

Nicholas Hopman presents a pseudo-Forde, a Forde open to inerrancy - 1

Nicholas Hopman writes in praise of Gerhard Forde in a recent *Lutheran Forum*.¹ He notes that Forde warned about the problem of understanding the gospel in terms of a system of law.² How ironic, because Hopman himself throws eternal law out the front door, only to sneak it in the back door.

Hopman is a PhD graduate student at Princeton Theological Seminary. He, Steven Paulson, and Mark Mattes have edited the *Lutheran Quarterly's* third volume of Forde essays titled: *The Essential Forde. Gerhard O. Forde, Distinguishing Law and Gospel*.³

Hopman reflects: "My appreciation for Forde's ability to home (*sic*) in on the essence of Lutheranism has only grown."⁴ Phew, Forde wins the approval of one who knows "the essence of Lutheranism."

To be sure, Forde's abiding concern was for the gospel and what it means to distinguish properly law and gospel. He chartered a future course he called **post-liberal Lutheranism**:

"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.**"⁵

It is hard to imagine Hopman calling himself a post-liberal Lutheran because he finds hope, in fact, the "**best hope**," in the inerrantist wing of American Lutheranism: "[T]he Missouri Synod is American Lutheranism's **best hope**."⁶ Moreover, Hopman lifts up Steven Paulson, a defender of inerrancy, as a faithful interpreter of Forde.⁷

"Steven Paulson, who edited Forde's final book on the bound will, has followed in his footsteps. *The Bondage of the Will* is the central source for his three-volume *Luther's Outlaw God*. Paulson's work—for example, this sentence, "the only answer to the unanswerable absolute is by absolutism" – swills Forde."⁸

¹ Nicholas Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," *Lutheran Forum* (Winter 2019) 23-31.

² Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," 24: "He [Forde] advises the reader to be on the lookout for the ways that the law attempts to gain theological hegemony."

³ *The Essential Forde. Gerhard O. Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019).

⁴ Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," 26.

⁵ Gerhard 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; here 72. Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

⁶ Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," 29.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Hopman, "Forde was for Proclamation," 27.

“Swills Forde”? Guzzles him? To the contrary, Paulson contradicts Forde.⁹ Thus, while Hopman salutes Forde, he follows in Paulson’s footsteps, which lead to inerrancy.

Like Paulson, Hopman presents Luther’s response to Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will* as a defense of inerrancy. They each use slightly different terminology, but the end result is the same: They throw eternal law out the front door, only to sneak it in the back door through the decalogue:

Hopman: “Luther’s theologoumenon, put on full display in *The Bondage of the Will*, is the distinction between **God preached and God not preached**. By adopting the theologoumenon as his own, Forde displaced the superstructure of orthodoxy’s eternal law (*lex eterna*) as the center of Lutheran theology. This move gave Forde the freedom to preach, describe, and deal with **the law**—not in the **abstract**, which was orthodoxy’s favorite kind of law, but as it really is in the **concrete** (or better said: flesh and blood) **reality** of created life under God.”¹⁰

Paulson: “The second volume [*Luther’s Outlaw God*] will address this greatest of all theological dialectics, **unpreached and preached God**, and show how Luther employed it prolifically in his exegetical theology. This allowed him **to avoid abstract questions by attending to the details of Scripture’s text as they show God’s two words of law and gospel at work, and then apply them directly to people in need.**”¹¹

For Hopman and Paulson, eternal law (abstract law) is bad. Throw it out the front door! But then bring eternal law in the back door, through the decalogue.

No, writes Forde. That is to misunderstand Luther:

“The issue is exposed when one comes up against the *deus absconditus*. Erasmus does not know what kind of a trap he is in. The fallacy of his whole argument is that he is left to infer what God must be like merely from the law, while the Holy Spirit is out making assertions apart from the law concerning the Father’s only Son, Jesus Christ. In the middle of the argument Luther breaks out in the confession, **‘He sent his Son to save us.’ That is the heart and soul of his entire argument. The work of theology is not for making inferences from the law, but for a proclamation that is all about Christ.**”¹²

“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.**”¹³

Against Forde, Hopman, like Paulson, views biblical law as revelation, as “God’s law.”¹⁴ For them, it is proper to infer God’s will from the law. It is how they do an end run around the cross. They give lip service to the *deus absconditus*, but they unmask the hidden God by inferring God’s will from the law.

⁹ “Paulson contradicts Forde.” Available at www.crossalone.us under Forde.

¹⁰ Hopman, “Forde Was for Proclamation,” 27.

¹¹ Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018) 1:245.

¹² Forde, “Postscript to the Captivation of the Will,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005) 77. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will. Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*. Ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 77.

¹³ Forde, “Postscript to the Captivation of the Will,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19:78; *The Captivation of the Will. Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, 79.

¹⁴ Hopman, “Forde Was for Proclamation,” 28.

