

Nicholas Hopman presents a pseudo-Forde, a Forde open to inerrancy, 2

Nicholas Hopman throws eternal law out the front door, only to sneak it in the back door – in a recent *Lutheran Forum* article in praise of Gerhard Forde. This is not the first time he makes this move. He did it in a 2016 essay, “Luther’s Antinomian Disputations and *lex aeterna*,” in the *Lutheran Quarterly*.¹

In this earlier essay Hopman also claims that Luther and Forde affirm the ten commandments as God’s divine law. His argument goes like this: Natural law = the decalogue = God’s divine moral code:

“Obviously, Forde could go right around Bultmann and Kant back to Luther to find a properly ‘existential’ (namely, experiential) understanding of the law. This understanding of the law does not exclude the fact that **the law is natural, summarized in the Decalogue, comes in specific commandments, tells people what to do**, and in God’s first use of it, extracts works which are good *coram hominibus*.”

“This fundamental argument in the *Antinomian Disputations* does not prevent **Luther from repeatedly defining the law as the Decalogue**²⁹ and mentioning specific sins condemned by specific commandments and natural law including avarice,³⁰ vainglory, pride,³¹ anger, despair, presumption,³² lust,³³ fornication, adultery,³⁴ murder,³⁵ unbelief, despair, hatred of God, and blasphemy.³⁶ **Apparently Luther saw no contradiction in acknowledging the law’s specific commandments and defining it according to its effect.**”²

“Forde’s affinity for defining **the law** as the law written on the human heart and as its oppression of the heart does not make the law subjective according to human whim; **it is the Creator’s law** and condemns the creature.”³

Hopman wants to use the Bible the way inerrantists do. Hopman does not want to be called an inerrantist; he just wants to use the Bible the way inerrantists do – as if God revealed a divine moral code in the ten commandments.

Luther was not an inerrantist. For Luther, revelation is the cross and resurrection alone. As Forde, for Luther the Bible is the pure proclamation of Christ and only this:

“**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.’**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**

¹ Nicholas Hopman, “Luther’s *Antinomian Disputations* and *lex aeterna*,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 30 (2016) 152-80. Hopman, “Forde Was for Proclamation,” *Lutheran Forum* 53 (2019) 23-31.

² Hopman, “*Antinomian Disputations* and *lex aeterna*,” 157. Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

³ Hopman, “*Antinomian Disputations* and *lex aeterna*,” 158.

the scriptures.³¹ **The Word of God therefore is ultimately Christ and the proclamation of the gospel.**⁴

Luther's two uses of law. And what about the ten commandments and biblical law? What matters about the law is not the particular content of law but its **use**, as Forde writes:

“For Luther the crucial question was not so much what the law *says*, i.e. the information it contains, but what it actually *does* to you when you hear it. This is why Luther puts so much stress on the question of the *uses* of the law. The question is one of how the law is intended to be *used*, what it is actually supposed to do. What he worked out was **the doctrine of the ‘two uses’ of the law.**”⁵

Luther on the ten commandments as natural law. This applies even for the ten commandments. Luther writes that the ten commandments are natural law. As such they are **not eternal, but human and changeable.** For example:

1525: In “How Christians should regard Moses” Luther writes:

- “This text [Exodus 20:1] makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us.”⁶
- “The Gentiles are not obligated to obey Moses. Moses is the *Sachsenspiegel* for the Jews.”⁷

1535: In his “Theses Concerning Faith and Law,” Luther writes:

- “52. For if we have Christ, we can easily establish laws and shall judge all things rightly.
- 53. **Indeed, we would make new decalogues, as Paul does in all the epistles, and Peter, but above all Christ in the gospel.**”
- 54. And these decalogues are clearer than the decalogue of Moses, just as the countenance of Christ is brighter than the countenance of Moses [II Cor. 3:7-11].”⁸

Luther can also speak of the ten commandments as divine:

1529: In his Large Catechism Luther writes of the ten commandments that “we should prize and value them above all other teachings as the greatest treasure God has given us.”⁹

1537: In the Antinomian Disputations, Luther writes “only the Decalogue is eternal,”¹⁰ and: “The Decalogue does not belong to the law of Moses, and he was not the first one to give it, but the

⁴ 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.

⁵ Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1972) 15.

⁶ LW 35:165.

⁷ LW 35:167.

⁸ LW 34:112-13.

⁹ Large Catechism, *Book of Concord* (Tappert 411; Kolb/Wengert 431).

¹⁰ *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus*. Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations. Edited and Translated by Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008) 127-29.

