

In order to establish a congregational missional mentality, the congregational budget, like its elected leadership would appropriately be organized and formatted according to these three goals. This would allow all to think through what it takes to do what we do, and how that relates to our congregational nature and purpose.

Most important is the interrelatedness of these goals, because that shows why they all have a valid and necessary role to fill in “the shape of our witness”. INDEED, ALL OF THIS IS OUR WITNESS. There are no shortcuts to this.

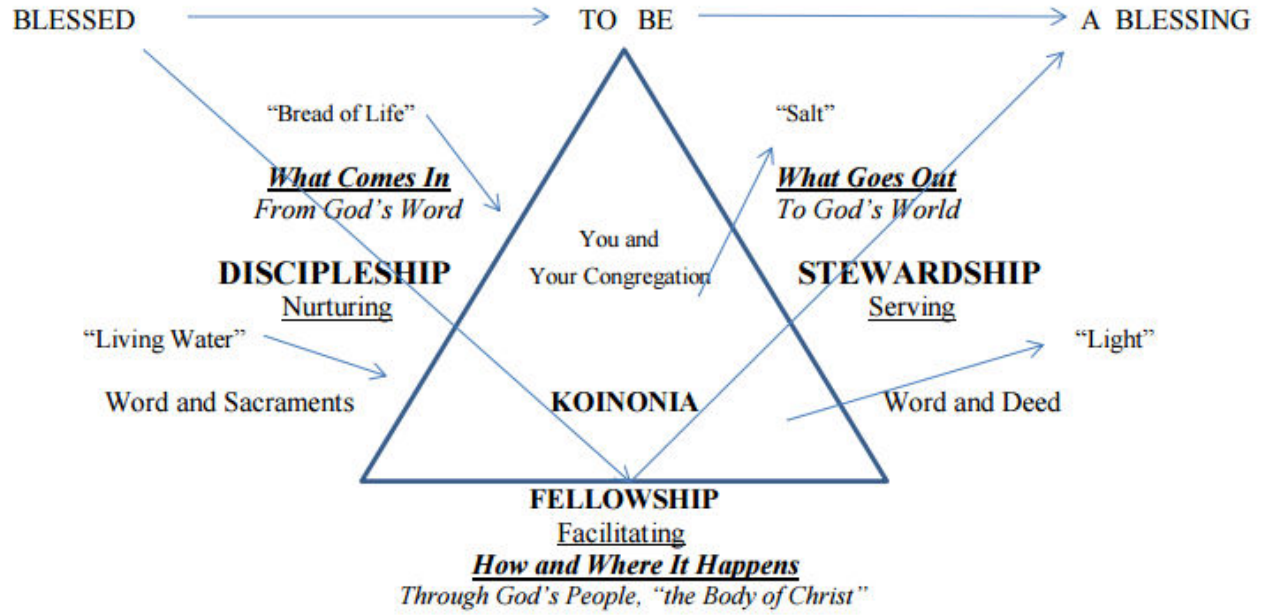
New member classes would appropriately incorporate this missional framework so that new converts or transfers would begin to see their lives involved in these goals.

Sunday Schools, Adult Classes, Youth groups, Auxiliary Organizations periodically could/should/would set aside time to review these goals as they pertain to their group.

Newsletters, bulletin inserts, posters, websites, special events (sponsored by these Ministry Boards?) can all continually build the congregation’s awareness and understanding of their purposes and priorities. Any of these three goals helps us see the need for the other two goals. (Deut. 11:18-21)

Jesus called His people “a city set on a hill”. He said we are to be “salt” and “light”. Others should see our good works and, as a result, give Glory to God. If the very way we organize our congregational life together “forces” us to see our missional purposes and priorities, we may become more like that “city set on a hill”.

This effort is meant to throw additional light on the questions: What does it mean to be a part of the Whole Family of God? What does it mean to be truly human? How do we live the Christian life where we live? We grow toward deeper discipleship by gathering with others to be fed and equipped in order to share the love of Christ where we live and work to “dress, till, and keep” God’s good earth. *If a picture is worth a thousand words, please study the accompanying diagram and then review the following, more detailed explanation and Biblical background references.*



The Rationale for a Missional-Membership-Mindset

“Mind-set”: **“Have this mind...”** (Phil. 2)

“Membership”: **“Now you are members of the body of Christ...”** (I Cor. 12)

“Missional”: **“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you”** (John 19)

“Go...” (The Great Co-Mission) (Matt, 28)

(Isn't it odd that in English “God” begins with “Go”?)

