

The new book, *The Essential Forde*, is pseudo-Forde (5)

“God and the scriptures are two different things, as different as Creator and creature,” wrote Luther in his response to Erasmus.¹ Luther dared to stress the distance: two different things—like Creator and creature. This assertion distinguishes Luther from the biblicism of his day and ours. The implications of this assertion are developed in Luther’s thesis on the clarity of scripture.

Seventeenth century Lutheran orthodoxy mistook this thesis as a claim to scriptural inerrancy. The twentieth century Luther renaissance rediscovered the proper understanding of this thesis. Forde’s theology, what he called post-liberal Lutheranism, is representative of this rediscovery and its importance. He held that there could be no compromise between inerrancy and the law/gospel method. The stakes could not be higher: “We are fighting for the restoration of the gospel.”²

The new book, *The Essential Forde*, is silent about Forde’s lifelong battles against inerrancy. Yet his *Lutheran Quarterly* editors, Steven Paulson and Mark Mattes, imply that they share with Forde a common view of the clarity and proper use of scripture, even as they promote inerrancy, law as an eternal moral order, and a third use of the law, as the chart below shows:

1. Inerrancy	
Forde’s editors	Forde
<p>“Thanks to Dr. Brug for standing for Scripture’s inerrancy....No doubt he is right, that the ELCA lost track of the original source of Scripture, which is the inerrancy in the letters that come through an inerrant Holy Spirit.”³</p> <p>“The ‘letter’ of scripture does not primarily refer to a ‘spiritual’ meaning behind the text but is an inseparable embodiment of spiritual activity that remakes the human anew – calls forth trust in God.”⁴</p>	<p>“The belief that by accepting scripture in this uncompromising fashion one is placing oneself <i>under</i> the authority of God’s Word is in fact open to serious question. For when all is said and done, the <i>a priori</i> belief that this is the way it <i>must be</i> in order for scripture to be the Word of God is nowhere established in scripture itself, and it is a human construction.... 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 <i>in fact</i> provided us with that kind of guarantee....The verbal inspiration theory has the increasingly obvious difficulty that it is unable to</p>

¹ *Luther’s Works* 33:25.

² Gerhard Forde, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology,” *A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Theology by Members of the Religion Department at Luther College* (Decorah, Iowa; Luther College Press, 1964) 67.

³ Steven D. Paulson, “Scripture, Enthusiasm, and the ELCA,” *LOGIA* XXII:1 (2013) 53. Bolding added here and below for emphasis. Italics are in the original.

⁴ Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson, “Introduction: Taking the Risk to Proclaim,” *The Preached God. Gerhard O. Forde. Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) 6-7.

1. Inerrancy	
Forde's editors	Forde
	<p>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 <i>within</i> the Bible itself – where the Bible disagrees with itself – demonstrate this fact....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.”⁵</p>

2. The clarity of scripture	
Forde's editors	Forde
<p>“So Scripture is not perforated with God’s hiddenness and dark obscurity; it is clear from beginning to end—though God retains his hiddenness apart from Scripture.”⁶</p> <p>“At this point a person could fruitfully consider Luther’s two kinds of clarity (external and internal) as he discusses them in <i>Bondage of the Will</i>. And one could also take up the Orthodox Lutherans who distinguished ‘obscurity in the</p>	<p>“[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</p>

⁵ Gerhard Forde, “Law and Gospel,” 55-56.

⁶ Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God. Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018) 1:100.

2. The clarity of scripture	
Forde's editors	Forde
<p>object contemplated and that which lies in the subject contemplating it.' As Quenstedt put it, 'The words of the Testament are in themselves very perspicuous, but are variously interpreted; because many neglecting the literal and proper sense, studiously seek a foreign one...because of the perverseness or imbecility of men. The obscurity which lies in the subject must not be transferred to the object' [!]"⁷</p> <p>"By 'external word' Luther means the text of Scripture, along with its miraculous bestowal or mediation from one person to another via the office of ministry. That office is the outward office of the Word that utters the two words of God in perfect clarity: first the Law that tells us exactly what to do and judges us; and then the gospel that tells us precisely what Christ thinks of us—apart from the law."⁸</p>	<p>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.'²⁷ 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.²⁸ One who does not find Christ in the Scriptures engages in superfluous reading, even if he or she reads it carefully.²⁹ One should 'refer the Bible to Christ...nothing but Christ should be proclaimed.'³⁰ Luther can even go so far as to say: 'If adversaries use scripture against Christ, then we put Christ against the scriptures.'³¹ The Word of God therefore is ultimately Christ and the proclamation of the gospel."⁹</p>