Forde was a leading voice of the twentieth century Luther renaissance. Forde's insight into Luther's understanding of *sola scriptura* and the clarity of scripture in *The Bondage of the Will* is shared by other leaders of the twentieth century Luther renaissance, including but not limited to the following:

- **Heiko Oberman:** "*The Bondage of the Will* of the year 1525 is directed against the most important representatives of the Renaissance north of the Alps—but **not only against them and their followers then and now. It is aimed equally at the fundamentalists**, who have taken up the cause of the Reformation and promoted it under **the motto of *sola scriptura***."¹⁵
- **Inge Lønning:** "The function of the thesis of the clarity of Scripture, however, is only properly recognized when the essential content has been somewhat correctly determined. **For Luther it is not a question, as is later the case with Orthodox dogmatists, of the quality of transparency (*perspicuitas*), which statements of Scripture should in a specific way have.** Rather, the expression *claritas scripturae* should be understood quite unambiguously from the contrast between light and darkness and the imagery associated with these two concepts. In the controversy with Erasmus, the alternative is worked out with special sharpness. Either one starts, like Erasmus, from the point that Scripture is dark and must be clarified by means of an authoritative interpretation in order to attain the necessary clearness or, conversely—like Luther—starts from the illuminating power of the message of Scripture and the necessity of clarifying all human agencies of interpretation. There are, of course, according to Luther's view of Scripture, signs which are obscure. It is decisive, however, that all the key teachings of Scripture (*res scripturae*) lie in bright daylight. This has been so since Christ's resurrection: the incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity, the atonement, the Lordship of Christ, all these have become accessible through the fact that **Holy Scripture henceforth is presented as the pure proclamation of Christ and only as this.**"¹⁶

The Bondage of the Will was key for Luther and is key for Lutherans today. To follow Hopman and Paulson is to misunderstand the clarity of scripture as its perspicuity, a view in concert with seventeenth century Lutheran orthodoxy. To learn from the twentieth century Luther renaissance's rediscovery of Luther is to affirm with 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

Hopman's go-to Forde text, *Free to Be*. Where can Hopman go to enlist Forde in support of conservative biblicism and inerrancy? He points to the confirmation book co-authored by Jim Nestingen and Forde:

"Forde's confirmation textbook, written with his colleague, co-teacher, and friend James Nestingen, *Free to Be*, remains a pedagogical classic. Not only does the book brilliantly speak the gospel into the anxiety and identity crisis of young adulthood, but the commentary on the Ten Commandments

¹⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Inge Lønning, "No Other Gospel: Luther's Concept of the 'Middle of Scripture' in Its Significance for Ecumenical Communion and Christian Confessions Today," in *Luther's Ecumenical Significance*. Eds. Peter Manns and Harding Meyer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 233-34.

¹⁷ Forde, "Postscript to the Captivation of the Will," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 78; Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*. "Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage," 79.

beautifully explains the temporal benefits of obeying the Commandments and the consequences of breaking them.”¹⁸

Does *Free to Be* provide evidence that Forde held that the Bible, particularly the decalogue, gives us access to divine law? A few points now, more in a future post:

1. *Free to Be* (1975) was written principally by James Nestingen, who was curriculum editor for Augsburg Publishing House from 1974-1976. Nestingen’s mentor, Lloyd Svendsbye, editor-in-chief at Augsburg Publishing House, had just become President of Luther Seminary in 1974. Nestingen has had a long-standing reputation as a colorful, effective catechist. *Free to Be* is written in his voice and style.
2. A confirmation textbook is not the place to introduce subjects like the historicity of the biblical witness, including the synoptic problem and questions like: What about the Twelve Commandments in the Covenant at Moab (Deut 27:11-26; 29:1)? Thus, regardless of what is written in *Free to Be*, how odd to claim it as the go-to text for understanding Forde on the law.
3. In the 1970’s Forde wrote frequently on the law and the proper use of scripture, including, but not limited to “*Lex semper accusat*. Nineteenth Century Roots of our Current Dilemma,” (1970)¹⁹, *The Revolt and the Wedding*,” (1970)²⁰, and *Where God Meets Man* (1972). In each of these texts and throughout his career, Forde writes that we don’t have access to eternal law through scripture, even the decalogue.

But, by using *Free to Be* as his go-to Forde text, Hopman implies that Forde agrees that the decalogue gives us access to divine, eternal law. In this way Hopman throws eternal law out the front door, only to sneak it in the back door.

Hopman criticizes certain Missourians but not inerrancy. Hopman chides several Missouri Synod critics of Forde for not recognizing that Forde “published articles defending the traditional Christian doctrine of marriage.”²¹

Forde did write in defense of marriage as the union of one man and one woman, but not on the basis of an inerrant scripture that gives us divine law and moral absolutes. Rather, Forde used **the wisdom of scripture** and **common reason** to argue his case. Marriage and family are left-hand kingdom issues. Forde:

“Some in the church like to argue that since the church has changed its mind on matters like divorce or ordination of women it seems consequent that it could change its stance on sexual behavior as

¹⁸ Hopman, “Forde Was for Proclamation,” 28.

