

Forde on the twentieth century Luther Renaissance:¹

1. “The search for an answer to the question about Luther ushered me into a strange and exciting new world. **Modern Luther research was just beginning to be imported from Europe.** I poured over Luther on Galatians, read and reread Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*, I gobbled up the essays and monographs I could find on Luther’s ‘reformation discovery’ and his theology in general (Wingren, Nygren, Prenter, Watson, Boehmer, Pauck, Rupp, etc.), as well as on related exegetical questions about the righteousness of God, justification, law and gospel, and so on. **In those days our education took place as much, if not more, in continuing conversations with fellow students in the dorm as in classes.** I was blessed with an illustrious group of classmates: Robert Jenson, Carl Braaten, Clarence Lee, Harris Kassa, Oliver Olson – to name just a few.

“The quest on which I embarked was greatly stimulated and encouraged when Lennart Pinomaa, the Finnish Luther scholar, came to us to lecture for a semester. He stayed in the dormitory with us and a number of us helped him put his lectures into an English accessible to students. Needless to say we learned a lot about the Luther renaissance. Here, I began to sense, was the real foundation for the ancient catechetical tradition for which I had been searching. **I found the answers to my questions** not in nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts to transcend or remodel the tradition but rather **in a probing of its own depths.** In so doing I found a gospel I believed I could preach to the twentieth century. Many seem to react to the Luther renaissance as though it were a species of historical antiquarianism. I have always found Luther to be the one theologian who has something new to say, and better, one who inspires the preaching of the new.”²

2. “When free-choice pietism has lost its moorings in the external Word, the only way to get it back in line is by turning to authority structures with the clout to do it. One can find that either in **Roman-type hierarchicalism** or in **Biblicism**. In either case, *satis est non statis est*. The gospel and the sacraments are not enough. They never are when they don’t bring the eschatological end and new beginning. An authority structure above and beyond the gospel must be added—a kind of **substitute eschatology** to assuage our impatience!

Do these hermeneutical alternatives define the parameters of our fate today? Are these the only possibilities available to us? I believe not. But I do think that if there is any fire left now, it will have to come more from Luther than our Melancthonian tinged pietism. Of course, many Lutherans seem to get glassy-eyed or nervous at the mention of such a prospect. But that is due, I think, to our theological Oedipus complex. We think it simply a re-pristination, perhaps, of what we already know and have reacted against. But, of course, **most of Luther was largely unknown to the Lutheran church, especially in America, until quite recently, and the most important dimensions of his theology are actually 20th century discoveries.** The phenomenon known as ‘Luther’s Theology’ is actually a quite new thing, particularly for American Lutherans. What it means to be a theologian of the cross, for instance, was virtually unknown until 1929 when Walter von Loewenich published his book on the subject. It did not appear in English until 1976. *The Bondage of the Will* did not really emerge as an alternative to received Lutheran anthropology until mid-century. The significance of Luther’s struggle with the basic letter/spirit

¹ Bolding added below for emphasis.

² Gerhard Forde, “The One Acted Upon,” *dialog* 36 (1997) 57-8.

metaphysic of medieval – and for that matter modern – catholic Christendom for hermeneutics and theological method also developed largely after the Second World War and is still unfolding. The recovery of the doctrine of vocation is due largely to 20th century Swedish Luther research. And so on. When all of this is put together with **current biblical studies, especially the recovery of New Testament eschatology, a theology with radically different – in today’s terms, eschatological – shape begins to emerge.**³

3. “The distinctive character of current Lutheranism, however, is largely the result of its continuing search for its own roots in the Reformation and Luther’s thought itself. Beginning in about the 1840’s when J.C.K. von Hofmann appealed to Luther in the argument over atonement, **Luther was for the first time set against Lutheran orthodoxy on a substantive doctrinal issue** (Hirsch, 1954, vol. 5, p. 427) **and the uniqueness of Luther’s own thought began to emerge as a viable alternative.** Subsequent Luther research, most notably that inspired by Karl Holl and his students as well as by Swedish scholars (Carlson, 1948), thereby becomes crucial for the development and understanding of contemporary Lutheranism. Luther’s understanding of the living Word, the distinction between law and gospel (Forde, 1969) and the theology of the cross continue to emerge as decisive critical factors for Lutheranism and contemporary theology in general. The way is opened thereby for a reappropriation of the anthropology (*simul iustus et peccator*) originally posited by Luther’s understanding of justification, as well as an eschatologically nuanced view of God’s two-fold rule in creation (traditionally: the two kingdoms doctrine; see Hertz, 1976) and the Christian’s vocation in society and the world (Wingren [1949] 1960). The work of Gustaf Wingren and Hans Joachim Iwand (see Iwand, 1962-74) is perhaps most successful in putting the various strands together into a coherent and characteristically Lutheran stance today.⁴

³ Forde, “*Satis est*: What do we do when other churches don’t agree?” (pp. 12-13).

⁴ Gerhard Forde, “Lutheranism,” *Blackwell’s Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, 354-57, here 357.