3. Nature of biblical materials	
Forde's editors	Forde
<p>"The 'letter' of scripture does not primarily refer to a 'spiritual' meaning behind the text but is an inseparable embodiment of spiritual activity that remakes the human anew – calls forth trust in God. Hence, one should not translate the text into one's own spiritual journey. That only reinforces a disembodied, enthusiastic 'god-within-ism,' just as mysticism does. Rather, one</p>	<p>"But how is the problem to be met? 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."¹²</p> <p>"[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</p>

⁷ Paulson, "Lutheran Assertions Regarding Scripture," *Lutheran Quarterly* XVII:4 (2003) 385.

⁸ Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019) 2:140.

⁹ 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, 1978) 120-37, here 129. Footnotes in the text as follows (Fn): Fn 27: P. Althaus, *Theology*, 336; Fn 28: WA 32:56, 21-27 *Sermons*, 1530; Fn 29: WA 51:4, 8. *Sermons* 1545; Fn 30: WA 16:113, 5-9. *Sermons on Exodus*. 1524-1527; Fn 31: WA 39/1:47, 19-20; LW 34:112. *Theses on Faith and Law*, 1535.

¹² Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 85.

3. Nature of biblical materials	
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<p>should cling to the external (<i>externum</i>) word that gives the new life it promises."¹⁰</p> <p>"The proclamation of this written text of God's dealings with his people, proclaimed to actual sinners in the present so that, as Christ says to his preachers, 'he who hears you hears me,' is the way that a writing has such divine, original and final power."¹¹</p>	<p>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."¹³</p>

4. Does the Bible give an audio-tape of Jesus' words?	
Forde's editors	Forde
<p>"[T]he words we use come first from Scripture's text, and so the question of how to move from Scripture to proclamation is precisely what preachers are concerned about. Forde has offered a basic help to us in his description of 'doing the text' to the hearer in a type of repetition of the original effect of the words that came to be written down, the words of Christ first and foremost, but also of the apostles who bear witness to him."¹⁴</p>	<p>"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 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."¹⁵</p>

¹⁰ Mattes and Paulson, "Introduction: Taking the Risk to Proclaim," *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 19.

¹¹ Paulson, "Lutheran Assertions Regarding Scripture," 383.

¹³ Forde, "Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition," *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, VI, 129.

¹⁴ Mattes and Paulson, "Introduction: Taking the Risk to Proclaim," *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 6-7.

¹⁵ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) 84-85.

5. Does the Bible give us revealed, divine law?	
Forde's editors	Forde
<p>"The ELCA is a runaway train of piety....To them, law is not universal and unchanging....They in the ELCA have discovered that the laws of Scripture and nature that are universal, unchanging, permanent, actually kill (2 Cor 3)."¹⁶</p> <p>"What happened with the law of God is remarkable indeed. God did what we deem impossible. God made his own divine law eternally <i>historical</i> by means of Christ's historical cross. The law become <i>once and for all</i>....For this reason, God giving his heart in Jesus Christ is not a simple matter. It complicates things for us on earth, especially those of us who are trying hard (sometimes) to live according to God's divine plan as revealed in his law."¹⁷</p>	<p>"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."¹⁸</p>
An upcoming chart will deal more extensively with the differences between Forde and his <i>Lutheran Quarterly</i> editors on the law.	

¹⁶ Paulson, "Scripture, Enthusiasm, and the ELCA," *Logia*, 53.

¹⁷ Mattes and Paulson, "Introduction: Taking the Risk to Proclaim," *The Preached God. Gerhard O. Forde*, 10.

¹⁸ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 111.