A. **THE MISSIONAL MIND-SET OF GOD**

The Creator of heaven and earth possesses a “missional mind-set” which He had before creation began.

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things....” (Col. 1:19-20). And again: “...he (God the Father) chose us in him (Christ), before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph. 1:4). “...a wisdom...that God destined for our glory before time began.” (I Cor. 2:7). “He was chosen before the world began....” I Pet. 1:20). “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1, 14). (Isaiah 45, the entire chapter).

B. **THE MISSIONAL ACTION OF GOD**

Out of his own Divinity, God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) “sent his only Son (his ‘missionary’ Son), not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him”. Jesus, the Christ, is not God’s “Plan B”, but “Plan A”. The Missional Christ belongs to God’s eternal plan.

“This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time (II Tim. 1:9). “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son....”(St. John 3:16-17). “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his word of power. After he made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” (Heb. 1:3)

C. THE MISSIONAL TESTIMONY OF JESUS

Jesus, the human, Son of Mary, and Jesus, the divine, Son of God, understood his mission, and gave expression to it in no uncertain terms.

“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God...for that is why I was sent” (St. Luke 4:43). *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach...proclaim liberty... recovery... release.....”* (St. Luke 4:18.) *“For I have come down from heaven to do the will of him who sent me.* (St. John 6:35,ff.) *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”* (St. Luke 19:10.) (St. John 17, the entire chapter).

D. THE MISSIONAL COMMAND OF JESUS

Jesus called his disciples to follow him, to bear witness to his life, death, and resurrection which opens to us forgiveness, life, and salvation.

“...As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”. (St. John 20:21). *“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...and you shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). *“...go and make disciples...baptizing...teaching...surely I am with you...”* (St. Matt. 28:19-20).

E. THE MISSIONAL FELLOWSHIP JESUS SHARES WITH US, HIS FOLLOWERS

Jesus lives. He lives “with” us. He lives “in” us. *“...surely I am with you...”* His Spirit takes up residence in our lives as we receive His Word and Sacraments bringing God’s grace, gifts, and wisdom to us, and thus bringing faith, activating faith, building faith, sustaining faith, in us.

“...the Father...will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth”. (St. John 14:16). *“The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”* (St. John 14:25-26). *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”.* (St. John 15:5).

F. MOVING US TO A MISSIONAL MIND-SET

None of us are born with it. None of us can “make it happen”, like a “do it when you feel like it” project. It requires a new start. It requires a new heart, a new attitude. Through Word and Sacraments, we start over with Christ’s life and power daily at work in us, by his Spirit. It is the daily renewal of our Baptism.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” (II Cor. 5:17). “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (II Cor. 3:17-18).

G. THE CHRISTIAN’S (OUR, PERSONAL) MISSIONAL MIND-SET

The goal of Word and Sacraments is Christian Discipleship. The goal of Christian discipleship is simply/profoundly to become Christ-like.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....” (Rom. 12:2). “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who... did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but...taking the very nature of a servant.... (Phil. 2:5-7). “...until we all... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”. (Eph. 4:13). “All scripture is God-breathed (inspired) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...” (II Tim. 3:16)

H. THE CHRISTIAN’S (OUR, COMMUNAL) MISSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

The goal of Christian Fellowship is to discern the “body of Christ”, our missional family. All Christians are members of a living body, the “Body of Christ”, more profoundly than they are members of a Christian organization in the community where they live. Each, a unique child of God, brings to this living body, the Church, their talents, personalities, skills, training, gifts and experiences which in the Church, this living body, they become like arms and legs, eyes and ears, hands and heart, muscle and senses; all the “parts” that must move together in a living body. As such, all members are needed, and need to see themselves as such. It’s how God designed his mission to be carried on.

“...since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” (1 John 4:11-12). “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another....” (Heb. 10:24-25). “...in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Rom. 12:5).

With the life of Christ, the power of His Holy Spirit in us, this is what we bring to the “body of Christ”.

I. THE CHRISTIAN’S (OUR, COMMUNAL) MISSIONAL CONGREGATION

The goal of this Christian **Fellowship** is also to equip, edify, and encourage the “body of Christ”, all its “parts”, all its members, for their varied ministries; to prepare God’s people to be “salt” and “light” where they live, for their stewardship of everything they touch.