¹⁹ 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. Gerhard O. Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019) 193.

²⁰ Gerhard 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, South Dakota: Augustana College Press, 1970) 85-86.

²¹ Hopman, “Forde Was for Proclamation,” 29.

well. **But in questions of the civil use of law it is not legitimate to argue that one example of change justifies another. Each case has to be argued individually.**"²²

"Each case has to be argued individually" because law is human, not divine, and **common reason** is the proper tool for sorting out dilemmas in the Lord's left-hand kingdom. Again, Forde:

"If genital sexual relations between people of the same gender are to be approved and/or blessed, the only way that could be done would be to bring them within something akin (at least) to the estate of marriage. **Can this be done in terms consonant with our understanding of the uses of the law? The thesis of this paper is that it cannot.**"²³

Forde does not give "God's answer." He does not say: The answer is settled by God's law in the decalogue. Rather, he appeals to "the uses of the law" because "the proper distinction between law and gospel **limits and humanizes the law.**"²⁴ This means, as Forde writes:

"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 we do not possess absolute unchangeable laws.** If the law no longer takes care of the world it can and must be changed. As even Luther put it,²⁵ we must write our own decalogue to fit the times."²⁶

Hopman, however, implies inerrancy by appealing once again to *Free to Be*: "Forde's treatment with Nestingen of the Sixth Commandment in *Free to Be* and his articles defending marriage are enough."²⁷ Having thrown eternal law out the front door, Hopman sneaks it in the back in "the Sixth Commandment." Wink-wink, God's eternal law.

No two kingdoms in Hopman. Hopman never mentions the two kingdoms. He never commends common reason as the proper tool to use in God's left-hand kingdom. He weakly states that Forde "did not reject God's use of law to limit evil and structure life in this world,"²⁸ which begs the question of whether the Lord works through human law codes—some better, some worse—to sustain life, or whether the Bible gives us access to heavenly law, supernatural law.

The two kingdoms doctrine is intrinsic to Luther and Forde. The two kingdoms are simply another way of stating what is meant by law and gospel. It is another way of stating what Forde means when he writes: "**Precisely, the proper distinction between law and gospel **limits and humanizes the law.****"²⁹

²² Forde, Forde, "Law and Sexual Behavior," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9:1 (1995) 8-9; *The Essential Forde*, 155-56.

²³ Forde, "Law and Sexual Behavior," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9:1 (1995) 12; *The Essential Forde*, 159.

²⁴ Forde, "Infallibility Language and the Early Lutheran Tradition," *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*, 129.

²⁵ Martin Luther: "Indeed, we would make new decalogues, as Paul does in all the epistles, and Peter, but above all Christ in the gospel" (LW 34:112, Theses concerning faith and law, 1535). "This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us" (LW 35:165, How Christians should regard Moses, 1525). "The Gentiles are not obligated to obey Moses. Moses is the *Sachsenspiegel* for the Jews" (LW 35:167).

²⁶ Forde, "Lex Semper Accusat?" *dialog* 9, 274; *A More Radical Gospel*, 49; *The Essential Forde*, 193.

²⁷ Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," 30.

²⁸ Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," 28.

²⁹ 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.

In God's left-hand kingdom, common reason is the arbiter in caring for the civil order of society. As Forde's New Testament colleague, Donald Juel, wrote about decision-making in God's left-hand kingdom: "[T]he wisdom of scripture and the tradition cannot be cited as 'God's answer' but neither ought that wisdom be summarily dismissed as irrelevant or outdated."³⁰

Hopman ends his tribute to Forde with a flourish of theology by upper case letters:

"The **God Who speaks in Scripture** is not the beautiful rational god of the metaphysicians. He is an electing jealous God, **Who** chose Israel as his own and is so jealous for her that **He** is now electing Gentiles in order to make Israel jealous (Romans 9-11)."³¹

A swipe at the "god of the metaphysicians" and a wink-wink to inerrancy.

Hopman salutes Forde, but he follows in Paulson's footsteps. They both throw eternal law out the front door, only to sneak it in the back door in the decalogue.

To be sure, American Lutheranism is in crisis today. It is tempting to retreat into inerrancy. Forde understood that temptation and how his legacy could be misunderstood:

"**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.**"³²

Forde was not another conservative biblicist, and it is a disservice to present him as such. A better option is to follow Forde himself: "**Precisely**, the proper distinction between law and gospel **limits and humanizes the law.**"³³

³⁰ Donald H. Juel, "Homosexuality and Church Tradition," *Word & World* (1990) X:168.

³¹ Hopman, "Forde Was for Proclamation," 30.

³² Gerhard Forde, "The Catholic Impasse: Reflections on Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today," *Promoting Unity. Themes in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue*, 72.

³³ Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Law in Lutheran Theology," *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, 301.