

Appendix 4. Forde Slips on Baptism and Faith

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Part 1: Infant Baptism is the great divide

1. Infant Baptism: The test of one's theology

Infant baptism is the great divide, the test of one's theology. Infant Baptism gives "the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation."¹ Baptism is not just a kickstart. Rather, baptized we are born again; it is the beginning of eternal life. It is all God's doing, God's deed. Forde:

- "Now it is obvious in all this that the question of infant baptism entails not just the doctrine of baptism but the broader dogmatic system and its use in its entirety. The ultimate root of difference in our speech is that there is a great divide in the way Christians look upon baptism. It is not just a difference in practice – say, whether to baptize infants or not – but **a difference in theology**. Edmund Schlink, in his study of baptism, speaks of this difference as an 'antithesis,' which marks 'the most profound difference' in the understanding of baptism. 'That antithesis,' he maintains, 'is the understanding of baptism as **God's deed or as man's deed**, as the sign given by God or as the sign of human self-obligation before God.'²

Forde:

- "Later dogmaticians developed the *ordo salutis* to deal with the problem. . . . The attempt to set it forth as an 'order,' however, is disastrous. Even Schmid, who love for the orthodox fathers is evident, is constrained to remark, 'The introduction of an independent development of these conceptions led to an arrangement of the entire doctrine which we cannot call a happy one.' Among other things, it led to a fundamental distinction between the means of salvation on the part of God (word and sacraments) and the means of

¹ Small Catechism, 4:5-6; BC Tappert, 349, Kolb/Wengert, 359.

² Forde, "Something to Believe," *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 141. Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

salvation on the part of man (faith and good works). **Faith became the subjective condition for salvation.**"³

Faith is also not a subjective response to election. Forde:

- "The assertion of "justification *by faith*" in the sixteenth-century Reformation can be understood only if it is clearly seen as **a complete break with 'justification *by grace*,'** viewed according to the synthesis we have been describing, as a complete break with the attempt to view justification as a movement according to a given standard or law, either natural or revealed. For the reformers, **justification is "solely" a divine act.** It is a divine judgment. It is an imputation. It is unconditional. All legal and moral schemes are shattered. Such justification comes neither at the beginning nor at the end of a movement; rather, it establishes an entirely new situation. Since righteousness comes by imputation only, **it is absolutely not a movement on our part, either with or without the aid of what was previously termed "grace."** The judgment can be heard and grasped only by faith. Indeed, the judgment creates and calls forth the faith that hears and grasps it. One will mistake the Reformation point if one does not see that justification "by faith" is in the first instance precisely a polemic *against* justification "*by grace*" according to the medieval scheme. Grace would have to be completely redefined before the word could be safely used in a Reformation sense.⁷

[Footnote 7] "The recent penchant for combining grace and faith into the formula "justification by grace through faith" is perhaps understandable given certain modern developments, but (in spite of words suggesting such a formula in the Augsburg Confession IV) it is strictly speaking at best redundant and at worst compounding a felony. When one misses the complete interdependence of grace and faith (grace *is* the gift of faith; faith alone lets grace *be* grace), **one turns faith into a "subjective response" and can only then cover one's tracks by saying, 'Of course, it comes by grace!' Faith** then simply takes the place once occupied by "works" or "merit" in the medieval system and **all the problems repeat themselves.**"⁴

2. If one is "saved by believing," then sin is not so serious

In *Where God Meets Man* (1972), however, Forde writes that "one is saved by believing, by trusting," which implies faith is a subjective response, even if one then "covers one's tracks by saying: Of course, it comes by grace!":

- "The faith [Luther] spoke of is a faith that receives what God is doing in and through the sacrament. It is faith in the God who comes to us *in* the sacrament itself, not in some other 'God-in-general.' One does not have to go somewhere else to get faith; faith is **created and awakened** by the sacrament itself. Faith does not *make* the sacrament valid; the sacrament is valid in and of itself. Faith *receives* the sacrament. One is not saved by being washed, nor by eating and drinking. **But one is saved by believing, by trusting** the God who promises that *by washing* he has made you his own and that *by giving you bread and wine* he has given

³ Forde, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:428-49.

⁴ Forde, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:407, 423, footnote 7.

you the new life of his body and blood. . . . The faith that receives the sacrament is **a faith awakened** by the kind of God who comes through the sacrament.”⁵

How could Forde, champion of election, write “one is saved by believing”? Infants do not know what is happening when they are baptized. Many adults who are mentally limited and mentally ill do not know what their Baptism means. For that matter, who among us, earnest and super-smart as we are, can be sure we believe and trust rightly? What happened to original sin?