“And in the church, God has appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles and healing, helpers and administrators and tongues”. (1Cor.12:28,ff). “...evangelists and pastors...” (Eph.4:11). “...servers, encouragers, contributors, leaders, mercy givers...” (Rom. 12:6-8). “...shepherds, elders, overseers...” (1 Pet. 5:1-5).

This is what our Lord, through the “body of Christ”, brings to us.

J. OUR MISSIONAL (PERSONAL/COLLABORATIVE) LIFE FOR THE WORLD

The goal of Christian **Stewardship** is to faithfully and wisely use and manage everything we touch and possess. It means we see ourselves as caretakers of what we have, and understand we are to deal with all of it after the model of Jesus and his servant life in and for the world. We have things we can share. We have talents and time we can offer. We have words, “Good News”, we can share: we serve a “missionary Lord and Savior” who seeks us out because he loves us and calls us to share the joy of His mission in the world which began before the world was created. IT IS OUR LIVING.

“You did not choose me, I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last.” (St. John 15:16). “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me”. (St. Matt.25:40). (“I am the vine, you are the branches”. (St. John 15:5). “Go and make disciples...” (St. Matt. 28:19).

K. And, so we have come full circle.

Disciples are made by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacraments. These means of grace supply the consolation, comfort, edification, and encouragement of God’s called and chosen people, thus equipping them for their lives of ministry as salt and light and witness; so that someone else gets to catch the joy of faith, hope and love, together with forgiveness, life and salvation; so that we may serve and worship our dear Lord Jesus “in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness”.



THE THIRD PRONG

The Third Prong

A RADICAL PRACTICE OF HOSPITALITY: (not to be confused with the ELCA definition of “radical hospitality”)

A “radical” faith fed, nourished, and shared in a “radical” congregational life, together, sets the scene for invitations to a time and place where a genuine welcome is sensed and hospitality is generous, because we are simply “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food “.

An Opportunity for Radical Lutheranism In the USA in the 21st Century

I. HOW WE GOT TO WHERE WE ARE IN AMERICA TODAY, IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A. People are leaving the church.

Membership is dwindling, especially in the main line denominations, including Lutherans, including the most recent “splinter group” Lutherans. Young people especially are leaving and either joining a non-denominational church or joining no church at all.

B. What’s going on? Why is this?

The “short answer” is this:

The Reformation wars 400-500 years ago left the church split with 3 general tracks to take.

1. The Roman Catholic Church – with what can be called “A Co-operation Theology”
2. The Protestants/Anabaptists – with what can be called “A Decision Theology”
3. The Confessional Lutherans – with what is called “The Theology of the Cross”.

Almost immediately another “war” emerged – Orthodoxy vs Pietism: You must believe this truth (doctrine) vs. you must behave this way (action). Both were meant to be means to an end, to love God and to love neighbor. What emerged from both was treated as ends in themselves. They both festered into legalism. You “must believe”,

you “must behave”. All three of the above post-reformation tracks were affected by this “war”, down to this day.

In the U.S., “Decision Theology” and “Co-operation Theology” have emerged as the dominant practices, even in many, if not most, Lutheran Churches. The common denominator to both of these tracks is the acceptance of the idea of “free will” as a necessary partner in effecting salvation in Christ. On the surface, it sounds appealing. God has done his part. We should do our part. If, however, we scratch under the surface, we come up with uncertainties and frustrations. Either, How can I be certain about whether I was sincere enough in doing my part, or I might think “I did my best” and being relatively proud of my good deeds, I’ll take my chances. This sort of thinking cannot produce a love and joy and gratitude that moves us to stay close to Jesus. There is, in either case, no solid ground to stand on, nothing compelling here. So people leave.

C. Other reasons why people leave the church (and also the faith itself)

We are beset on all sides by competing claims

and ideologies and religions: Humanism, Science and Technology as answers to what was once thought of as “an act of God”, political saviors –socialism, capitalism, liberalism, conservatism, etc. Add sects and other world religions and the menu is “world class”. We cannot eliminate the competition, if that’s the word. We simply have to realize the kind of world we are in and address it, hopefully with “The Theology of the Cross”.

