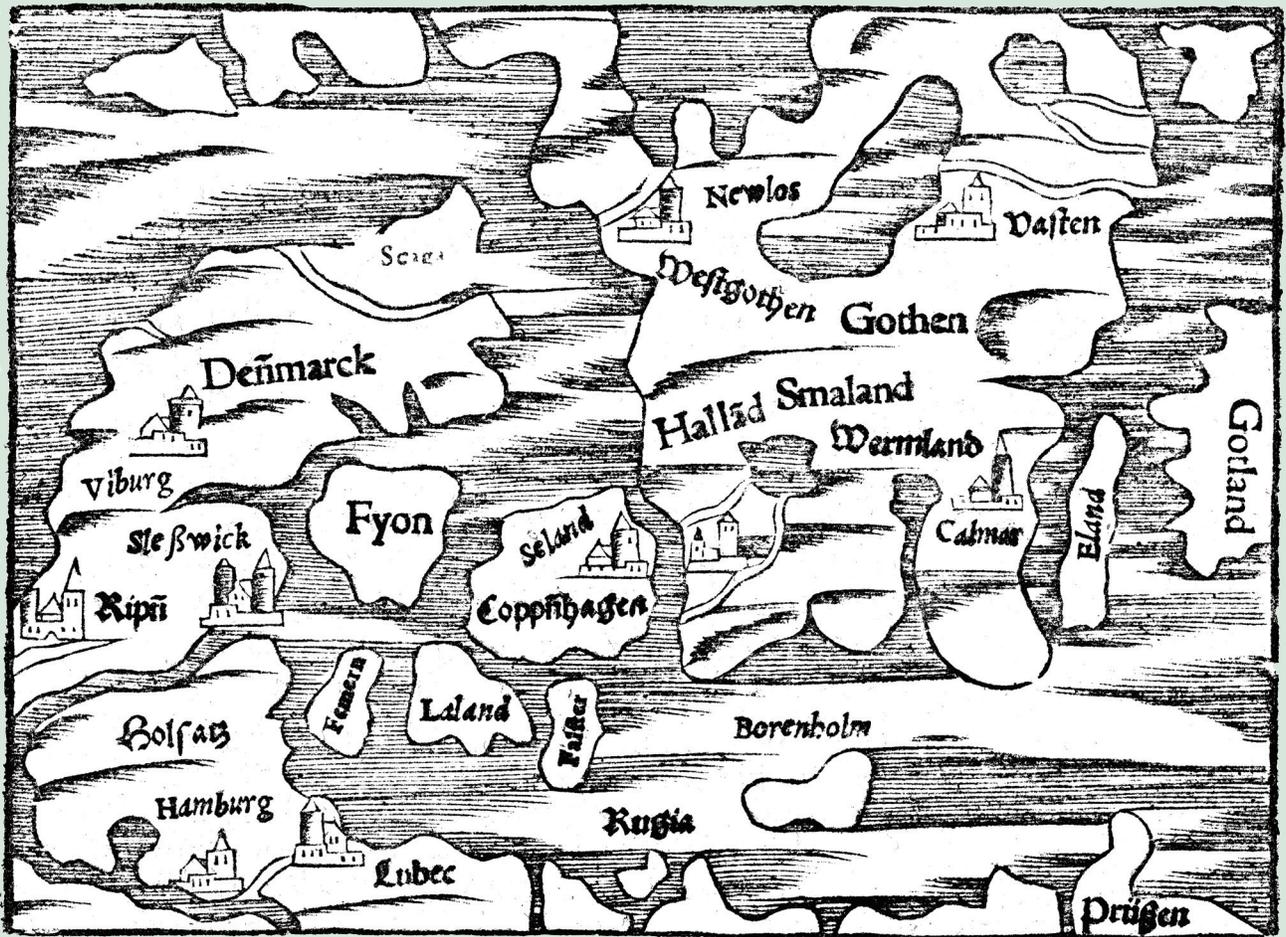


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Gerhard Forde

A Short Appreciation and Critique

JACK KILCREASE



THE THEOLOGY OF GERHARD O. Forde (1927–2005) has grown in its influence in traditionalist North American Lutheran circles over the last few decades. Ironically, although Forde was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for many years (and before that the American Lutheran Church), interest in his theology and institutional support for his ideas within that denomination have dwindled. The real growth of interest in Forde's theology has been within the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod and other confessional Lutheran church bodies. Some have reacted with alarm to the growth of this influence, while others have welcomed it. What I would like to argue in the following short article is that Forde is neither the demon nor the demigod that many have made him out to be. He has made many theological contributions but also many mistakes. Below I will outline several positive contributions that I believe Forde has made to North American Lutheran theological discourse. Then I will also discuss several areas where he displays weakness or error.

