

In memoriam Gerhard O. Forde

By Steven D. Paulson

Professor Gerhard O. Forde died at age 77 on August 9, 2005 in St. Paul, Minnesota. His funeral was held at St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church on August 12, 2005 and he is buried on the hillside of the beautiful white church, Indherred, where his Father and Grandfather preached for over forty years and where he grew up in the parsonage next door. Gerhard Forde is one of a small number of American Lutheran theologians who have made an indelible mark in theology in the United States and internationally. He did so by means of his interpretation of Luther for the modern audience, especially in his popular book »Where God meets man« (MP 1972), and his co-authored »Free to be« (with James Nestingen, MP 1975) by which he taught the gospel to young and old alike. His chief theological contributions include first, that the place of the law in any theological system determines whether or not the theology can issue in the gospel. That is, the law comes to its fulfillment and end in Christ alone. Thus, God's holy law has a place, but a limited, penultimate place in this old world. Theology itself has an eschatological limit as a collection of theories or ideas that must finally get out of the way of the cross. Second, Forde made significant contributions for the doctrine of atonement and the person of Christ by refusing to understand redemption by law alone. Instead he used the dialectic of death and life. God is reconciling the world to himself by the actual, historical events of Christ's cross and resurrection by which sinners are first caught *in* the act of rebellion, then they can be caught *by* Christ's act of love bestowed as a gift of the unconditional forgiveness of sins – by faith alone. Third, that means all theology is for proclamation or the present election of sinners by the power of God's word to do what it says. The only true theologians are the kind Luther, in the Heidelberg Disputation, called »theologians of the

cross« rather than »theologians of glory«. Forde provided one of the great commentaries on Luther's theses in his »On being a theologian of the cross« (Grand Rapids, MI 1977). Fourth, Forde believed that sin is human bondage. Our bondage is the incessant claim that we are free over against the absolute, hidden God, and therefore we will not listen to his Son's forgiveness apart from the law. Christ's justification of sinners therefore meant actual death and resurrection for God Himself, then for each sinner of Christ's choosing.

Within the church, Gerhard Forde is remembered for teaching the Lutheran Confessions to thousands of American pastors as documents of Christian freedom and the means to improve preaching. He exercised an important influence for twenty two years in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic dialog. He understood that true ecumenism required the freedom of the Lutheran proposal – it is enough for church unity to agree upon the word and sacraments – and so he understood that the doctrine of justification by faith alone would not truly be agreed upon until the underlying issues of hermeneutics – the distinction of law and gospel – would become the center of ecumenical discussion with Rome rather than requiring human traditions for ordering the church's ministry. He served on the Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC) from 1983 through 1987 that led to the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). There he made a lasting contribution by – among many other matters – shaping the form of the public confession and absolution that is known today as the »Brief order for confession and forgiveness" in the »Lutheran book of worship«.

Forde was born in Starbuck, Minnesota on September 10, 1927 and was raised in the Old Norwegian Synod, with its ties to the state church in Norway and its strong traditions of Lutheran hymns and chorales. Forde attended Luther College in Decorah, Iowa receiving his B. A. degree in 1950. He proceeded to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, WI in chemistry for one year, but left to pursue theology at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota (B. Th. degree in 1955). Forde did not identify directly with his teachers whom he saw as stuck with intractable positions derived from the Norwegian-American controversy on election (Naadevalgstrid, 1880). Forde saw a way through pietism and rigid orthodoxy by means

of the lively dialectic of law and gospel in Luther where the law and gospel are not substances, but *function* in human lives. Election then ceases being an intellectual conundrum and gives way to real matters of death and life. He received his Th.D. degree from Harvard Divinity School in 1967, though he baffled most of his teachers there, including Paul Tillich (1886-1965). What Forde produced at Harvard was a dissertation – »The Law-gospel debate«, MP 1969 – that gathered up some shared concerns of a small group of Scandinavians – like Lauri Haikola (1917-1987), Herbert Olsson (1899-1969), and Gustaf Wingren (1910-2000) – who arose after the effects of long wars, responding to Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and from the search for a modern use of historical-critical scholarship that did not depend solely upon the systems of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) or even Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). They all went back to Luther. Luther, of course, was pre-modern, but unusually so since he broke radically with theories that depended upon the law as the only life-giving relation to God. In the middle of graduate work Forde spent an inspirational year in Tübingen (1958/59) with Hanns Rückert (1901-1974), Hermann Diem (1900-1975), Ulrich Mann (1915-1991), and Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998), but there he came upon his own favorite modern interpreter of Luther, Hans Joachim Iwand (1899-1960), whose writings taught him what it meant to preach to people with bound wills. Provoked by the debates about law and gospel initiated by Karl Barth, Forde found a much deeper problem stemming from the atonement debates surrounding Johann Christian Konrad von Hoffmann (1810-1877). He recognized the problem of assuming that the law was God's eternal plan so that theories of salvation came to replace Christ himself as our salvation. This was a more persistent problem than Christological liberalism or forms of idealism or materialism, or even of Barth's re-ordering of law and gospel. Instead, Forde pursued a radical dialectic of law and gospel, and a truly eschatological end of the law in Christ himself and alone. Eventually this propelled him to his enduring interest in Luther's »Bondage of the will«. Forde produced a remarkable sketch for dogmatic theology called »Theology is for proclamation« (MP 1990) on the basis of Luther's distinction between God preached and not preached. Forde then built his systematics

out of the need to preach to sinners who are in open rebellion against their Creator. Forde's last book – »The captivation of the will« (Grand Rapids, MI 2005), is his capstone interpretation of Luther's crucial theological arguments concerning Scripture, God, human willing, and Christ and our salvation.

Forde's teaching began at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota in 1955/56; he lectured at Luther Seminary for one school year 1959/60, and then joined the faculty of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa from 1961 to 1963. He returned to Luther Seminary in 1964 and in the same year wed his beloved wife Marianna, who taught French at nearby St. Catherine's college for most of her career and with whom he had three children. He became a full professor in systematic theology in 1974. He formally retired in 1998 but continued teaching for four more years. He was ordained in 1968 and became the Lutheran tutor at Mansfield College, Oxford University (1968-1970). He spent sabbatical years at Harvard (1972/73), Strasbourg (1979/80), and the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota (1988). He served as president during the Eighth International Luther Congress held at St. Paul, 1993, where he gave the main address, »Called to freedom«. Forde was instrumental in the early days of »Dialog: a journal of theology«, and put his final efforts into »The Lutheran quarterly«, where he wrote the journal's inaugurating mission called »Radical Lutheranism«, that is now included in his first volume of collected essays, »A more radical Gospel« (Grand Rapids, MI 2004).

For most of his students, however, he will be remembered for his incisive and arresting sermons. That is only fitting for one who believed that theology's purpose was not thinking itself, but the proclamation of Christ to bound sinners who need His unconditional forgiveness.

Biography: Gerhard O. FORDE: The one acted upon: theological autobiography. Dialog 36 (St. Paul, MN 1997), 54-61.

Bibliography: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE PUBLICATIONS OF GERHARD O. FORDE. In: By faith alone: essays on justification in honor of Gerhard O. Forde/ ed. by Joseph A. Burgess; Marc Kolden. Grand Rapids, MI 2004, 341-344.

Picture: http://www.luthersem.edu/memorial/gerhard_forde.asp.