

At least the Ten Commandments are God's revelation, aren't they? (1)

Both Luther and Forde sometimes speak of the Ten Commandments as divine revelation – laws sent from heaven above to earth below.

At the same time they both also refer to the Ten Commandments as human codes that are not absolute or divine. These statements, some of which are given below, are not flippant or erratic. Rather, they are important clarifications relating to the larger questions: What is revelation? What is election?

Three examples from **Luther**:

- “Indeed, we would make **new decalogues**, as Paul does in all the epistles, and Peter, but above all Christ in the gospel” (*Luther's Works* 34:112).
- “This text makes it clear that **even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us**” (*LW* 35:165).
- “The Gentiles are not obligated to obey Moses. **Moses is the *Sachsenspiegel* for the Jews**” (*LW* 35:167).¹

Three examples from Gerhard **Forde**:

- “For 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 that **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.”²
- “Once the eschatological outlook has been displaced by **an eternal order of law**, antinomianism is the attempt to remedy the situation with a false and realized eschatology.

“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.”³

¹ *Sachsenspiegel* is the “Saxon code of law,” a thirteenth century compilation of economic and social laws which influenced the codification of German law until the nineteenth century. Emphasis added here and below.

² Forde, “*Lex Semper Accusat?* Nineteenth-Century Roots of Our Current Dilemma,” *dialog* 9 (1970) 274; *A More Radical Gospel*. Gerhard O. Forde. *Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 49. *The Essential Forde*. Gerhard O. Forde. *Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019) 193.

³ Forde, “Justification and This World,” *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2:447.

- “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.”⁴

The total Luther. The total Forde.

Were Luther and Forde confused, inconsistent? Did they change their positions over time? Are their theologies like a wax nose that can be twisted into supporting any number of views?

No. There is the **total Luther**, his defining stance (*was Christum treibet*), which excludes and includes. The same holds true for Forde. There is the **total Forde**. He, too, has his defining stance (also *was Christum treibet*). This means that their theologies cannot be twisted like a wax nose by those who find a quote here or there that seems to support inerrancy, a third use of law, or the like.

⁴ Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1972) 110-11.