TEXT, FOR THE RECORD

Lutheran Faith and American Freedom

by GERHARD O. FORDE

[A lecture to pastors in autumn, 1992]

To get right to the point, when we confront the question of American freedom from a theological point of view, we are immediately in trouble, but perhaps we can get at it most quickly by saying that what most Americans call freedom today is what theology—particularly Lutheran theology—would call bondage. Freedom to do as we please usually ends in bondage to the self and the lusts of the day. Perhaps it was not always so. Originally, I suppose, freedom for Americans had to do with political liberty, with shaking off tyrannies which had plagued them in Europe. Originally they claimed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness over against such tyrannical forces. But they knew well, in the early days, that freedom could not be only freedom from such tyranny. If it were so, freedom would become license and likely just run amok. If freedom were to work, there would have to be some way to restrain it and keep it from running amok. And if it were to remain freedom, it would have to be a voluntary restraint. And that meant, as Terry Eastland ("In Defense of Religious America," *Commentary*, June 1, 1981) and others have pointed out, that American freedom could work only if it had a religious base. It was religion that preached and inculcated the virtues and the sense of duty that gave freedom something worth-while to do. Thus that perennially quoted and sharp-eyed observer from France, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed that whereas freedom allowed the American people to do just about anything, there were things which their religion prevented them

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from imagining and forbade them to dare. Religion, he said, was America's "foremost political institution." Religion provided what a Constitution based on commercialism and self-interest could not provide. Religion provided a check on the freedom guaranteed by political institutions. Freedom depended upon the old religious warning against license.

But now, as we all well know, religion is no longer a "political institution." Indeed, religion, since about the 1920s, according to Eastland, has slipped into rapid decline. Politically, in recent decades, given the impression left by court decisions and the general tenor of the times, the voice of religion seems to be about the only voice that cannot be heard on important political and moral issues—particularly, it seems, the voice of the Christian religion. Indeed, one can say that we seem to have slipped over into a more or less anti-religious mood. "Religion is a cruel joke," announced a placard in an abortion rights parade. The separation of church and state, intended originally, it would seem, to give the differing denominations equal voice, has become a divorce, an antagonism. People use the principle of separation as a defense against religion. If the original intent of the Constitution guaranteeing the free exercise of religion is to mean anything more than trivialities, then surely it should mean that religion should have an equal voice to that which is not religious. But that seems no longer to be the case. Since there is separation, people seem to think, religion has no right to speak publicly at all. Freedom of religion has become freedom from religion. Now the result of this, of course, is that American freedom has lost its religious moorings and threatens to run amok and destroy itself. Americans rarely today have the original modesty to think they have the right to pursue happiness, but rather that they have the absolute right to possess it—no matter at whose expense. Rights we talk about gladly, but not duties or responsibilities or character. And since we will not police ourselves voluntarily, from the highest Savings and Loan tycoon down to the lowest drug pusher, our police force is less and less able to cope, the jails are filling, the justice system is clogged, people are suing each other for any violations of their rights imaginable. And so on and so on. From a Lutheran standpoint one might say, perhaps, that the American marriage between

freedom and religious restraint was doomed to failure from the start. However, we need not attack that question here. For the moment, suffice it to say, as at the outset, once freedom loses its moorings in religion and becomes the unbridled pursuit of whatever rights turn one on, it modulates rather rapidly into just what Lutherans would call bondage. Unencumbered by any call to virtue or responsibility, freedom becomes fertile soil for addiction. Freedom, that is, sells itself to greed and lust.

Now, what does this mean for Lutheranism? Mark Noll in his recent article in the *Word and World* issue on "Whither Lutheranism" rightly says, I think, that Lutheranism stands at a crossroads. Lutheranism has always been a champion of freedom, as we all know. But now the danger is that Lutheranism will just sell out, as we put it in our first lecture, to the gods of current American culture. The freedom of the Christian which Luther championed will just get melted together with the freedom of the American. But that would mean the surrender of whatever distinctiveness we have to contribute. As Mark Noll, speaking of the crossroad at which we stand, put it: "the infusion of European migration has been over for two generations. Assimilation to American cultural patterns proceeds rapidly. Lutherans now cannot avoid choices about how to relate more generally to other American churches and to the American environment itself." But Noll, even though believing that Lutherans have a lot to contribute, is not optimistic about the way things are going. He says: "the choices that have been made so far seem to throw into doubt either the ability to communicate an authentically Lutheran word in America or the capacity to maintain such an authentic word" (314). That is, we have to make choices, but the choices already made are not good ones. If the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has retreated into parochial dogmatism, the churches that formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America appear to be drifting toward the common fate of the old, large, Americanized, and increasingly endangered denominations. "The dominating concern (of the ELCA) seems to be less the offering of Lutheranism to America than the promotion of social engagement and bureaucratic efficiency" (315).

