

The importance of being anti-evangelical

Evangelical mantras:

- “You can prove you’re a Christian by living a certain way.”
- “You should show the public that you have made a commitment to Christ.”
- “If you’re a Christian, it should show in your life.”

Wrongedy, wrong, wrong, wrong. Evangelical wolves are everywhere, preying on the sheep by requiring visible evidence of faith in word and deed. To drive away these wolves, use Luther’s keys to the Christian life:

- The **total** righteousness/**total** sinfulness of the Christian leads to →
- The **hiddenness** of the Christian life, which leads to →
- The use of **common reason** in the Christian life.

Below are quotes from Gerhard Forde on each of the three bullets above:

1. The Christian is *totus/totus* from baptism to death, 24/7.

“We can best attack the problem by asking whether in Luther . . . it is possible to discover any distinctive ideas about sanctification or Christian growth. The *simul*, it is to be recalled, was posited precisely to counter the idea that justification is to be synthesized with ideas of progress according to law. The justifying act unmasks and exposes **all our pretense about becoming virtuous persons**, by the very fact that it is an unconditional divine imputation to be received only by faith. To be justified by God’s act means to become a sinner at the same time. **The totality of justification unmasks the totality of being a sinner. Thus the *simul iustus et peccator* as total states would seem to militate against any talk of progress in sanctification.**

“There are many utterances of Luther’s which reject all ideas of progress. Sanctification must simply be included in justification because the latter is a **total state**. **Sanctification is simply to believe the divine imputation and with it the *totus peccator***”¹

“Faith, however, born of **the imputation of total righteousness**, begets the beginnings of honesty as well. Such faith sees the truth of the human condition, the reality and **totality of human sin**, and has no need to indulge in fictions.”²

“‘But we have to do *something*?’ How like us in our last extremity piously to hold out for a little ‘something’! It demonstrates our true intent: That is all we had ever planned to do. ‘Don’t we have to do something?’ No. Simply be still for once and listen. Faith, Luther insisted, arises out of the

¹ Forde, “Justification and Sanctification,” *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten, Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2:430-31.

² Forde, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:434.

absolute passivity of listening to God's justifying word. Out of that death, that passivity, life comes, life born by the divine Spirit."³

2. The *totus/totus* means the Christian life cannot be seen in works; it is hidden.

"One cannot measure Christian existence by works, concluding back from the works to one's status before God."⁴

"The teachings of Jesus and the injunctions in the Epistles must be viewed in the same light...**the Christian life will be *hidden* from this world and inexplicable to it.** Sometimes—perhaps most of the time—the Christian life will appear to follow quite ordinary, unspectacular courses no doubt *too* ordinary for the world. But sometimes it will appear to go quite contrary to what the world would deem wise, prudent, or even ethical. Why should costly ointment be wasted on Jesus? Would it not be better to sell it and give to the poor? Should not Jesus' disciples fast like everyone else? Why should one prefer the company of whores and sinners to polite and virtuous society? Why should a Christian participate in an assassination plot [Bonhoeffer]? The Christian life is tuned to the eschatological vision, not to the virtues and heroics of this world.

"It has become something of a platitude among religious people that the Sermon on the Mount sets forth the sort of ideal life the world might aspire to and admire. On the contrary, the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most antireligious documents ever written, because of its eschatological perspective. The people it calls 'blessed' would hardly qualify as members of virtuous and religious society: the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (not those who *have* it!), the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for righteousness sake, the reviled. The religious and the virtuous are not on the list and in all likelihood would not wish to be. Indeed, **the attempt to break the hiddenness is precisely the dangerous thing:** 'Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven' (Matt 6:1). Those who wish to be vindicated in their piety before this world, who wish to be praised by other people, *have* their reward: 'Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward' (Matt. 6:2). **The goodness or the Christianness of one's life should be hidden even from oneself:** 'But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Matt. 6:3)."⁵

"If you lose your 'virtue,' what will protect you then?" Luther's advice in such situations was: "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe even more boldly." The point is not to go out and find some sins to commit. **The point is rather not to be deceived by the glitter of ideals, of sanctity and piety, by the quest for the Holy Grail.** Christ and Christ alone has dealt with sin and saves sinners."⁶

³ Forde, "Justification Today," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:465.

