

Consensus

Volume 38

Issue 2 *Reformation: Then, Now, and Onward. Diverse
Disputations Effectual Exposés*

Article 5

12-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Matthew R. (2017) "The Tough Wedge: Reformation Now and Onward," *Consensus*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol38/iss2/5>

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The Tough Wedge: Reformation Now and Onward

Matthew R. Anderson¹

This article is based on the work of, and dedicated to, Gregory Baum, a Canadian Catholic justice theologian and a tireless worker for the gospel, who died as this issue was being prepared, in October 2017.

In all cultural traditions, including religions, there are: (1) currents that resist modernity and cling to the past, unaware that doing so fossilizes their inheritance; (2) currents that embrace the market civilization, unaware that doing so threatens to dissolve their inheritance; and (3) currents that are open to the challenge of modernity and find in their inheritance resources for affirming, in their own terms, responsible citizenship and social solidarity.

– Gregory Baum²

A knotty stump requires a tough wedge.

– Martin Luther³

A strong inheritance is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, traditions, whether of family, culture or religion, create a nearly-automatic sense of identity from which a person or a community can understand their place in the world and move confidently into it. On the other, strong traditions limit, often unconsciously, the range of possibilities one envisions, and enacts, for the future. To further complicate such a situation, Evangelical Lutherans come out of a strong tradition, but one that, for most in North America, is in the process of upheaval. The non-mainstream - usually German or Scandinavian - ethnic identity that marked previous Canadian Lutherans is no longer a significant factor for present generations, most of whom were born in Canada and increasing numbers of whom come from other backgrounds. This essay proposes ways in which the theological heritage of Canadian Lutherans might continue on, past the eclipse of their now-fading foreign ethnicity.

This is not intended to be a scholarly paper on the history of the Reformation, nor on its effects, sociologically or theologically. Rather, my purpose in this essay is to trace some of the societal currents that continue to buffet Canadian Lutherans in the ELCIC,⁴ and to look forward to some possible ways in which the Lutheran Reformation tradition, as it has taken root in Canadian soil, can and should be preserved.

When I was still a teenager, in the mid-1970s, someone gave me Dr William Hordern's book "Living by Grace." The little green and white paperback, published by Westminster Press, had a profound impact on me, opening my understanding of Luther in a way I had

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² Gregory Baum, *The Oil Has Not Run Dry: The Story of My Theological Pathway* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 167.

³ Martin Luther *Luther's Works* (LW) Volume 54 Table Talk, No 5089, 387.

⁴ The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The term "evangelical" in its title is not meant to ally the ELCIC to the North American evangelical movement. Rather, it points to the historic and ongoing Lutheran emphasis on the primacy of the gospel message for Christian identity.

never before experienced. I remember reading it with rapt attention among the poplar trees of Cypress Hills, in south-west Saskatchewan. Somehow, I had grown up nurtured within what we might now call a 'micro-environment' of the Lutheran church, hearing sermons, going to worship, attending Sunday School and confirmation classes, and had never really understood or internalized the Lutheran message that God's love for me was unconditional and not dependent on my own actions. For a sensitive young person who wanted to "do right," Hordern's practical explanation of Luther, and his prophetic critique of the Lutheran church 'on the ground', was a deliverance. When, years later, I read Luther's words about being released and experiencing the "very gates of heaven," I recognized some of that feeling of freedom. Using examples I could relate to, Hordern critiqued many of the practices of the then-church, pointing out that an authentic attachment to God's unearned and graceful love has very real consequences for how we live in a church and in a society, how we judge or do not judge others, and what we think the essence of the disciple's life should be. It's no mistake that "Living by Grace" was written by a theologian who had lived through the 1960s. Hordern knew liberation theology – the book is a treatise on liberation, solidly grounded in the insights of the Reformation.