In *Theology is for Proclamation* (1990) Forde in a similar way distinguishes between “validity” and “efficacy” in order to claim that **sacraments are not efficacious without “our knowing or our contribution”**:

- “It is useful here to recall the distinction between **validity** and **efficacy**. Sacraments are valid in and of themselves. The promise is given, the act done. Nothing can change that. **But they are efficacious only when they succeed in creating faith**. They work only through faith. They are not magic potions or vitamin pills. **Such things work often without our knowing or our contribution, but sacraments do not**. We must be grasped by them as proclamation. But this does not mean that they are merely subjectivized or internalized. As external Word they work to **create the faith that receives them**.”⁶

This implies that infant Baptism is only a kick-start, the insufficient beginning of salvation to which the real thing, believing response, must follow. This undermines the seriousness of sin.

Yet Forde also states a few pages later: “Proclamation must never take the tack of much so-called evangelical preaching that attempts to promote itself by calling **baptism or its efficacy into question**.”⁷

In “Something to Believe” (1993), an essay on infant Baptism, Forde writes of the importance of not “ignoring or belittling the place of faith”:

- “Can we simply depend on the fact that we have been baptized? Does baptism work ‘automatically’? So the questions go. But they are traps. If, in the attempt to protect individual choice, one hurries to say, ‘No,’ one simply negates the grace of it. . . . If, in the zeal to protect grace, one hurries without further ado to say, ‘Yes,’ **one will likely be accused of ignoring or belittling the place of faith**.”⁸

To be sure, Baptism does not work mechanically. It is the gracious action of God in Jesus Christ to save us. But “the place of faith” is where “the gift of faith” (Romans 3:24, John 6:44-45, Ephesians 2:8) is given, in Baptism itself. “Faith” and “grace” are one in the same gift of the Holy Spirit given in Baptism. Faith, like grace, is totally God’s doing because salvation is totally God’s doing. In Baptism we are “adopted” (Gal 4:5), “redeemed” from slavery (1 Timothy 2:6), and “snatched from the jaws of the devil” (Large Catechism 4:83). Salvation is God’s rescue operation, outside of ‘anything we are, think, say, or do.’⁹

⁵ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 73-74.

⁶ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 163-64.

⁷ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 170.

⁸ Forde, “Something to Believe,” *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 134.

⁹ Smalcald Articles, 3/3:36; BC Tappert 309, Kolb/Wengert 318.

3. The problem of personalism and having a “personal Savior”

Forde is critical of formulations such as accepting “Jesus as my personal Savior,” which imply that salvation is a relationship similar to human relationships:

- “We wonder . . . whether we really have accepted Jesus as our ‘personal Savior,’ whatever that is supposed to mean. . . . We become a prey to adverbial theology. Do we really, sincerely, truly, personally, believe? Do we live abundantly, joyously, affirmatively? Do we think positively, praise gratefully, respond generously?”¹⁰

But Forde himself states that salvation is a “grace-faith relationship” when he writes that “faith” is our trusting, our believing. Forde:

- “Sin, as a total state, can only be fought **by faith** in the total and unconditionally given righteousness. . . . If our righteousness depends totally on Jesus, and **is appropriated only in the relationship of trust (faith)**, then we can begin to see that God has two problems with us.”¹¹
- “The old self is through, drowned in the gracious water and drawn out to say a joyful yes. Anyone who thinks it is a matter of ‘have to’ may just as well forget it! This is **the divine yes calling to our yes in the Spirit.**”¹²
- “Because of its irreducible externality, baptism is a preeminent sign of the **priority** and therefore the offense of **pure grace**. The difficulty in most arguments about baptism is that the very thing objected to is the point and power of baptism. ‘You do not mean to say that a mere external ceremony can save, do you?’ So the question forever goes. But this is the entire point of baptism. The grace is in the very offense of externality. The grace is in the fact that the triune God has intervened now ‘for you.’ The intervention from without is the declaration that the God who runs the whole show is indeed *for you*. **Baptismal faith is precisely to believe this.** It is simply to believe in God.”¹³
- “Should we not simply go out in the street and ‘hose ‘em down in the name of the triune God?’ The question is, once again, a trap, perhaps a last desperate act of self-defense. Answer with a shocked, ‘No,’ and **the battle for grace** is lost. The smile is lost and pessimism sets in. **Answer with an unqualified, ‘Yes,’ and the grace-faith relation could be lost.**”¹⁴
- A “grace-faith relation” implies that salvation is 99% “the grace given in Baptism,” (“the divine priority”), and “faith” is the 1% we do (“our believing and trusting,”). By making “faith” a knowing response to the “grace,” Forde undermines the seriousness of sin.