Beginning with his positive theological contributions, one area of theological strength is Forde's application of Luther's doctrine of the hidden and revealed God. Forde's emphasis on this doctrine represents an extremely helpful break from modern theology's hunger for self-justifying theodicy.¹ In his writings on the subject Forde pulls no punches in describing the human situation under the hidden God.² Here he follows Luther in his basic recognition that God is by his very nature an electing God.³ A God who in his abstract majesty is the supremely omnipotent arbiter of life and death cannot be trusted because he is too frightening to contemplate. For this reason, human beings in the delusional state of sin assert their free will against God's omnipotence.⁴ This gives them a sense that they possess a modicum of control over the *mysterium tremendum* of God's reality. Nevertheless, free will cannot solve the problem of the hidden God. Free will starts by carving a hermeneutically sealed space out for itself over and against God's omnipotence. Ultimately it is never happy with this space. It grows and grows until it eventually does away with God entirely.⁵

Recognition of this problem brings us to Forde's second great contribution: his application of Luther's theology of the cross.

The solution to the problem of the hidden God is not the puerile obfuscation of the theodicy of free will but rather the actuality of God's saving presence.⁶ The theologian of the cross is honest about human bondage and God's terrible hiddenness and wrath.⁷ Finding God in his majesty utterly unbearable, the theologian of the cross rejects the way of glory and proclaims God hidden *sub contrario* in the flesh of the man Jesus.⁸ Whereas God apart from Christ is terrifying, abstract, and intangible, God in the man Jesus becomes for us the tangible and gracious God. Jesus is a God onto whom faith can hold, and therefore a God in whom one can trust.⁹

This leads to Forde's third major contribution: his insistence on the centrality of proclamation.¹⁰ Because the intangible and hidden God can never be explained away or controlled, the true Christian must hold onto Christ as the tangible God present in word and sacrament. The preacher's job is to proclaim the actuality of Christ's saving presence in word and sacrament.¹¹ Many men who occupy the preaching office believe that their job is to give their congregations a better idea of God. Through this, they hope to make God more attractive and thereby move their parishioners' free will in a better direction.¹² The preach-

1. See Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 84–86. See one attempt to vindicate this path in Paul Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology Luther Through Leibniz* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009).
2. See Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 31–46; Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 13–38; Forde, "The Work of Christ," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:66–76.
3. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 30–38; Forde, "Work of Christ," 67.
4. Forde, "Work of Christ," 66.
5. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
6. *Ibid.*, 67–69.
7. Forde, *Theologian of the Cross*, 72–81.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Forde, "Work of Christ," 67–69.
10. See the definitive summary in Gerhard Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays in Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 3–16.
11. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 147–90.
12. Forde, "Work of Christ," 67.

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er of the cross knows that explaining away God's terrible presence will never help sinners. Giving better theories about who God is simply cannot make God gracious in his concrete actuality.¹³ Only the means of grace, within which God has willed to make himself gracious and tangible, can overcome the terror of God's intangibly hidden reality.

Forde's description of the work of Christ is problematic because it calls into question God's faithfulness to his word of law.

Along with these important theological contributions, Forde also displays some areas of weakness. The first area of concern is Forde's critique of the doctrine of *lex aeterna* or eternal law. Forde begins his doctoral dissertation *The Law-Gospel Debate* by attacking what he considers to be the inadequacies of the Lutheran scholastic doctrine of *lex aeterna*.¹⁴ According to the older Lutheran theologians, because God is eternal and the law is the content of his will, then the law itself must be understood as something eternal.¹⁵ Forde rejected this interpretation of the law in light of his rereading of Luther's *Antinomian Disputations*.¹⁶ According to Forde (largely basing his interpretation on that of Lauri Haikola¹⁷), Luther rejected the idea of *lex aeterna* in favor of an understanding of the law as the experience of condemnation, accusation, and threat within creation.¹⁸ In light of this, the law ultimately cannot be eternal because this experience of the law ceases or becomes an "empty law" (*lex vacua*) when the law is fulfilled within believers through faith.¹⁹

Though we do not have the space to critique Forde's position fully here, one main point should be made. If God does dynamically engage in accusing and threatening activity within creation, it is necessarily a reaction to human sin and its viola-

tion of God's eternal will. Therefore, saying that the law cannot be eternal because believers will eventually cease to experience its threat is something of a category confusion. One can agree with Forde on the existential dimensions of the law, while recognizing that God threatens sinners on the basis of their rejection of his eternal will.²⁰ Hence, when Forde rejects the idea of the eternal law he does not mean to suggest that the law at some point simply ceases to be God's will, but rather that God's will ceases to threaten sinners when the law is fulfilled in them. Though it is not theologically incorrect to say that the existential effect of the law will eventually cease for believers, Forde's formulation confuses the discussion by applying a term meant to express the ontic reality of the law to an existential description of the law's effects.