D. History does seem to repeat itself. It seems St. Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, a very

cosmopolitan city in its day, is perfectly suited for us. See I Cor. 1:18-25. Some Lutherans boast of their orthodoxy, some of their liberalism, compassion and tolerance, some of their “free will”, some of their “broad-mindedness”, some of their “narrow-mindedness”. Mixed signals, indeed! With no solid rock to stand on even here, people drift away from our churches also, especially the young. As a result, we U.S. Christians are considered irrelevant, passé, not worth much time or attention or trouble or opposition or persecution. We can be safely ignored.

II. IN THE 1ST CENTURY, THE CHURCH’S MESSAGE WAS NOT IGNORED. IT GOT THEIR ATTENTION

A. In Jerusalem

Almost immediately the apostles were thrown in jail for their message.

B. In Judea and Samaria

Ancient barriers between Jews and Gentiles came down, to the consternation of many.

C. And beyond

Riots resulted in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Ephesus, and elsewhere; Paul and his fellow-Christians were described this way in these warnings to others: “These men...are throwing our city into an uproar”.

“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here”.

D. WHAT GOT THEIR ATTENTION WAS THE RADICAL NATURE OF THAT MESSAGE

It was a radical application of the Law (Acts 2, Rom. 2, 3) which “cut them to the heart”. It was a radical proclamation of the Gospel (Rom. 5, 8, etc.) which set men free. It was God’s radical promise which cut through all the competing religions of the day.

III. SO, WHERE IS THE “RADICAL LUTHERAN” OPPORTUNITY IN OUR 21ST CENTURY CONFUSION?

A. Only the “Theology of the Cross” can adequately address the spiritual hunger of modern mankind, and Lutherans have access to it like very few others do. We have seminaries which understand this and can teach this to pastors and others. We can teach how to preach it. Our curriculums for parish education should be assessed with this in mind.

B. Our emphasis on Word and Sacrament in worship is totally suited to support this. Every pastor needs to take leadership of worship services with attention to every detail to support this. The Liturgy needs to support this. We should and can present this “Theology of the Cross” with the utmost beauty and respect and dignity it calls for.

C. Our congregations need to be re-formed. We need to be missional in our life together. Our current typical way of doing things does not promote such a mentality. Therefore we need a re-formation of our congregational understandings. We need to adopt a format which is unmistakably missional: “The Shape of Our Witness” (SOOW), or something very similar to it.

D. The most logical place to begin to work in this direction is with the pastors of Lutheran congregations which already have demonstrated a clear appreciation of the “Theology of the Cross”; at least the Augustana Synod of LCMC and, perhaps, others.

IV. A PROPOSAL:

Present this topic to the leadership of the Augustana District of the LCMC at, perhaps, an all-day conference or similar venue. The presentation should include complete documentation (provided) with time for discussion. The time and place for this conference would be determined mutually, preferably in early 2015.

Why We Lutherans Worship the Way We Do

It begins with our definition of “church”. The word “church” has different meanings in 21st century America, e.g.

- “church” is a building with a street address.
- “church” is a group of religious bodies which share the same teachings. (e.g. Lutheran, Methodist, etc.)
- “church” is a historic organization. (e.g. “the church”, not “the state”, not “academia”, not “labor”.)

“Officially”, Lutherans put it this way: “The Church is the assembly of believers where the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel”. – Augsburg Confession, Article 7.

At “bedrock”, what that means is –the church is an event. “The assembly”, the church, happens at a given time and place; in fact, in many different times and places. Often that happens in a building with a particular shape and style, but not always. The building itself is not the church, but what happens there normally and regularly is. The event is attended by Christian believers, and sometimes by guests, both believers and non-believers. But without the “assembly of believers”, and without the Word and Sacraments proclaimed and Administered, it is not the church.

Believers live and work “all over the place”. They are Christians wherever they are. When they are scattered, they are not the church. The church is not individual Christians working and serving at their “stations in life”. The church happens when those Christians assemble at the event “where the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” Then and there is the church.

The New Testament word for “church” in the original Greek is “ecclesia”: ec- means “out”. –clesia –means “called”. Put them together and the word literally means “called out” or “the called out ones”. People of faith in Christ are Christians, wherever they are. But, they are “the church” when they are “called out” from where they live and work and are gathered (the assembly) to worship in the context of Word and Sacrament. When that happens, the “church” is then and there.