Inspired by that little book, I would look later into Luther's own works, and find the same emancipatory message:

From this you will see that we are not asking here for crumbs...but for an eternal, priceless treasure and for everything that God alone possesses. It would be far too great for any human heart to dare to desire it if God had not commanded us to ask for it. But God is God who also claims the honour of giving far more abundantly and liberally than anyone can comprehend – like an eternal, inexhaustible fountain, which, the more it gushes forth and overflows, the more it continues to give. (The Large Catechism, transl. Stjerna, in *The Annotated Luther 2: Word and Faith*, p. 376)

That was fifty years ago. The world has changed, and we've changed with it. If Lutherans were a marginal social group in Canada in 1975, we are very much more so now. The church is both imploding and transforming. Many of the orthodoxies Hordern criticized have vanished, at least in this country (the American Lutheran church, being much larger and more important culturally, is a different case). In April 2017, Bishop Michael Pryse of the Eastern Synod, ELCIC wrote: "I am experiencing steadily increasing levels of anxiety and fearfulness among us. A great many ... are both stressed and distressed. Participation levels are decreasing. Financial capacity is declining. Physical assets are crumbling."⁵

In short, the institution, as it existed in previous decades, is collapsing. The social cohesion, identity formation, and the mechanisms for the generational transfer of values that characterized previous generations of Lutherans are no longer operative. Such a situation does not call for the prophetic *critique* of "Living by Grace," as helpful as that book was in its time. Like Jeremiah, faced with the fall of Jerusalem, what is needed now is a prophetic *hopefulness*. Bishop Pryse's column goes on to exhibit precisely that. The basic message that Hordern drew from Luther – the Reformation emphasis on freedom from judgement and freedom *for* discipleship – is still important. But it needs to be reinterpreted, in this time and

⁵ M. Pryse, "Bishop's Column," *The Canadian Lutheran*, April/May 2017, 30.

place, for the sake of those who, in Pryse's pastoral and prophetic words, seek through courage and imagination to find a way forward.

Reformation Now

As much as those of us who are Lutherans tend to place Luther's theological insights at the centre of the Reformation in Europe, scholars of history and of theology increasingly point us to the fact that Luther's realizations about God's unmerited grace, and the unprecedented use of new social media to spread his views, came at a kind of tipping-point in European cultural, political and religious history. In other words, Luther was important, but he would – and could – not have been so, had not the conditions been right, and had he not been living, as he himself recognized, in a pivotal time.

We live in a similarly critical period. Despite the significant, obvious differences between our time and the sixteenth century in Europe, some parallels exist. There is again, as at the time of the Reformation, a revolution happening in communication and in social media. There is again, as there has so often been, a kind of apocalyptic feeling in the air, a sort of shock-wave of anxiety at the rapid pace of change, accompanied by various forms of political uprisings and revolts among the disadvantaged. There is again a fear of the Muslim world's influence on Europe, a fear stoked for political reasons by leaders in the West. There is, again, an important wing of Christianity (this time found on television and online) that offers to the gullible and the afraid, salvation in exchange for money. Cities are again, or rather still, the crucibles of social, economic and technological transformation. And there is again, as at the time of the Reformation, a church caught in the middle, and unsure of the way forward.

There are three crucial movements that preoccupied the Evangelical Lutheran church in Canada in the latter half of the twentieth century and for the first decade of this one: firstly, the move away from American trusteeship of Canadian Lutherans and toward a national church structure (a movement that, in true Canadian fashion, immediately split into groups that identify themselves by region). Secondly, the fight for the inclusion of women in leadership positions as clergy and bishops. Finally, the movement for greater inclusiveness toward openly homosexual people as full members of the church, eligible for marriage and for ordination. The inclusion of gay and lesbian Lutherans, especially as clergy, has led for Lutherans, as in other denominations, to the loss of a number of congregations.

The latter two developments, as important as they have been, were not and are not specifically Lutheran, but arose first elsewhere. Especially in comparison to the United Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada came to women's full participation as clergy, and the inclusion of LGBTQ2 persons as full members, rather late.

