

### The new book, *The Essential Forde*, is pseudo-Forde (3)

*The Essential Forde* includes four chapters of Forde's doctoral dissertation, *The Law-Gospel Debate*.<sup>1</sup>

While there is nothing wrong with presenting his work on the history of the law-gospel debate in the nineteenth century, Forde's dissertation is about the theology of others, not his own theology.

Moreover, dissertations are written for specialists, hardly the kind of material suited "to introduce Forde to a new generation of pastors, theologians, and church leaders who do not know him directly," as Steven Paulson writes of the editors' purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Why not present "law and gospel" in Forde himself?! Below is a representative statement on law and gospel by Forde from the US Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue VII. By round seven of the dialogue Forde had become the de facto leader of the Lutheran team. Keep in mind that across table sat Roman Catholic experts, including Avery Dulles, George Tavard, and Carl Peter, ready to challenge the slightest misstep:

"The law does not open the future, it closes it. It only reveals what should or might have been when it is too late and the future is sealed, unless there is another possibility. To live under the law is always to be attempting to repair or atone for yesterday; thus yesterday always controls tomorrow. The law kills and brings death, not life, for yesterday is always yesterday. **Grace, the gift of God's eschatological kingdom in the promise of the gospel, is humanity's tomorrow.** Since that is the case, **the law must function to cut off every human attempt to create its own tomorrow.** The letter, the literal history, must do its work to cut off every form of metaphysical or religious escape. We do not have some transcendent scheme of meaning which somehow protects us from history, rather **we are cast into history with nothing but faith, to wait and hope.** The dialectic makes us historical beings. 'If we have died with him, we shall also live with him' (2 Tim 2:11).

**The law and its office or function is therefore strictly limited to this age.** It is accuser. That is its chief function, its office. As accuser it stands inviolate, unrelenting, without any 'veil,' until that to which it points arrives. As long as sin and death remain, the law remains. Unfaith, sin, death, and the law are inseparable partners. Until the ultimate triumph of the eschatological kingdom, the law will sound.

All of this raises the inevitable question about whether there is not a more 'positive' use of the law in Lutheran theology. Here it should be remembered that Lutherans do speak of the 'civil use' of the law, the so-called first use. But that use, too, it should be noted, was a use restricted to 'this age.' In its civil use the law restrains evil and establishes order for the care of human society. God uses the law in this sense to hold the world in readiness for the gospel and keep it from collapsing into the chaos which threatens it. Under the civil use of law it is quite possible to speak of the goodness and 'civil righteousness' of human activity even though it does not reach beyond this age. If this use of the law is overextended, however, if one begins to take the law into one's own hands in order to bring in one's own version of the kingdom, tyranny results and **resistance must be mounted.**

**Precisely the proper distinction between law and gospel limits and humanizes the law.** The

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law Gospel Debate. An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Steven Paulson, "Forde Lives!" *The Essential Forde. Gerhard O. Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019) 18.

purpose of the law in its civil use is to take care of the world and of human beings, not to tyrannize them.”<sup>3</sup>

Forde here focuses on the key dynamic of law and gospel: “**Precisely the proper distinction between law and gospel limits and humanizes the law.**” Through his career Forde shows that when law and gospel are **properly** distinguished, the law is not eternal, reason is the proper tool in God’s left-hand kingdom, and there are only two uses of law, not three:

**1. The law is not eternal, supernatural; it is natural and changes.**

- “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 said, not unlike the common law of any nation. Men on this earth simply don’t have access to eternal laws.”<sup>4</sup>
- “Faith in the end of the law leads to the view that its purpose is to take care of this world, not to prepare for the next. That means we do not possess absolute, unchangeable laws. If the law no longer takes care of this world, it can and must be changed. As even Luther put it, we must write our own decalogue to fit the times.”<sup>5</sup>
- “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>6</sup>
- “Once justification had again been reasserted in radical fashion, it was natural that heavy pressure would be brought to bear on the received understanding of law. John Agricola rightly sensed that justification by faith could not simply be combined with **the older idea of law as an eternal order,** still evident in some of Philip Melancthon’s theological constructions.”<sup>7</sup>
- “The Reformation’s insistence on justification by faith as an eschatological event brought with it a reassertion of **the functional understanding of law.** Luther especially insisted that law must be clearly distinguished from gospel and the proper ‘uses’ of the law carefully explained. The distinction between law and gospel and the doctrine of the uses of law are of **primary importance** because **they contain virtually everything we want to say** subsequently about the Christian life.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “Forensic Justification and the Law in Lutheran Theology,” *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*. Eds. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 300-301. Bolding added here and below for emphasis. See also *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing, 1972) 110-12.

<sup>4</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 110-11.

<sup>5</sup> Forde, “*Lex semper accusat?* Nineteenth Century Roots of Our Current Dilemma,” *dialog 9* (1970) 274; *A More Radical Gospel*. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) 49; *The Essential Forde*, 193.

<sup>6</sup> Forde, “Postscript to the Captivation of the Will,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19:1 (2005) 79; Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*. Ed. Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 79.

<sup>7</sup> Forde, “Justification and This World,” *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) II:448.

<sup>8</sup> Forde, “Justification,” *Christian Dogmatics*, II:415.

