

## Forde: Neither inerrancy, nor Heilsgeschichte, nor existentialism

From Forde's theological autobiography:

But in the seminary it soon became apparent that **the ancient tradition was under attack**. The attack, however, was not from without but from within. It was not, that is, the inroads of criticism and liberalism, etc., that were the ultimate source of trouble. Such inroads could temporarily at least be sidestepped, accommodated, or moderated. So we read Brunner (the most used in dogmatics classes as I recall), and Sittler, and Kantonen, and Nygren, and Tillich, etc., and they assured us that all was well in the "Neo-Orthodox" camp. Yet there was, for me at least, a certain unease. The surrender of biblical inerrancy to various versions of "truth as encounter" and other **existentialist** ploys seemed to lack the bite of the older views of biblical authority. Perhaps it was that something of the offense was gone. Yet there was no way back. Older views of **biblical inerrancy** were not an offense, they were just intellectually offensive. I was looking, I think, for **something deeper and more compelling, a gospel authority that establishes itself by its own power and attractiveness, not a legal authority that simply demands submission**.

*Heilsgeschichte*, then in vogue, dominated our theological classrooms. But it was at best a half-way house. It freed us from older views of authority based on biblical inerrancy but left us rather with serious questions about history. A Bible that is an authoritative mine for data to construct a historical scheme is, in the end, **only somewhat better than a Bible of texts used to "prove" dogmatic propositions**. The inchoate desire of my younger days for a more solid foundation was not satisfied.

My own theological education began one day when I was impelled to set off on my own search. That certain independence and reluctance to rely just on the word of my professors once again asserted itself. While attending **a class on Galatians** one day the question that was to occupy center stage for the rest of my theological career was posed, the question of the relation between human "responsibility" and divine election. The professor, bless his pious heart, stretched out his arms and said, "Men (there were only men in those days!), there are just some things we have to learn **to hold in tension!**" Something within me **shouted NO!** There are no doubt some things we might hold in tension, but not this thing, not the question of human salvation! I came to suspect that this was the real threat against the ancient tradition. I had to ask myself, "**Was this the theology for which Luther was willing to see the church torn apart?**" Was this the position over which he argued so desperately with Erasmus? I couldn't believe it. This touched off my quest. And that questing centering around **divine election, the bondage of the human will, and being a theologian of the cross** accounts for **the sum and substance of my theology**.

The search for an answer to the question about Luther ushered me into a strange and exciting new world. **Modern Luther research** was just beginning to be imported from Europe. I poured over Luther on Galatians, read and reread Luther's *Bondage of the Will*; I gobbled up the essays and monographs I could find on Luther's "reformation discovery" and his theology in general (Wingren, Nygren, Prenter, Watson, Boehmer, Pauck, Rupp, etc.), as well as on related exegetical questions about the righteousness of God, justification, law and gospel, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

See further:

The theology at which I have arrived is **the result of a quest for faith. It is not really an option for me.** I do not see it, ultimately, as though it were one of many possible "expressions" of faith – even though I try to be as charitable towards those other expressions as I can. I have sought **a theology which repeatedly calls me back from the brink of unbelief by its own intrinsic power.** I believe I find this particularly in Luther's understanding of being **a theologian of the cross.** For me that is not a matter of traditionalism or whatever pejorative charges those who like to play at such games like to hurl around. **For "beyond" or "outside" such theology, I am threatened simply by unbelief.** Which is to say, I suppose, that I simply cannot live on a "theology of glory." If I fight adamantly in ecclesiastical circles, that is the reason.

Second, just a note about my work itself. Upon reflection I think that Christology, both the understanding of the work of Christ in atonement and of the person of Christ, might have been highlighted a little more than was immediately evident in Professor Nestingen's article. Perhaps as a historian he is less impressed by "systematic" theological achievements! But I have been preoccupied not only with atonement, but also with the person of Christ, and it does seem to me – or at least it is my hope – that some of my most significant contributions to theology have been in this area. This is, of course, vital to the task of being a theologian of the cross today. What I have striven for throughout is a theology which **relentlessly brings the cross and resurrection home to us, "does" it to us.** It has seemed to me that the biggest problem systematically is that theology constantly gets in the way of the cross. I have sought **a theology which gets out of the way for the cross.** Rightly or wrongly, I think some of my best work is the fruit of that search.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The One Acted Upon," *dialog* 36:1 (Winter 1997) 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Forde, "Response to James Nestingen's article," *dialog* 31:1 (Winter 1992) 34-35.