⁴ Forde, "Justification and Sanctification," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:437.

⁵ Forde, "Justification and Sanctification," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:441.

⁶ Forde, "Justification and Sanctification," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:438-39.

“Apart from his revelation in Christ, God is **hidden**. We have, ultimately, no means for penetrating that **hiddenness**. We don’t really even have a basis for making an absolute separation between **evil and good**. **Many things we think are good turn out to be evil in the end and *vice versa*.**”⁷

3. Because the Christian life is hidden, we claim no higher wisdom for life in God’s left-hand kingdom, but, with the rest of humanity, we use common reason to address human problems.

“The line between this world and the next is drawn by God’s grace. This establishes the world as a place **under the law** in which man can live, work, and hope. It should establish a sphere in which law can be seen as a good rather than a bad thing....Hope in the world to come creates the faith and patience to life in this world; it gives this world back to us by relieving us of the burden of our restless quests. Freedom from the world makes us free for it. Just so faith in the gospel does not despise the law or destroy it, rather **it places the law for the first time on a solid basis**....

“This world is run by law. When the law is limited by the gospel of God’s kingdom to come we can see that it has its proper and just place in the world.....We begin to see that its purpose is not to get us to heaven, but to help to take care of this earth, to be used as **a weapon in the battle against the tyranny of the devil**. So it was that Luther insisted that governmental officials too were God’s magistrates on earth. **The political realm is ordained by God** in that sense to take care of human beings and to restrain the power of evil and the devil....**Law belongs to earth, not to heaven. It is natural, not supernatural**. It is a servant, not a master.

“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**. But men do have **the gift of reason and the accumulated wisdom of the ages as well as the Bible**. Here is the task for man’s **reason and created gifts**. Once cured of religious and mythological ambitions, they can be put to work as they ought: taking care of men. For in the final analysis, all man’s vocations are to be enlisted in the battle against the devil.”⁸

“**Law** remains, in view of its potentially changing appearance, in a certain sense **hidden**. Its **content** will depend upon the concrete situation in creation at a given time; man cannot have it **in the form of eternal principles in advance of any concrete situation**.

“This means that for Luther law does not constitute, as it does for orthodoxy, **a fixed scheme according to which God and his revelation can be ‘figured out.’**”⁹

“Law is a *general* term for describing the nature of man’s existence in this age. It is **the command which man meets in society, demanding order, and it is also the judgment of his way of life which drives him to the cross**. It is defined in a general sense, as that which afflicts the conscience. Nothing *material* is said about the *content* of law as such; that, apparently, may depend upon

⁷ Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1972) 30.

⁸ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 110-12.

⁹ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 177.

concrete circumstances. Since law is defined in this general way, **no great point is made about a distinction between a natural or a revealed law. It is simply taken for granted that law is natural for man.**"¹⁰

"The rejection of monastic vows, and with them the quest for one's own holiness, meant for Luther a 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.**"¹¹

It is incorrect to think that **"the Christian has some special epistemological advantages over the non-Christian when it comes to 'knowledge' of the law**. It is precisely faith, however, which tells the believer that this is not so. **Faith tells him that law is something he has in common with the rest of mankind**. To be sure, **the Christian also has the laws of the Bible, but even these *as laws* are available to the non-Christian, to say nothing of non-Christian parallels of biblical law**.

"What the Christian is given is a faith that clarifies for him the nature of his existence under the law in this age. Faith tells him that the **'naturalness' of the law means that he does not have access to the will of God in the form of some eternal *law of being*, but rather that in common with the rest of mankind he must use his reason** in the context of his situation to work out the best practical solutions to his problems."¹²

"Law is to be used for political purposes, i.e., for taking care of people here on earth in as good, loving, and just manner as can be managed. **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.**"¹³

"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 this world, **it can and must be changed**. As even Luther put it, we must **write our own decalogue to fit the times.**"¹⁴

¹⁰ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 194.

¹¹ Forde, "Justification and This World," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:454-56.

¹² Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 211-12.

¹³ Forde, "The Viability of Luther Today," *Word & World* 7 (1987) 27.

¹⁴ Forde, "*Lex semper accusat?* Nineteenth-Century Roots of Our Current Dilemma," *dialog* 9 (1970) 274; *A More Radical Gospel*, 49; and *The Essential Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019) 193.