

The new book, *The Essential Forde*, is pseudo-Forde (4)

“I think it is safe to say **the major conflict in our church today** is a clash in precisely this area,”¹ wrote Gerhard Forde in 1964. “The area” was the conflict over how the authority of the Word of God is established. By the method of verbal inerrancy or by the law-gospel method?

Surely the new book, *The Essential Forde*, includes Forde on the authority of the Word of God? On what he called “**the major conflict in our church today**”? But it doesn’t. Nothing. Nada. **Not a single essay**, even though it was a major theme throughout his career.

This “**major conflict**” is with us still, as Forde’s editors, Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson, note:

“Forde’s work in hermeneutics...will be an abiding interest for the future. He especially identifies the sacramentality of the preached word itself. God’s gospel, unlike the restraining and preserving law, creates anew – even out of nothing. It does what it says, says what it does. **Scripture as the source of this word is the battleground** for the problem of dealing with an eschatological word that raises from the dead. And a pitched battle it is. Since the letter kills and the Spirit gives life **the problem of interpretation of scripture is key for all matters of church and theology.**”²

What a loss that Forde’s work on hermeneutics is missing from *The Essential Forde*. As his editors above write, it “is **key** for all matters of church and theology.” Below is the real Forde on the “**major conflict in the church today**,” the authority of the Word of God:

1964: “Law and gospel as the methodological principle of theology.”

“[T]he verbal inspiration theory has the increasingly obvious difficulty that it is unable to deal with facts gained both by research into the Bible and the world around us. For over two hundred years now it has demonstrated its **inability to cope with truths established by scientific and historical research.** In the face of the mounting knowledge of the world, **the verbal inspiration method has had no constructive counsel to give, but can only advise one to retreat from the world** and refuse to face those things which one finds uncomfortable. One does not need to go outside the Bible itself to show the inability of this method to cope with the facts. Clearly the belief that there are no mistakes of any sort in scripture simply is not true. The many discrepancies *within* the Bible itself – where the Bible disagrees with itself – demonstrate this fact.³

“I am in effect saying to God that unless he provides me with the kind of guarantee which I expect and want, I cannot believe. Then I am in a very dangerous position because I am dictating to God the conditions under which I will believe. It is dangerous because **it might just be that God has not in fact provided us with that kind of guarantee.**

¹ 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; here 51. Bolding added for emphasis here and below. In 1961 all but one member of the Luther College religion faculty resigned in defense of the inerrancy of scripture, which Robert W. Jenson, a member of the faculty, rejected. Jenson remained on the faculty with the support of the College President, J. W. Ylvisaker. Read more [here](#).

² Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson, “Introduction,” *A More Radical Gospel. Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism. Gerhard O. Forde*. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) xvii-xviii.

³ Forde, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology,” 56.

In the final analysis the verbal inspiration method is based on a theory—a **human theory about the nature of the Word of God**. Now the test for the validity of any theory is how well it explains the facts, and one can only say that this theory does not explain the facts very well. It is based on human logic and once its logic is broken the entire position collapses all at once.”⁴

“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**.

We are fighting for the restoration of the gospel. It must be made absolutely clear here that it is *not* dedication to historical-critical research, it is *not* dedication to science or any other human endeavor which decides the matter. It is purely and simply dedication to the gospel. For the twentieth century the burning question is the question ‘how do you know?’ and one cannot compromise on this question today without compromising the gospel. **It is not possible to hold both these methods today, or to compromise between them without compromising and hence distorting the gospel.**”⁵

1978: “Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition.”

“[W]ith rare exceptions infallibility language is used positively only in a gospel context. It is used to assert that the promises of God in his Word are trustworthy and that they apply to the hearers of that Word....The question which naturally arises at this point is: What is the Word of God to which this kind of infallibility is ascribed? **A formal legalistic biblicism is clearly not what Luther and early Lutherans had in mind.** In the controversy with the peasants especially, and with other sectarians of the times as well, **such biblicism was encountered and rejected.** ‘Luther’s ultimate authority and standard was not the book of the Bible and the canon as such but that scripture which interpreted itself and also **criticized itself from its own center, from Christ and from the radically understood gospel.**’ For Luther, the authority of Scripture was Christ-centered and therefore gospel-centered. Scripture bears testimony to all the articles about Christ and is on that account to be so highly valued. One who does not find Christ in the Scriptures engages in superfluous reading, even if he or she reads it carefully. One should ‘refer the Bible to Christ ... nothing but Christ should be proclaimed.’ Luther can even go so far as to say: **‘If adversaries use scripture against Christ, then we put Christ against the scriptures.’** The Word of God therefore is ultimately Christ and the proclamation of the gospel.”⁶

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.”⁷

⁴ Forde, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology,” 56-57.

⁵ Forde, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology,” 67.

⁶ Forde, “Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition,” *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*. Eds. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1978) 120-37, here 129.

⁷ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 11:1 (Spring, 1987) 12-13. Emphasis added.

1989: "The Catholic Impasse: Reflections on the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today."