To say this is to underline a crucial observation about "reformation now": it's ecumenical. The effects of the ecumenical movement on Evangelical Lutheranism in Canada, and on the church, cannot be overstated. What changes there have been, that have not arisen from various mergers or splits, have come in large part, from changes shared with, and often pioneered by, partners in the ecumenical movement.

There is an important, mutually-reinforcing aspect to ecumenism once a church begins to take it seriously, a sort of "your friend is my friend" principle. For instance, in 2015 I was appointed as the Lutheran observer to the Roman Catholic-Anglican dialogue of Canada. On the surface, this is in no way revolutionary: the ELCIC and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) are in a relationship of full partnership. Lutheran and Anglican clergy and

congregations enjoy deep, meaningful partnerships across the country. Nothing would seem more natural than for the Anglicans to make sure that their partners are also at the table. However, it was the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops, motivated by their own powerful ecumenical interests,⁶ who requested that a Lutheran be appointed. Ecumenism, once it takes hold, translates into community in unexpected ways, and its various motivations can be mutually reinforcing.

One could argue that the new perception of God that most northern Lutherans share with ecumenical partners arises not just from theological reflection, but from cultural necessity: Canada is an increasingly urban and cosmopolitan society. Our churches are smaller. The “Lutheran micro-societies” that at one point existed in Saskatoon, Kitchener, Lunenburg or Camrose have disappeared. Fewer Lutherans live in small towns or villages split between the “Catholic” and the “Lutheran” side; in fact, most Lutherans in Canada probably live in situations where the general population would be hard pressed to identify what a Lutheran even is.⁷ In such a situation, our similarities to other Christian denominations are more obvious than our differences.

An often unseen, but remarkably strong, ecumenical push for Lutherans over the last fifty years has come from the influence of scholarship, and specifically from the influence of changes in the field of biblical studies. This very practical ecumenism originates from what many people might think of as being *not* particularly practical – the theories taught during university and seminary education. There is, at that level, a widely-based consensus, not necessarily on the meaning of every text, but on how to approach the scriptures that Christians share. Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican and certain Baptist and other biblical scholars increasingly approach the Bible in similar ways when they think about it critically. In the last half-century, diverse voices have begun to be heard in biblical scholarship, including Jewish, atheist, and other non-dominant scholars. Currents in scholarship have reformed the Lutheran church gradually, through theological education, and through its effects on the formation of pastors, and through them, eventually, on preaching. The “average” Lutheran (if there is such a person) doesn’t have to be a biblical scholar to appreciate that if their pastor and the pastor of the neighbouring church interpret Sunday’s gospel in more or less the same way, there is less that divides their congregations as well.

The overall diminishment of the so-called mainline churches in Canada has hit Evangelical Lutherans particularly hard. Lutherans in Canada no longer live in communities where they are supported in that identity by micro-German or -Scandinavian cultures around them. The self-understandings of Lutherans have changed as islands of Lutheran identity have shrunk or have been transformed, and for those still involved in their congregations, a self-understanding as ‘Christian’ has often become as important as the specific denominational label ‘Lutheran’. Concurrently, the contemporary ways in which the ELCIC has been changing have been influenced by participation in wider theological and

⁶ Pope Francis continues to reinforce the move toward ecumenism that was first demonstrated by Rome in the Second Vatican Council, in the 1960s.

⁷ Informally, some Waterloo Lutheran Seminary supporters have remarked that WLS’s new name – Martin Luther University – has the benefit of reminding the many who do not know Martin Luther, of his much more famous namesake: Martin Luther King Jr.

cultural currents, especially ecumenism and our partnership with the Anglican Church in Canada (ACC).

There are various ways in which individuals may belong to organizations such as denominational bodies. We can belong to a church in a way much like we belong to a large union, or to a corporation. At times, such as the 1970s, where this was the understood manner of belonging to the Lutheran church, our congregations and synods were organized in ways one might expect of a corporation: official reports, ministries (known as committees or boards), statistics, standardized constitutions, defined membership, bylaws and other legislative mechanisms. Insofar as these ways of 'being church' ever worked for Lutherans in Canada, they have, or are in the process of being, broken down. From the 1980s into this millennium, after a period of downsizing and mergers, we continue de-professionalizing our leaders (as our two seminaries grapple with the problem of maintaining staffing and facilities for decreasing numbers of students), moving more and more to part-time pastorships, outsourcing work, closing 'branches' (congregations) and shedding expensive buildings.

