

## The new book, *The Essential Forde*, is pseudo-Forde (2a)

In 1971 Gerhard Forde shifted from teaching in the Church History department to Systematic Theology. He said this shift did not make any major transition in his thinking or teaching, adding: "It did mean, however, that I have always taught systematics from a historical base – as it ought to be taught!"<sup>1</sup>

Forde's statement above is noted by Nicholas Hopman in his introduction to Forde's life in *The Essential Forde*. How odd that Forde's editors note his concern for historical context and then fail to provide [historical context or bibliographical references](#) for Forde's own writings.<sup>2</sup>

Hopman's fellow editor, Steven Paulson, writes of the purpose of *The Essential Forde*: "But with this volume, we especially want to introduce Forde to a new generation of pastors, theologians, and other church leaders who do not know him."<sup>3</sup>

How is a new generation supposed to understand Forde without bibliographic references and historical context? The implicit message of *The Essential Forde* is: "Look no further than what we give you here."

Forde's context, however, is crucial to understanding him and the wider Lutheran world. He lived and wrote in the heart of the twentieth century Lutheran renaissance. Forde:

"[M]ost 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 20<sup>th</sup> century discoveries. The phenomenon known as 'Luther's Theology' is actually quite a 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 metaphysics 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 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish Lutheran 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 a radically different – in today's terms, eschatological – shape begins to emerge.**"<sup>4</sup>

A new generation needs tools for assessing its heritage. What was rediscovered in the twentieth century Lutheran renaissance? What have we learned from current biblical studies? Why can't a verbal inspiration hermeneutic be combined with a law-gospel hermeneutic? Why did Forde call himself a post-liberal Lutheran? Forde writes about all these questions and more:

"What brings a post-liberal Lutheran back to faith in the triune God, the divine/human Redeemer, the atonement, the resurrection, the church, i.e., the main corpus of traditional catholic doctrine? **Most assuredly not** the magisterial authority of an infallible ecclesiastical office or **assertions about the inerrancy of an infallible Scripture. And not, certainly, just romantic nostalgia for the safety of a lost conservative haven.** The Enlightenment has swept all that away....The 'post liberal Lutheran'

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The One Acted Upon," *dialog* 36/1 (1997) 61.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Hopman, "Forde's Life," *The Essential Forde*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Paulson, "Forde Lives!" *The Essential Forde*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Forde, "*Satis est*: What do we do when other churches don't agree?" 12-13. Emphasis added. Available [here](#).

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 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. But attempts to ground faith in 'natural religious experience' of some sort are also perceived finally to undercut the gospel as well and do not finally liberate. Thus the post-liberal has been driven to reach back beyond the confessional, 'orthodox,' and liberal settlements and compromises of the post-Reformation era to the roots of the Reformation protest, particularly in Luther himself....What is it in the theology of Luther that attracts a post-liberal and impels a return to the catholic faith?....One could say many things or approach the matter from several different angles. Here, however, it will have to do to say it is simply the peculiar realization that the proclamation of the gospel when rightly done as **the 'word of the cross' itself cuts the ground out from under previous ways of doing theology, and does it more surely and radically than the Enlightenment ever did.**"<sup>5</sup>

In his Forward to *The Essential Forde* James Nestingen writes that the book provides "a wonderful sampler of Gerhard's work."<sup>6</sup> A sampler without bibliographical information, without historical context, and without the larger picture of Forde's leadership in the twentieth century Luther renaissance.

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<sup>5</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. (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1989) 67-77, here 72-73. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> James Nestingen, *The Essential Forde*, xv.