

## The new book, *The Essential Forde*, is a pseudo-Forde

How could *The Essential Forde* fail to present Forde as a post-liberal Lutheran?

*The Essential Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*<sup>1</sup> is out. It is the third volume of essays by Gerhard O. Forde, edited by Steven D. Paulson and Mark C. Mattes (and Nicholas Hopman for this last volume). James A. Nestingen writes the Forward.

On the one hand, any collection of Forde is worth reading because Forde. On the other hand, this “essential” sampler fails to convey his post-liberal Lutheranism.

Forde: “A post-liberal Lutheran is one who has been through the options spawned since the Reformation and realizes that they have all been used up. **Least of all does infallibilism or reactionary conservatism of any sort provide an answer.**”<sup>2</sup> Three points:

**1) Inerrancy.** Part I of the book, “The Law-Gospel Distinction in Modern Theology,” presents several chapters from Forde’s doctoral thesis on the historic controversy over the law and biblical authority. There is nothing from Forde’s own battles against biblical inerrancy in current Lutheranism, roughly 1960-2005. The battle over inerrancy in contemporary Lutheranism goes to the heart of how Forde describes himself: a post-liberal Lutheran.

Forde writes in his 1964 essay, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology”<sup>3</sup>: “I think it is safe to say **the major conflict in our church today** is a clash in precisely this area [the modern debate over inerrancy and biblical authority].”<sup>4</sup>

That was **1964**. Did Forde change his mind? As battlefronts changed from ordaining women, to liberation theology, to homosexuality, did he change? No. Three examples:

**1987: “Radical Lutheranism.”** “The attempt to combine two incompatible views means that internally it [Lutheranism] has always had to battle its fundamental scepticism, **its uncertainty about the basis for its faith**. So in its practice it has resorted mostly to a dogmatic absolutism largely dependent on a view of **scriptural inerrancy**, which usually brought with it **disguised moral absolutisms** of various sorts as well.”<sup>5</sup>

**1989: “The Catholic Impasse: Reflections on the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today.”** “The ‘**post-liberal Lutheran**’ is, of course, something of a shadowy, if not menacing, figure on the contemporary scene, perhaps not yet clearly defined, often a puzzle to both friend and foe, usually mistaken simply

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<sup>1</sup> *The Essential Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Gerhard O. Forde, Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Forde, “The Catholic Impasse: Reflections on Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today,” *Promoting Unity*. Eds. H. George Anderson & James R. Crumley Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 72. Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Forde, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology,” in *A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Theology by Members of the Religion Department at Luther College* (Decorah, Iowa; Luther College Press, 1964) 50-69.

<sup>4</sup> Forde, “Law and Gospel,” 51.

<sup>5</sup> Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 11:1 (Spring, 1987) 12-13. Emphasis added.

for a hard-line conservative confessionalist or orthodoxist. But that is seriously to misread the situation. It is a post-Enlightenment, post-liberal position. A post-liberal Lutheran is one who has been through the options spawned since the Reformation and realizes that they have all been used up. **Least of all does infallibilism or reactionary conservatism of any sort provide an answer.** In any case, Lutherans have always been uneasy with **infallibilist solutions** to faith's questions. Even where they have flirted with the ideas of **scriptural infallibility** they have had some anxiety and suspicion that it might be contrary to a gospel appropriation of the scriptural message.<sup>6</sup>

**1997: "The One Acted Upon."** "But in the seminary it soon became apparent that the ancient tradition was under attack....The surrender of **biblical inerrancy** to various versions of "truth as encounter" and other existentialist ploys seemed to lack the bite of the older views of biblical authority. Perhaps it was that something of the offense was gone. **Yet there was no way back.** Older views of **biblical inerrancy** were not an offense, they were just intellectually offensive."<sup>7</sup>

Forde didn't change, but they changed him, that is, several at *The Lutheran Quarterly*: Steven Paulson, Mark Mattes, Nicholas Hopman, and Jim Nestingen.

Forde said there is **no middle ground** in the conflict over method. You have to choose. Forde: "Finally, what is at stake in this conflict over method? **Must we make a choice between them today?** If so, why? **I think we must.**"<sup>8</sup>

Paulson, Mattes, and Nestingen seem to disagree. More on them in a moment.

**2) The Two Kingdoms.** The two kingdoms doctrine is intrinsic to Forde's theology because it is simply another way of stating what is meant by law and gospel. Where are the two kingdoms in *The Essential Forde*? Hardly there at all.

There are a few "two kingdom" references in *The Essential Forde*, such as: "[W]e do not possess absolute, unchangeable laws. If the law no longer takes care of this world, it can and must be changed."<sup>9</sup> Or: "But in questions of the civil use of law it is not legitimate to argue that one example of change justifies another. Each case has to be argued individually."<sup>10</sup>

The two kingdoms doctrine, however, should be a major theme because it addresses God's left-hand kingdom and the human nature of law. Forde:

**Where God Meets Man, 1972:** "This is what it means to say that whereas the kingdom to come is a kingdom of grace the kingdom of this world is a kingdom of law....**Law belongs to earth, not to heaven. It is natural, not supernatural.**...That is why Luther did not speak of law as something static and unchangeable. **Laws will and must change in their form as the times demand. Luther, for instance, refused to grant eternal status even to the laws of Moses.** They are strictly 'natural,' he

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<sup>6</sup> Forde, "The Catholic Impasse: Reflections On Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today," *Promoting Unity. Themes in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue*. Eds. H. George Anderson and James R. Crumley Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 67-77; here 72.