¹⁰ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 159.

¹¹ Forde, “The Lutheran View of Sanctification,” *Christian Spirituality. Five Views of Sanctification*. Ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988) 26. *The Preached God*, 238.

¹² Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 169.

¹³ Forde, “Something to Believe,” *The Preached God. Gerhard O. Forde*, 137.

¹⁴ Forde, “Something to Believe,” *The Preached God. Gerhard O. Forde*, 143.

4. The baptismal word of institution is the heart of the sacrament

Forde frequently uses the phrase “the sacrament embedded in the proclamation”¹⁵ and even writes that Baptism should not be performed without proclamation:

- “It is the sacrament embedded in the proclamation that creates faith. In any case **baptism ought not to be performed without proclamation**. But how is it to be proclaimed? It ought to be proclaimed precisely in the teeth of all the objections that rise against it.”¹⁶

Proclamation, however, is intrinsic to Baptism. **The baptismal word of institution is the heart of the sacrament, which makes the sacrament a sacrament.** Therefore, to speak of “baptism embedded in proclamation” implies that Baptism lacks something when it is not embedded in additional proclamation. At the same time, it should be noted that Forde rejected restrictions or rigorism regarding Baptism: “The only cure for the abuses surrounding baptism is to teach and preach it properly; not to withhold it.”¹⁷

Pastors and laity are sometimes called upon to baptize in emergency situations in hospitals or other crises. Such Baptisms can be administered with the confidence that nothing is lacking, that this is God’s doing, and “it is finished” (John 19:30). Baptism saves.

What about those who fall away? That is God’s problem, not ours. We really, truly do not know. We have God’s promise in Baptism, and we leave the rest to God.

5. Ambiguity about faith and Baptism is found in Luther, too

In his essay on infant Baptism, Forde quotes a section from the Large Catechism in which Luther implies that faith as our response to grace:

- “Faith **clings** to the water and **believes** it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life When I **believe** this, what else is it but **believing** in God as the one who has implanted his Word in this external ordinance and **offered it to us** so that we may **grasp** the treasure it contains?”¹⁸

Are you clinging tightly enough? Believing earnestly enough? Have you grasped the grace offered to you? This way of speaking undermines election and implies it is up to the sinner to “cling” tightly and “grasp” earnestly.

6. Luther: Baptism saves

Luther, however, said other things. In his Small Catechism he affirms that Baptism gives the Holy Spirit and eternal life. In his Large Catechism Luther ties the validity and the efficacy of infant Baptism to the Word:

- “Further, we are not primarily concerned **whether the baptized person believes or not**, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I

¹⁵ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 158, 162, 163, 167, 168, 170.

¹⁶ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 168.

¹⁷ Forde, “Something to Believe,” *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 141.

¹⁸ Forde, “Something to Believe,” *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 131.

have already said, that baptism is simply water and God's Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, **even though faith be lacking.** For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. **Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.**"¹⁹

- "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which **snatches us from the jaws of the devil** and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory."²⁰

7. Forde: Baptism saves

Forde, too, writes that infant Baptism saves; it is both valid and effective:

- "The very point of baptism is to save us from having to depend on our own decisions."²¹
- "Baptism is the divine yes that intends to drown, to slay the old being which hopes to continue in control, the divine yes, yes, yes, calling us to life out of death. 'You are mine,' says the Living God, 'and I will never let you go!' All the questions come tumbling out, questions by which we hope to protect our old way of being. They are to be met by a confident yes. 'Do you mean to say baptism is enough?' Yes! It works forgiveness of sins, and where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation. Believe it, it's yours! **'But can it have all that significance even if I was just a baby and didn't know what was going on? 'Yes, for it is God who speaks that yes and God does not give up or go back on promises. God is, after all, God.'**"²²
- "The justification of God promised in Jesus is **not an 'offer' made to us** as old beings; it is our end, our death."²³
- "The devil, that master of subjectivity, can do nothing about the alien Word, the Word from without, the visible and tangible Word. It has simply happened and nothing can change that. As such it is part and parcel of the proclamation and must be preached against all objection. An amusing incident from the television series 'All in the Family' illustrates the point. When Michael protests at Archie's conniving to have the baby baptized, Archie retorts, 'What's the matter, you were baptized, weren't you?' 'Yes,' Michael replies, 'but I renounce my baptism.' 'You can't do that,' Archie says, 'You can renounce your belly button, but it won't go away!' Archie was a better theologian than most on that point. It has happened. It is a Word from without. It sticks. Nothing can change that. It will not be manipulated by our internality. No doubt that is what rankles us as old beings. It is part of the offense. But the point is that if we can do nothing about it, so also the devil can do nothing about it. In the end it may be our last line of defense. **Who knows how we shall die? Demented, raving, despairing? The alien Word will still be there. So Luther, when he was driven to despair by the devil in**