"How did the churches react to the break in the history of the West called the Enlightenment and its social and political aftermath? In broad terms, the reaction was of two sorts: resistance or accommodation. For both Catholics and Protestants the resistance took the form of a defensive hardening of lines against the Enlightenment 'erosion' of the biblical and apostolic faith. At its apex, the hardening of lines took the form of rallying behind infallibilism: papal infallibility in the case of Rome and **biblical infallibility or inerrancy** in the case of Protestants. The threatened **erosion of apostolic or scriptural truth by Enlightenment criticism** could best and most safely be countered by outright refusal to consider the argument. The fact that both Catholics and Protestants reacted with something of the same tactic indicates that both operated with pretty much the same hermeneutical principles: the **authoritativeness of the Holy Words** rests almost exclusively in their ability to signify something on the order of '**metaphysical**' truth: i.e., '**true doctrines.**' Where criticism erodes this ability or where the proper interpretation of the words is questioned, additional authoritative support is needed. Thus **the resort to infallibilist claims**, either ecclesiastical or scriptural.⁸

1990: *Theology is for Proclamation*

"The Enlightenment sought to liberate the world from such heteronomy. It saw clearly that old news was bad news. Those who think that an inerrant or infallible historical record solves the problem mistake the gravity of the crisis....On the 'right' conservatives and reactionaries insist that we are safe only if everything is, so to speak, set in stone. **We are protected from the erosions of time only by an inerrant scripture, infallible secondary discourse.** But this is likewise an undermining of the present-tense proclamation. Old news remains bad news even if it is supposedly inerrant or infallible."⁹

"From this perspective one might well ask why there is so much religious fury directed at historical criticism. Will we be ashamed of the one we find thereby? To be sure, the historical critical method is not theologically neutral; ambiguity surrounds its usage. It is highly questionable when used to establish continuity with 'the real Jesus' who is supposed no longer to be an offense or a threat. But resistance to the method can also be due to the stake we have in the titles that similarly protect from that offense."¹⁰

"Conservative Christology seeks to trace explicitly '**proof for the 'divinity' of Jesus directly back to the teaching of an inerrant scripture.** There is direct continuity between the Christology of Jesus thus uncovered and their own. Today such a Christology can maintain itself only **by ignoring the development of careful historical investigation of the Scripture and the problematics that gave rise to that historical work.**"¹¹

"The Gospels had to be written to tell the truth about Jesus in the light of the cross and the resurrection. They had to be written to preserve the delicate dialectic between continuity and discontinuity. We may indeed argue as to **the relative success each of the Gospels achieves** in this sensitive enterprise, but it is essential for proclamation today to understand this if one is

⁸ 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; 71, [here](#).

⁹ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 7-8.

¹⁰ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 68.

¹¹ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 70.

going to preach significantly on the Gospels. On the one hand, the life and teachings are of no significance apart from the death and resurrection. Indeed, they had to be transformed in the light of the cross and resurrection. This fact is usually the most difficult, especially for the literalists among us. **We must reckon with the fact that the words and teachings of the earthly Jesus in all probability could not have been handed on as he gave them even if those very words had been preserved.** The death and resurrection had intervened and it would be untrue to what God was doing to hand on anything about Jesus apart from that fact.”¹²

1990: “*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*: Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition”

“*Sui ipsius interpres* [Scripture interprets itself] is simply the hermeneutical correlate of justification by faith alone. In this light, formal claims made for extra-scriptural authority structures and/or **formal declarations about biblical authority** (inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) are constructs which in one way or another are simply **a reflex of the needs of the subjective *sensus proprius*.**”¹³

1990’s (no date given) “Authority in the Church: The Lutheran Reformation”

“The insistence that **scripture interprets itself** is simply the hermeneutical correlate of **justification by faith alone**....From the Reformation perspective, the problem in the church is not finally to be traced to a lack of nerve in asserting the law, but rather in the failure to preach the gospel in all its radicality. There is absolutely no way that **the proper authority and uses of the law** are going to be established in the church’s message without that radical gospel. This call for a more radical gospel is the *raison d’être* for my teaching. Since the Reformation, beginning even with the Saxon Visitation (the ‘graveyard’ of the Reformation?) where Melancthon tried to shore up the sagging enterprise by preaching the law more strenuously, just about all the remedies have been tried. We have about used up all our coupons. We have only one left. We should try it – a more radical gospel.”¹⁴

1997: “The One Acted Upon”

“But in the seminary it soon became apparent that **the ancient tradition was under attack**. The attack, however, was not from without but from within. It was not, that is, the inroads of criticism and liberalism, etc., that were the ultimate source of trouble. Such inroads could temporarily at least be sidestepped, accommodated, or moderated. So we read Brunner (the most used in dogmatics classes as I recall), and Sittler, and Kantonen, and Nygren, and Tillich, etc., and they assured us that all was well in the “Neo-Orthodox” camp. Yet there was, for me at least, a certain unease. 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.** I was looking, I think, for

¹² Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 85.

¹³ Forde, “*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*: Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition,” *A More Radical Gospel*, 72.

¹⁴ Forde, “Authority in the Church: The Lutheran Reformation,” *A More Radical Gospel*, 53-67; here 66-67.

something deeper and more compelling, a gospel authority that establishes itself by its own power and attractiveness, not a legal authority that simply demands submission.”¹⁵

The real Forde on scripture is a post-liberal Lutheran:

“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 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.**¹⁶

¹⁵ Forde, “The One Acted Upon,” *dialog* 36:1 (1997) 57-58.

¹⁶ Gerhard Forde, “The Catholic Impasse,” *Promoting Unity. Themes in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue*, 72.