This brings us to a second area of concern: Forde's interpretation of the doctrine of atonement.²¹ Forde starts with the recognition that sinful and unbelieving human beings exist under the law and the hidden God. In order to overcome this situation, God has sent Jesus into the world in order to forgive, thereby changing God's relation with the world to one of love and forgiveness. God, as he is actualized in Jesus, makes a unilateral decision to forgive without any fulfillment of the law. Humans prefer to be under the law because they believe that they can control God using their good works. Their response to being forgiven is to kill Jesus in order to maintain this sense of control. In doing this, they reveal their own sin of unbelief and they thereby die in their recognition of sin. Jesus' resurrection vindicates his practice of unilateral forgiveness. Since faith fulfills the law and sanctifies us, God now looks at the person of faith as righteous and is "satisfied."

Forde's description of the work of Christ is problematic because it calls into question God's faithfulness to his word of law. If grace is described as God's abandoning his word of law by refusing to punish sin, can we be certain that he will not ultimately reverse himself regarding his word of grace as well? Furthermore, although Forde criticizes the idea that the law must be satisfied before God can become gracious, he ultimately agrees that the law must be fulfilled. The only difference is that the law is fulfilled in believers through faith and not by Jesus. This calls into question the Lutheran confessional understandings of justification *propter Christum*.

Lastly, Forde has drawn criticism due to his understanding of the third use of the law. For Forde, faith fulfills the law and therefore talk of a "third use" is in a sense superfluous. The per-

13. Ibid.

14. Gerhard Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 3–11. Also see Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Hay and Henry Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 508–9, 510–16.

15. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 3–11.

16. Ibid., 180–87.

17. Lauri Haikola, *Studien zu Luther und zum Luthertum* (Uppsala: A. B. Lundquistika Bokhandeln, 1958); and also Haikola, "A Comparison of Melancthon's and Luther's Doctrine of Justification," *Dialog* 2 (1963): 32–39.

18. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 180–87.

19. Ibid., 182–84.

20. See Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1969), 1:368–401. Harnack argues that there is a distinction between "office" and "essence" (*Amt und Wesen*) in Luther's understanding of the law. In its essence, the law is God's eternal will, whereas in its temporal office after the fall it is whatever threatens and accuses. In my opinion, this is a much better interpretation of Luther.

21. See the summary in Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," in *A More Radical Gospel*, 85–97; Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 87–134; Forde, "Work of Christ," 79–104.

son of faith has entered into the new age of righteousness and grace. Moreover, talk of a third use also presupposes that the *lex semper accusat* has in some strange sense been abrogated.²² In other words, talking about a “third use” assumes that the law has lost its threat and has now become a harmless “pet” that merely instructs.²³

Contrary to what many have charged, this does not mean that Forde holds that there is no place for law in the Christian’s life. Of course, due to the *simul* of Christian existence, the old being persists and needs the law. For this reason, the law as instruction and rational commonsense continue to function for the Christian as they relate to the world.²⁴ This form of instruction Forde characterizes as falling within the first use of the law, rather than the third.²⁵ Hence Forde does not so much reject the third use as lump it in with the first use.²⁶

22. Gerhard Forde, “Luther’s Ethics,” in *A More Radical Gospel*, 152–53.

23. *Ibid.*, 153.

24. *Ibid.*, 152.

25. *Ibid.*, 149, 152.

26. See Mark Mattes, “Beyond the Impasse: Re-Examining the Third Use of the Law,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69 (2005): 279–80. Mattes writes: “Forde rejects a third use because he does not see this formulation as offering anything that is not already in the first use.”

There are several difficulties with this interpretation of the third use of the law. First, when Forde claims that the third use assumes that the law is harmless or has ceased to accuse, he is directly contradicting the descriptions of the third use made in the Formula of Concord. In fact, the Formula of Concord agrees with Forde that the law is a necessary restraint for Christians insofar as they remain under the power of sin (see discussion in FC SD v1). Secondly, although Forde is correct to emphasize the rationality of law, he fails to appreciate the need for the law to be clarified into cognitively understandable instructions by divine revelation. One point that is made in the Lutheran confessional documents is that Christians must perform divinely sanctioned works rather than self-chosen ones (See CA xx; FC SD v1). Of course, as long as the basic substance of the biblical teaching remains, one can parse the uses of the law any way one wishes. It is nevertheless helpful to describe the third use as something distinct from the first. This is important because it emphasizes the need for the visible church to give specific instructions regarding which works are divinely sanctioned and which are not.

In spite of these criticisms, Forde has made many valuable contributions to twentieth-century Lutheran thought. As with any theologian, Forde should, of course, be read with discernment. Nevertheless, his many positive contributions should not be ignored because of his mistakes. **LOGIA**

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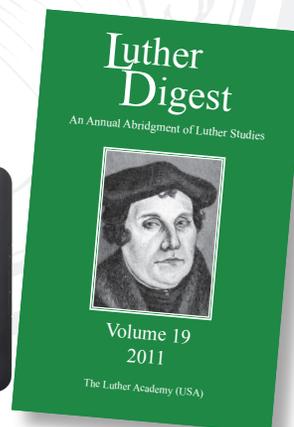
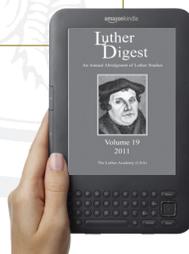
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