¹⁹ Large Catechism, 4:52-5; *BC Tappert* 443, Kolb/Wengert 463.

²⁰ Large Catechism, 4:83; *BC Tappert* 446, Kolb/Wengert 466.

²¹ Forde, "Something to Believe," *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 138.

²² Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 168.

²³ Forde, *Christian Spirituality. Five Views of Sanctification*, 19; *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 232.

his tribulation (*Anfechtung*), unable to escape wallowing in his own subjectivity, could at last only cry out 'I am baptized!' Precisely so do sacraments save us."²⁴

- "The objection to the idea that sacraments work just by being done (*ex opera operato*) was therefore leveled not against the idea that the sacrament worked 'magically' on us, but rather against the idea that it worked magically on God. The objection was to the idea that the ritual gives the priest, in pagan fashion, some means for manipulating God. That is, there was certainly no objection to the objectivity and from withoutness of the sacrament, and certainly not against the idea that it worked powerfully on us. Indeed, the charge of 'magic' is reprehensible only when it is understood as a means placed in human hands for manipulating the gods. It is quite another matter when it is understood, so to speak, as **God's 'magic,'** God's way of getting to us to end the old and being the new."²⁵
- "It [sanctification] is a matter of getting used to the fact that if we are to be saved it will have to be **by grace alone.**
- "But if we are saved and sanctified **only by the unconditional grace of God,** we ought to be able to become more truthful and lucid about the way things really are with us."²⁶
- "Atonement is a unified action in which the real reunion of the opposed parties occurs. 'The 'subjective' reception of redemption (faith) is contained in the objective act of redemption. The 'subjective' never occurs without the 'objective,' and vice versa."²⁷

8. Luther changed his thinking on Baptism

Forde writes: "Luther constantly warned us that baptism and faith should never be separated."²⁸ But that is not exactly true. Luther changed his thinking on Baptism as Vincent Pfnür, Roman Catholic ecumenist, states in the international Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue on *The Eucharist*:

- "Even as late as 1525, Luther was still preaching that baptism without faith did not help anybody and was not to be administered to anybody who did not himself believe. This statement, as well as others in a similar vein, were used as reproaches against the Lutherans by J. Eck in the *404 Articles*, by J. Fabri in the *Antilogiarum Babylonia*, and by the *Responsio Catholica* at the Augsburg Diet in 1530.

"But these references by the Catholic side to earlier statements made by Luther did not do justice to the Lutheran position of 1530, since in the meantime both Luther and Melancthon had reconsidered the question about the effectiveness of the sacraments in the course of the disputes with the Anabaptists, the Enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*) and Ulrich Zwingli. Thus, in his 'Bedenken gegen die Wiedertäufer' (Objections to the Anabaptists), Melancthon wrote in 1528: 'Baptism bears witness to the fact that the remission of sins extends also to children, even though they do not yet understand the proclamation of the Word.'

²⁴ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 161.

²⁵ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 174.

²⁶ Forde, *Christian Spirituality*, 27, 32; *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 240, 244.

²⁷ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 189.

²⁸ Forde, "Something to Believe," *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 136.

“Against the Anabaptists at that time, Luther too professes the **objective effect** of the sacraments. He rejects rebaptism in the case where baptism has been received without faith: ‘It is a correct baptism in itself, and received rightly. For the words are spoken and everything that pertains to baptism is done as fully as when faith is present. If a thing is in itself correct you do not have to repeat it even though it was not correctly received. You remove what was wrong and all will be right without any repetition. *Abusus non tollit substantiam inimo confirmat substantiam* (Abuse does not eliminate a substance, it rather confirms it). Abuse does not change the reality of a substance, indeed there can be no abuse without its reality.’ In Luther’s Large Catechism we read: ‘When the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid **even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.**”

Pfnür provides this footnote from Luther: “For even if I were **never certain any more of faith**, I still am certain of the command of God, that God has bidden to baptize, for this he has made known throughout the world. In this I cannot err, for God’s command cannot deceive. **But of my faith he has never said anything to anyone, nor issued an order or command concerning it**” (“Concerning Rebaptism,” [1528] LW 40:252).