Another, much more local, way of belonging to a church is after the fashion of a family. This type of belonging is more personal and relies on real, imagined, or constructed kinship. If we are related by birth or marriage, or feel a similar kind of emotional and relational attachment to others within a congregation or a cluster of congregations, it is natural that many, if not most, of our decisions will be shaped by those relations. As a relatively small and regionally-concentrated church, the phenomenon of identifiable Lutheran kinship groups was once operative in Canada. Many older Lutherans, whether in western or eastern Canada, will still remember the names of one or another Lutheran dynastic family.

A final way of belonging to a denomination is what I would call *appartenance*, a term inspired by the work of sociologist Fernand Dumont. I am refining and building here on Dumont's work as interpreted by Gregory Baum, a noted Roman Catholic theologian. In discussing how a person understands their belonging to a nation or country, Dumont uses the French term *référence*, which Baum translates as "symbolic identification." "To be part of a collectivity by *référence* means sharing its memory and having hope for its future," writes Baum.⁸

I propose that symbolic identification – I prefer the term *appartenance* – is the primary way by which most members of our congregations will soon think of themselves as Lutherans. There is a certain circular aspect to *appartenance*: I am a Lutheran because "that is what I am." One does not have to have memorized the Small Catechism, or go regularly to a Lutheran church, to hold this form of identification. The challenge of such a minimalist (at least by organizational standards) form of self-identification is that it can easily mean nothing. However, the emphasis on memory and hope that Baum underlines for Roman Catholics is a clue to how Evangelical Lutherans in Canada also might seek their future.

Reformation Onward

"The unexpected" is a theological category: God's action in the world is often a surprise, an unexpected mercy, an unforeseen breakthrough, an unpredictable turn of events.

– Gregory Baum⁹

⁸ Baum, *The Oil*, 172.

⁹ Baum, *The Oil*, 180.

For where God's word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind. And let no one think that we will have peace; rather, we must sacrifice all we have on earth – possessions, honour, house and farm, spouse and children, body and life.

– Martin Luther¹⁰

I am hopeful for the future of God's church because I take Luther's words to heart. In a time of social upheaval, he wrote that the true church is often hidden under the cross and not obvious to the world, its future unclear, even to its members. Where the cross is proclaimed, there will be suffering. The ELCIC is in a time of institutional suffering, and unsure of which way to head in the wilderness. If Luther is to be believed, now is also a time of promise. We are being handed a God-given moment of truth, and forced into a moment of creativity we would otherwise never have dared undertake. In Baum's words, this is our moment of "unexpected mercy." We are being asked to redefine ourselves, an act that rarely happens in times of prosperity. I would like to sketch out, very briefly, three reasons why I believe this to be so.

Firstly, the combination of changing social circumstance and ecumenism, properly understood, is making Lutherans re-evaluate our theological inheritance (the collective 'past' to which *référence* refers). We are being challenged by our ecumenical partners to find those resources within our tradition that are truly unique, and that contribute the most to the common-wealth of God's church. When we are no longer "protesting" (the origin of the term "protestant"), what are the positive values for which we stand? Other than the increasingly unknown narrative of the medieval monk at Erfurt, what other stories define us? Stories, despite their common threads, change to suit the times. We who are Lutherans need to stop making a medieval experience of God our only template. Luther's own incredible relief at being released from the fear of an angry and judgmental God is not directly applicable to the lives of many of even our own people, much less others outside the church. Yet a lack of freedom and feelings of guilt and shame are still prevalent in our society. How can we re-tell our founding story so as to make the gospel relevant still?