- “Throughout this *locus* ‘law’ is to be taken in a functional rather than a material sense. ‘The law’ in this sense is demand, that voice which ‘accuses,’ as the reformers put it, arising from anywhere and everywhere, insisting that we do our duty and fulfill our being. Anything which does that exercises the function or ‘office’ of the law. Law is not a specifiable set of propositions, but is one way communication functions when we are alienated, estranged, and bound. **This understanding of law transcends the usual kind of argument**, as when, for instance, it is maintained that ‘law’ should be understood as ‘Torah,’ a gracious gift in the covenant rather than a harsh imposition, or when it is said that Paul misunderstood the law. Such exegetical considerations, important in their own right, are not decisive for the question at hand. It makes no difference at the outset, therefore, whether ‘the law’ involved is biblical, the natural law, the law of being, the law of Christ, or the faces of starving children on the television screen. **It is the way the communication functions, its ‘use,’ that matters.** The assumption we fallen humans make is that the law is the way, that we can be saved by response to a demand, by ‘the works of the law.’ We assume we can end the voice by acceding to its demands.”<sup>9</sup>
- “The **law is limited to this age**, and only where faith grasps that will the law be accorded its **proper place.**”<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Reason rules in God’s left-hand kingdom.

- “Men on this earth simply don’t have access to eternal laws. But men do have the gift of **reason** and the accumulated wisdom of the ages as well as the Bible. **Here is the task for man’s reason and created gifts.** Once cured of religious and mythological ambitions, they can be put to work as they ought: taking care of men. For in the final analysis, all man’s vocations are to be enlisted in the battle against the devil.”<sup>11</sup>
- “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>12</sup>
- “It is not enough just to say that a given command is ‘The Word of God’ ... **in questions of the civil use of law...each case has to be argued individually....**The fundamental concern of the civil use of the law is for the care of the social order....What the law enjoins is love of and service to the neighbor. **That is its fundamental and ineradicable content.**”<sup>13</sup>
- “[The two kingdoms doctrine’s] great contribution to the problem of social ethics is exactly to strip men of their mythologies. For the very fact that it insists that whatever other Kingdom there is, the eschatological one comes solely and absolutely by God’s power alone means that the only real task for men is to repent, to turn around and take care of this world as best they know how – without myth, but with **reason, love and justice; to be pragmatic:** to solve problems concretely. The eschatological vision makes it clear that **the secular is our sacred**

<sup>9</sup> Forde, “Justification,” *Christian Dogmatics*, II:400.

<sup>10</sup> Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 100.

<sup>11</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 110-11.

<sup>12</sup> Forde, “The Viability of Luther Today: A North American Perspective,” *Word & World* 7 (1987) 27.

<sup>13</sup> Forde, “Law and Sexual Behavior,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 9:1 (Spring, 1995) 8-9, 18. *The Essential Forde*, 155, 165. “Ineradicable” here does not mean “eternal law.” Forde: “Law belongs to earth, not heaven. It is natural, not supernatural,” *Where God Meets Man*, 111.

**task.** It tears the mask from our pretensions and bids us become human beings. That, I think, is the real significance of Luther's resistance to the Peasant's Revolt, whatever we may think of his final action. He saw quite clearly that if one is to apply this principle, then there could be **absolutely no exceptions.** Not even those who undertake revolutions for the sake of so-called 'Christian principles' can be excepted. Nobody, Prince, Peasant, Preacher, President or what have you, carries out a revolution or a political program in the name of Christ. That is so first of all because Luther categorically refused to allow Christ to become a club with which to beat anyone (a 'New Law' as he called it), and secondly because revolutions and political programs can be carried through only in the name of humanity without appeal to either myth or religion. Luther means that quite radically. **You don't need Christ, or even the Bible, necessarily, to tell you what to do in social matters. You have reason, use it!**<sup>14</sup>

### 3. The law has two uses, not three.

- "From the eschatological perspective the legitimate concerns badly expressed in the idea of a **third use** of the law can be sorted out. First, one who has been grasped by the eschatological vision looks on law differently from one who has not. But that is not to say that one sees a 'third' use. What one sees is precisely the difference between law and gospel, so that **law can be established in its first two uses this side of the eschaton.** Before that vision or when it fades, law is misused as a way of salvation, a means of escape. One does not know the difference between law and gospel.  
Second, one grasped by the eschatological vision will recognize **the continuing need for the law. But this too does not mean a third use.** Rather, just because of 'rebirth' in faith, one will see how much one is a sinner and will be until the end. One will see that one is not yet a 'Christian.' One will see precisely that one has no particular advantages over those who are not yet reborn. One will see one's solidarity with the rest of the human race and wait and hope until the end, leaving the heroics and pretensions to spiritual athletes.  
The idea of a third use of the law after rebirth thus obscures the eschatological nature of that event and consequently mistakes our relationship to this world. 'Rebirth' does not mean premature translation in time into a state different from that of the rest of humankind, in which one is now privileged to use the law differently. That would be a false eschatology. Rebirth, since it leads to the understanding of self as *simul iustus et peccator*, simply cannot share such an idea of conversion. One is never converted in that sense, because one must be converted anew each day. Until the end, therefore, one grasped by the eschatological vision will know that he or she **needs the law** in precisely the same way that the rest of humankind needs it: **to restrain evil and convict of sin.**"<sup>15</sup>
- "Formula of Concord (Article VI) vacillates on the issue. On the one hand, it speaks of a third use of the law to be applied to the regenerate, but then it goes on to say it is necessary because regeneration is incomplete in this life. It is an attempt to have it both ways and thus threatens only to obscure the issue."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Forde, "The Revolt and the Wedding: An Essay on Social Ethics in the Perspective of Luther's Theology," *The Reformation and the Revolution* (Sioux Falls: Augustana College Press, 1970) 85-86.

<sup>15</sup> Forde, "Justification and this World," *Christian Dogmatics* II: 449-50.

<sup>16</sup> Forde, "Justification and this World," *Christian Dogmatics* II:460, footnote 3.

**“Precisely the proper distinction between law and gospel limits and humanizes the law.”<sup>17</sup>**

**The above quotations** present the key elements of the **real** Forde.

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<sup>17</sup> Forde, “Forensic Justification and Law in Lutheran Theology,” *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, 301.