Decalogue pertains to the entire world, it is written and etched in the minds of all people from the beginning of the world.”¹¹

The total Luther on the ten commandments as natural law. Given these varying statements, what is the total Luther? Forde provides clarity:

“The rejection of monastic vows, and with them the quest for one’s own holiness, meant for Luther **new understanding of and love for God’s commandments**. What God commands takes us into the natural, created world. Here the proper place of ‘natural law’ is to be found. By **natural law most seem to mean ‘supernatural’ law**, a law built into the universe which, if followed, leads to eternal bliss, a kind of built-in permanent escape mechanism. Revealed law is then something like the completion, the clarification of what has been dimmed by the fall, the final extension of the escape ladder. **That is not what Luther meant by it, even when he compared and often identified the commandments of God with ‘natural law.’ He meant precisely *natural* and not supernatural law.** The commandments of God do not command anything contrary to life, anything supernatural or superhuman, but rather **what anyone who properly consults his or her reason** would have to acknowledge as good and right—exemplified, say, by the golden rule.”¹²

Hopman and Paulson abandon Forde and embrace inerrancy. Hopman and Paulson contradict Forde on natural law. They minimize and even omit key aspects of Luther on the law in order to use the Bible as inerrantists do. Five points:

1. **The two kingdom’s doctrine** is intrinsic to Luther and Forde. The two kingdoms are simply another way of stating what is meant by law and gospel.
 - For Hopman, like Paulson, the two kingdoms doctrine is not vital because the Bible gives access to God’s divine law. For Hopman “the Creator’s law”¹³ governs life.
2. **Law is human, not divine.** Forde: “Law belongs to earth, not to heaven. It is natural, not supernatural. It is servant, not master.”¹⁴
 - For Hopman, like Paulson, the ten commandments are “the Creator’s law.” (Hopman and Paulson do not address whether the twelve commandments in the covenant at Moab are also divine [Deut. 27:9-26; 29:1].)
3. **Law is human and changing** for Luther and Forde. Forde: “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.”¹⁵
 - Hopman and Paulson omit that the law is human and changing. To the contrary, they imply the Bible gives access to an unchanging, heavenly code.

¹¹ *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus*, 217.

¹² Forde, “Justification and This World,” *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:454-56.

¹³ Hopman, ““Antinomian Disputations and *lex aeterna*,” 158.

¹⁴ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 111.

¹⁵ Forde, “*Lex semper accusat?* Nineteenth-Century Roots of Our Current Dilemma,” *dialog* 9 (1970) 274; “*Lex semper accusat?*” *A More Radical Gospel*, 49; and “*Lex semper accusat?*” 49; *The Essential Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019) 193.

4. **Reason is primary in the realm of law.** Forde: “**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.**”¹⁶
 - Hopman and Paulson omit common reason as having a positive role in the Christian life.

5. **The Word of God is the pure proclamation of Christ and only this.** Forde: “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.**”¹⁷ To be sure, the preacher uses biblical law in preaching, and also law found elsewhere in the culture of the day. Forde: “**The law that must be preached is the absolute offense of the unconditional gospel**, the ‘letter’ which kills, so that the spirit can make new—the kind of law which destroys the illusions about law as the way and thus drives the demons from the house.”¹⁸
 - Hopman and Paulson claim to hold to Luther’s two uses of the law, but their claim that the ten commandments are “the Creator’s law” conflicts with what Luther and Forde mean by the law and its two uses.

Hopman and Paulson use the Bible as inerrantists do. Luther was not an inerrantist. Nor was Forde. Paulson, however, affirms inerrancy.¹⁹ Nicholas Hopman defends Forde against some of his Missouri Synod critics but does not present **Forde as he understood himself, as a post-liberal Lutheran.** Rather, Hopman, like Paulson, **omits** five key features of natural law, cited above, in order to make Forde acceptable to conservative biblicists.

American Lutheranism is in turmoil. Some Lutherans are lurching left. Others are retreating into inerrancy by throwing eternal law out the front door, only to sneak it in the back door through the ten commandments.

“We are fighting for the restoration of the gospel,” wrote Forde in 1964 in the inter-Lutheran battle over inerrancy.²⁰ The same concern for the gospel motivated his twenty-plus years of work in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. Forde in 1985: “**Precisely the proper distinction between law and gospel limits and humanizes the law.**”²¹

Forde got out of biblicism; you can, too.

¹⁶ Forde, “The Viability of Luther Today,” *Word & World* 7 (1987) 27.

¹⁷ Forde, “Postscript to the Captivation of the Will,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005) 77, 78. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will. Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*. Ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 77, 79.

¹⁸ Forde, “Justification,” *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:424, fn. 24.

¹⁹ Paulson: “...[T]he ELCA lost track of the original source of Scripture, which is the **inerrancy in the letters** that come through an **inerrant Holy Spirit.**” “Scripture, Enthusiasm, and the ELCA,” *LOGIA* XXII:1 (2013) 53.

²⁰ Forde, “Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology,” *Theological Perspectives: A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Theology by Members of the Religion Department at Luther College* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1964) 67.

²¹ 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, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 301.