As an academic who has studied Paul and benefits from a wealth of critical scholarship on late Second-Temple Judaism, it has been distressing to me to come to realize how profoundly Luther misunderstood the "apostle to the gentiles." The often entertaining vividness and directness of Luther's writings make his comments on Judaism especially repugnant. As Lutherans, we must acknowledge the ways in which Luther's interpretations of Paul's message, and of the Bible overall, have fed the hate-filled, terrible oppression of Jews, especially within countries influenced by the Lutheran heritage. It is our special responsibility as a denomination to continue to renounce (as the ELCIC did, in convention) these writings completely and without reservation. However, we must go further still. There is, within Luther's influential understanding of Paul, a supersessionism that must be overturned for us to move forward. Luther must be revised and refuted, not only because his position leads to the kinds of thinking that, centuries later, undergirded the Holocaust, but also because he was wrong in fact, as well as ethically: non-Jews are not the new special children of God, for Paul. We are the late-comers to the family, and the undeserved, who are

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, transl. Stjerna, in *The Annotated Luther 2: Word and Faith*, 377-378.

still somehow, in these last days, welcome at the banquet table. As such our attitude should be one of gratitude, not privilege.

We need to look to a different part of Luther's reading of Paul for a positive, unique contribution to Christian ecumenical theology. Luther's emphasis on the hidden God, as it is expressed in his theology of the cross, speaks especially to a time like ours, when majority culture is indifferent or even openly hostile toward those who identify as religious. Luther wrote that it is at precisely those times when we feel furthest from God, that God is closest to us. It is at the foot of the cross, and in the moments of seeming abandonment that salvation is accomplished. And the wilderness is that place where the Spirit can best do the hidden work of salvation and redemption.

Secondly, we are increasingly seeing Luther for the ways in which he was heir to, and continued, the deep tradition of mysticism within the church. This is a time when irrational – even anti-rational – political discourse seems to be fighting for ascendancy. The Lutheran tradition can contribute to an earthly mysticism, a robust appreciation of how God works in us and speaks to us daily through music and art. I will try to explain what I mean.

There need to be voices within our society that speak against simple majority desire, and especially against narrow and utilitarian self-interest. The Biblical witness has never condoned utility. The worship of God and the love of neighbour are values that stand above efficiency and above self-interest. The voting public, both in Canada and the United States, has been encouraged to become more and more irrational. We are addicted to the sugary lies of slogans and of self-serving half-truths. Through history, to our shame, Christians have also been dangerously irrational. But always, thankfully, some of the faithful have also been NON-rational – not IRRational – but non-rational, in a positive and difficult, discipleship, way: that is, revelatory, narrative and reaching for a dream that may never be realized, but makes life better in the meantime. Loving your neighbour, doing good for no return, giving up privilege for the sake of those who have none - these are also non-rational actions. They follow a dream of service, not selfishness. Luther wrote: 'We are God's work, and God's poem. God himself is the Poet; we are the verses God creates.'¹¹ When we embrace this kind of non-rational openness, we open ourselves, not to slogans and lies, but to art, visions, and transformative dreams.

Thirdly, as others have pointed out, the position of Lutherans in Canada as a minority, largely immigrant church on the outskirts of political power can, if we allow it, make us more aware of, and sensitive to, others who are far more marginalized.

One of the most recent ecumenical moves that has, in turn, influenced Lutheran theology and practice is the growing recognition of the Bible's call to justice. In recent decades, there has arisen a new appreciation of the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and of Jesus, especially, that have always been there but have historically been underemphasized. What are Lutherans doing to "let justice roll down like streams"? How can we compare, not just our actions, but even the very structures by which we worship and teach and govern ourselves, to God's preferential option for the outsider, the foreigner, the oppressed, and the excluded?

Instrumental reasoning, as described by Charles Taylor and others,¹² is a way of thinking and of making decisions that values profit and utility over life and safety.

¹¹ LW 7:366

¹² Charles Taylor. *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 1-12.