<sup>7</sup> Forde, "The One Acted Upon," *dialog* 36:1 (Winter 1997) 57-58.

<sup>8</sup> Forde, "Law and Gospel," 67.

<sup>9</sup> Forde, "Lex semper accusat," *The Essential Forde*, 198.

<sup>10</sup> Forde, "Law and Sexual Behavior," *The Essential Forde*, 155.

said, not unlike the common law of any nation. Men on this earth simply **don't have access to eternal laws.**"<sup>11</sup>

**Christian Dogmatics, 1984:** "Unable to rhyme Matt. 5:17-18 with Rom. 10:4, the dogmatic tradition has experienced nothing but trouble over the law....**Paul and Matthew are at irreconcilable odds.** Unable to grasp this fulfillment as end, the tradition for the most part had to indulge in what was strictly forbidden by both Matthew and Paul: tampering with the content of the law to arrive at a compromise. The result was the idea that in Christ the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were abrogated...while the 'moral' law was not....But that is patent nonsense....**Neither Testament makes that kind of distinction between ceremonial and moral law....**The outcome of such confusion was, in general, that natural law became the arbiter....Natural law became the structural backbone of the theological system, displacing eschatology."<sup>12</sup>

**"The Viability of Luther Today," 1987:** "First of all, if justification proceeds by way of negation, then the judgment is indeed universal and **all causes are relativized.** This flows from the **very nature of the gospel** and cannot be compromised.

"Secondly, for Luther's theology, it seems to me that the only way from such universal negation back to the concrete is the way of freedom....The Kingdom of God indeed comes by God's power alone, and thus one is turned back into the world for the time being to serve the neighbor....If we are to remain true to the gospel, we must realize that **there are no levers here.** If the movement is not one of freedom, all is lost. Moralists, social reformers, ideologues, revolutionaries, and **even just plain zealous religious people may no doubt find this frustrating and maddening,** but it is of the **very essence** of the matter. Whenever a cause is exempted from the negation, so as to exert a pressure which destroys this freedom, **we come to a serious parting of the ways.**

"Law is to be used for political purposes, i.e., for taking care of people here on earth in as good, loving, and just manner as can be managed. **Reason,** i.e., critical investigation using **the best available wisdom** and analysis of the concrete human situation in given instances, is to be the arbiter in the political use of the law."<sup>13</sup>

The two kingdoms doctrine is intrinsic to Forde's law-gospel theology. It is essential.

**3) Paulson, Mattes, and Nestingen.** In recent years these men, who were students, friends, and colleagues of Forde, as well as guardians of his legacy, have come out of the closet to endorse inerrancy, eternal law, and the third use of law.

In 2017 they contributed to the manifesto, *The Necessary Distinction. A Continuing Conversation on Law and Gospel*, led by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS) jointly with the Lutheran Church of Canada and the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). This manifesto includes a document, "God's Word Forever Shall Abide: A Guiding Statement on the Character and Proper Use of the Sacred

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<sup>11</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 110-11. Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Forde, "Justification and This World," *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2:447.

<sup>13</sup> Forde, "The Viability of Luther Today," *Word & World* 7 (1987) 27.

Scriptures,”<sup>14</sup> which **was adopted** by the dialogue committee, which includes Paulson, Mattes, and Nestingen.

The manifesto’s guiding statement endorses inerrancy, eternal law, and the third use of law, all positions contrary to Forde, yet supported by Paulson, Mattes, and Nestingen, as is evident by their vote for it and by other things they have written:

**Paulson on inerrancy:** “Thanks to Dr. Brug for standing for Scripture’s **inerrancy**....No doubt he is right, that ELCA lost track of the original source of Scripture, which is the **inerrancy in the letters** that come through an inerrant Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

**Nestingen on eternal law:** “The Law is not eternal in the sense of Augustine’s *lex aeterna* doctrine—then it would displace the Gospel. But it is eternal in the eschatological sense. Its significance points ahead of itself to the shape of life God intends for the creation and the new creation.”<sup>16</sup>

(This is an implicit endorsement of eternal law for the first and third use of law. See Forde: “The only way to overcome the problem of the hiddenness of God not preached is by God preached. But **that will not happen by attempting to infer God’s will from the law.**”<sup>17</sup>)

**Mattes on the third use of law:** “The new person in Christ truly delights in God and in His ways, how God has ordered the cosmos and the limits He has established for our behavior....We are reborn so that we might do good works....The third use indicates that very path and presupposes a new motive ...for walking that path.”<sup>18</sup>

Forde’s editors at the *Lutheran Quarterly* have produced an “essential” Forde which muzzles his post-liberal Lutheranism – while they endorse a manifesto on inerrancy with the LC-MS.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Necessary Distinction. A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel*. Eds. Albert B. Collver III, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017). The joint statement is available both online and at the end of *The Necessary Distinction*.

<sup>15</sup> Paulson’s response to the paper by John F. Brug, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Word,” at the Lutheran Free Conference, November 2011, was revised for *LOGIA*, Epiphany XXII,1 (2013) 53-54.

<sup>16</sup> Nestingen, *The Necessary Distinction*, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, Ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 79.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Mattes, *The Necessary Distinction*, 133.