The Christian message, the “Gospel”, the “good news”: the saving action of God who comes in divine love to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to free us from sin, death, and the power of the demonic, this good news is proclaimed to that entire assembly and driven home (“addressed”) to us personally, and sealed by God’s promise, that what Jesus did, He did for you, whoever you are. That promise comes home to us personally in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This message draws forth from the assembly of believers a response of “prayer, praise, and thanksgiving”. Indeed, this message creates faith and makes believers out of us.

So, what happens at such an assembly? The assembly worships God! The assembly uses its time together for two purposes:

- 1) The assembly listens to the Word of God; is fed, sometimes confronted, always comforted: nurtured.
- 2) The assembly expresses its needs and attitudes and responses to the Word of God.

In other words, it’s the assembly that does the “work”, the action, of worship. What that means is, the leader(s), the Pastor, is not the “act-or”, the “performer” of worship, while the congregation watches and decides how well he/she is doing. The pastor is not even an “emcee” for other “performers” who may sing, play an instrument, read, or even make a speech. The pastor does not stand on a “platform” or on a “stage”. We make every effort to prevent the idea that it’s the pastor’s job to perform in some way, while it’s the congregation’s job to be an audience, or in some sense “spectators” to what’s happening “up front”. If there is, in any sense, a stage, it is where the worshipers sit. The only true spectator here is the Lord of Heaven and Earth. And what He looks for is prayer, praise and thanksgiving arising from hearts of faith.

When we worship, it’s WE who worship. The action requires our participation. We are meant to “work at it”, to put our minds in gear, to let our hearts sing and soar, to use our eyes, ears, and tongues, to stand when respect and adoration is called for, to kneel (where possible) when humility is to rule the moment. Worship engages the whole body. So those assembled are like an orchestra, and the pastor is like the conductor who helps them express their prayers, praises, and thanksgivings together, and who proclaims “the Gospel”, the message which motivates (Rom. 10:17) that prayer, praise, and thanksgiving (that faith) in the first place.

So, when you come to worship in this assembly, you bring your life's realities with you; your recent (and maybe your not-so-recent) experiences, your good days and your not-so-good days, your better self, your worse self, your fears and hopes, your guilt and doubts and all of what makes you... you.

In this assembly you confess your sins; you receive God's promise of the forgiveness (absolution) of all your sins; you sing with gratitude; you pray for each other; you hear God's Word and wisdom for you from His Holy Scriptures; you praise Him for His goodness; you confess the faith of the historic church as your faith, even your not-so-perfect faith; you offer your prayers and gifts for others in need; you come to the Lord's Supper to hear it again. He really loves you, "warts" and all. He really forgives you. It is all "FOR YOU". Every Sunday is "Thanksgiving Day". Every Sunday is an echo of Easter. Jesus died and rose again, for you.

You don't come to be entertained by some religious professionals. This is not a religious program. You come and get engaged in the beautiful work of worship, so that you can leave this assembly fed, renewed, refocused on your place and privilege on God's good earth.

You may wonder why we (Lutherans) sing songs (hymns) which are "hard to sing" and not always that "lively". We hear that comment at times. We know there are some songs which are easy (and fun) to sing, and we use them now and then. But, there are some great hymns of the church which serve another purpose: they teach the faith. They are the "meat and potato" hymns. They have substance. They have great insights. They "stick to your ribs". That they are still around after hundreds of years proves their value. Of course, new hymns and liturgies are written and music composed in every century and right up to this very time. We can always use fresh and faithful expressions of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.

Finally, we worship weekly, not because we have to, but because we want to, and truth be told, we need to; indeed it is God's will, and was Jesus' "custom" (Luke 4). Human nature, two centuries ago, was the same then as it is now. God's nature and power now is the same as what it was then. He has found you. We are meant to know and rejoice in that, and appreciate what a relief that is. Worship is where God promises to meet us, in that "assembly of believers where the Gospel (that good news) is preached in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel".

Then and there we are "Blessed to be a Blessing". Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Wanted

A few congregations with the courage to conduct their affairs for the next two years, using the principles presented by Dr. Forde for a Radical Lutheran Faith together with the congregational format called “The Shape of Our Witness”, using the 500th Anniversary as a benchmark to begin the re-establishment of a Radical Lutheranism in North America.