Instrumental reasoning denies that there is any intrinsic value to human beings, and undermines actions taken on the basis of ethical considerations, including those that are part of the scriptural witness. In his 1920 *Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber observed that there is a difference between prophetic and priestly religion. Given that instrumental thinking tends to dominate political thinking and decision-making more and more, any institution, such as the church, that operates by other criteria has a responsibility to speak out prophetically. Part of what makes our time, like Luther's, a pivotal moment, is the present global dominance of a system of labour and capital based on instrumental – that is, anti-gospel - considerations of human life. A church that has lost its 'priestly' place in the structures of society can, as an outsider, now critique systems of domination and oppression that it is increasingly outside of.

There is no need to go to the global south to participate in justice projects. The standard of living on most First Nations is appallingly low; clean water is often not even provided, and at the time of this writing, the government's financing of the education of First Nations children is systemically lower than the national average. One opportunity for future reformation of the church in Canada, and an opportunity to which Lutherans can contribute in a unique way, is in the calls to action given by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that is, steps toward equity, the return of land, and reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. Here, Lutherans benefit from their historical status as outsiders. Like some other Protestant churches, especially the Mennonites (who have certainly taken this task to heart), Lutherans were simply never important enough to be asked by the state to participate in the cultural genocide of First Nations. As a result, we avoided the catastrophe of running the residential schools. Because of our historical status as outsiders in Canada, and yet our relative degree of access to mainstream Canadian society, Lutherans have a vantage point to listen in silence, and with a willingness to learn, to the stories of those other outsiders, the First Nations, who have experienced in such a tragic way the destructive effects of being excluded, marginalized, and oppressed.

Living By Grace in the Twenty-First Century

The three directions I see for 'reformation onward' are: a Lutheran tradition aware of its cultural baggage and focused on those theological insights, especially the theology of the cross, that speak best to present ecumenical Christian experience; a recovery of Luther's emphasis on the mystical experience of Christ as known in art and music and which therefore encourages those expressions, and finally, an honesty about our own historical status as a minority, marginal group that can, if we allow it, perhaps enable us to better listen to those who have experienced far more crushing forms of exclusion and oppression in Canadian society.

These three predictions are more hopes than expectations. Whatever possibilities one can see from this vantage point, the living experience of the people of God is that holy transformation almost always comes from an unexpected quarter. The Reformation arose on the margins of European society and was made up of a wide confluence of social, political, economic, and religious changes. From our vantage point, we can see, in retrospect, some of the causes of the changes that overtook the church at that crucial time. However, in the moment, the explosion of change must have seemed to have come out of nowhere.

It is indicative of our time and of my church that I can write an essay about the future of Canadian Lutheranism that is inspired by, and in dialogue with, the work of a Canadian

Roman Catholic theologian, Gregory Baum. Baum noted that to move forward as a collectivity, our churches must be in dialogue with “the challenge of modernity and find in [our] inheritance resources for affirming, in [our] own terms, responsible citizenship and social solidarity.” I agree completely and have tried to apply that principle to Lutherans in Canada. We need not deny the ethnic heritage that so many Canadian Lutherans enjoy – after all, that is also part of what it means to be Canadian. Our spiritual lives are embodied and enculturated, whether as German, Scandinavian, Guyanese, or Cameroonian Lutherans.

Luther saw in Paul an emphasis on death and resurrection in solidarity with Christ. We might say that resurrection, including the resurrection of some form of Canadian Lutheran identity, will only come after, and through, some kind of death. Ironically, knowing one will die, and changes will come, can be quite liberating. William Hordern’s book *Living by Grace*, at least as I remember it, emphasized the Reformation’s call to freedom in the face of death: freedom from the fear of angering a Creator whose only wish is our liberation and whose only motive is love, freedom from the fear of breaking some human-created rule when such rules really matter so little, and especially freedom from the oppression of structures meant to control and limit, rather than to give life. In that sense, whatever we, in our own small ways, can contribute to further Reformation must support life, and freedom. Only in those ways do we uphold the best in our own tradition.