In Forde’s article on infant Baptism, he quotes from the Large Catechism on Baptism but not from the section on infant Baptism (Part 4:47-86). Thus Forde misses the opportunity to highlight Luther’s statement that in Baptism “God snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own”²⁹ a powerful statement that in Baptism God rescues us in spite of anything “we are think, say, or do.”³⁰

Forde, like Pfnür, quote Luther in “Concerning Rebaptism” (1528) on the **efficacy** of Baptism:

- “Since God has made a covenant with all the heathen through the gospel and ordained baptism as a sign thereof, who can exclude the children? If the old covenant and the sign of circumcision made the children of Abraham believe that they were, and were called the people of God, according to the promise, I will be the God of thy descendants [Gen. 17:7], then this new covenant and sign must be much more effectual and make those a people of God who receive it. Now he commands that all the world shall receive it. On the strength of that command (since none is excluded) **we confidently and freely baptize everyone**, excluding no one except those who oppose it and refuse to receive this covenant. **If we follow his command and baptize everyone, we leave it to him to be concerned about the faith of those baptized.**”³¹

We dare not say more; we do not know. That is God’s business, not ours. Inge Lønning states:

- “That the *verbum externum* may possibly become a *verbum internum* which determines man’s entire person is a process that **lies outside the sphere of human reflection**. According to

²⁹ Large Catechism, 4, 83; BC Tappert 446; Kolb/Wengert 466.

³⁰ Smalcald Articles, 3/3:36; BC Tappert 309, Kolb/Wengert 318.

³¹ Forde, “Something to Believe,” *The Preached God*. Gerhard O. Forde, 144. LW 40:257-58.

Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession, the Holy Spirit brings about faith in men who hear the bodily word of the gospel *ubi et quando visum est Deo*."³²

Part 2: Infant Baptism is the perfect expression of the Gospel

Writing on New Testament perspectives on faith for the Lutheran-Baptist Dialogue, Joseph Burgess sets forth why infant Baptism is the perfect expression of the Gospel:

- “The varying perspectives in the New Testament at the very least allow for faith as a gift of God. Lutherans customarily state this in the words of Luther’s explanation to the third article of the Apostles’ Creed: ‘I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel.’” At this point some will raise the spectre of the *opus operatum*, or of magic, or of sacramental manipulation in baptism. Yet none of these spectres is a problem unless the absolute seriousness of sin is diminished. **If my faith or even my repentance were able to be a contribution to salvation, then sin would not be sin and grace would not be grace.**

“To the one who objects that grace must be *pro me* and that salvation is not mine unless I am personally involved, the answer in part is that even our restored relationship with God (not to speak of our broken relationship with God) is not an I-Thou relationship in the same sense in which one has an I-Thou relationship with another human being; somehow in our modern hybris we have lost track of **the infinite distance between Creator and creature just as we have sublimated the seriousness of sin**. To be sure, God’s grace is *pro me*, but that too is part of his grace.

“Thus faith is a gift, purely and simply. All are in the same situation when it comes to faith, just as all are in the same situation with respect to sin. That means **adult baptism is simply delayed infant baptism**. Infant baptism admittedly cannot be shown with absolute certainty to have been church practice until the end of the second century, but the theological rationale was there from the beginning. This is the essential meaning of sin and grace.

“We must not allow ourselves to be trapped into making the validity of faith the decisive question. **God breaks through to me by his words and actions, in spite of my sin and weakness**. Though deaf, I hear; though blind, I see. Thank God my salvation does not depend on my feelings, my consciousness (whether I still believe if I am asleep, senile, mentally ill, or retarded), my level of psychological development (whether I still believe I believe or doubt I believe), the faith of the Church, or, finally, on me (in any way, shape, or form), lost and helpless as I am.”³³

³² Inge Lønning, “The Reformation and the Enthusiasts,” *Conflicts about the Holy Spirit*. Eds. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 39. Available [here](#).

³³ Joseph A. Burgess, “Faith: New Testament Perspectives,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 1 (1982) 147-48. Available [here](#).