This estimate parallels, I think, what I said in my first lecture about the damage of slipping into a kind of decadence. If, in our attempts to become American we simply allow the freedom of the Christian to be dissolved into and assimilated to the freedom of the contemporary American we are in danger of losing whatever it is that we have to say. The peculiar danger of Lutheranism is evident precisely because of its passion for the gospel. We all intend, and wish to preach the gospel. We don't want to fall into the trap of the law. But given the current slide towards accommodation with the gods of American culture, the result of the intent to preach the gospel can all too often result in a kind of gospel Schwaermerei—an attempt just to preach the gospel without the law. The result is just a slip into the swamp of permissiveness. We repeat theologically the error of anti-nomianism—the idle dream that we can escape the clutches of the law just by ignoring it or avoiding it, by refusing to preach it. It is, as Luther said, as though you could rid yourself of the law just by going through your theological books and erasing the word L–A–W wherever it appeared, or taking your sermon and erasing everything that appeared to you to smack of law. But that is a drama played in an empty theater. One can't get rid of the law or wrath by theological erasure. The law is a *power* which remains even when all the words are gone. Indeed, as with most such matters, it becomes more destructive precisely because we have lost the name for it. And when we no longer know the name of the law or its power, the gospel becomes aimless, or perhaps rather something like a scatter gun which shoots at anything and everything in sight that seems to threaten. The enemy turns out, as I indicated in my first lecture, to be an amorphous "they" who are against me, perhaps just because they inhibit or make claims on me. In the end, everyone becomes the enemy. The gospel gets reduced, willy-nilly, to sentimentality, to being affirming of anything and everything, just saying gospel, gospel, gospel, all over the place. Preaching, as Luther once said, becomes a matter of spreading "sweet security" all around. But then matters only get worse, of course. Then we don't know how to handle our terrors. If the gospel brings sweet security, how come we are so insecurely situated in this world? I expect one of the reasons

we have so much trouble with the question of evil today might be because we have been brought up on sweet security and so don't know what to do when things go wrong. As Luther put it,

> The devil knows very well . . . that it is impossible to remove the law from the heart . . . But the devil devotes himself to making men secure, teaching them to heed neither law nor sin, so that if sometime they are suddenly overtaken by death or by a bad conscience, they have grown so accustomed to nothing but sweet security that they sink helplessly into hell. For they have learned to perceive nothing in Christ but sweet security. Therefore such terror [they think] must be taken as a sure sign that Christ (whom they understand as sheer sweetness) has rejected and forsaken them. This is what the devil strives for, and that is what he would like to see. (*Luther's Works* 47:111)

Even the theology of the cross, one of the rock–bottom theologoumena of Lutheranism, tends to get swallowed up in the soup of sentimentalization. The theology of the cross becomes just the idea that "Jesus identifies with us in our suffering," and isn't that nice. Now for the suffering, there is, of course comfort in that. But without the resurrection, it becomes just what one might call a "misery loves company" theology. It becomes a negative theology of glory. If we couldn't make it by good works, perhaps we can gain some purchase on the Kingdom if we suffer enough. And so you can see immediately how the theology of the cross, too, loses its gospel character and becomes law.

There is, of course, just enough truth in the fact that suffering is a mark of the Kingdom to make all that plausible. But we tend to forget a couple of matters. First of all, even though Jesus did, in a real sense, identify with us, we did not identify with him. Nobody identified with him. "He was despised and rejected of men, he had no form or comeliness that we should desire him, he was as one from whom we hid our faces, despised, and we esteemed him not" [*Isa. 53*]. We tend to forget that we didn't identify with him, but did him in. He was wasted for—at the hands of—our sins. We should at least hesitate a bit, I should think, before we move so quickly to talk all this identification language. We didn't identify with him, we (not they) killed him.

Secondly, all too much of the theology of the cross around these days seems to lack or at least ignore or neglect the resurrection. It is impossible to have a true theology of the cross without the resurrection. For without the resurrection, we cannot face up to the awful truth of the cross. We can't face up to the fact that in the end no one identified with Jesus, but everyone joined the crowd to cry "crucify him." Even the disciples forsook him and fled. And, as Paul could put it, to the extent that we still try to avoid such facts, we do it again. For the point of the theology of the cross is that even though we did not identify with Jesus, God did. God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and so turned the table exactly around. Had Jesus remained in the tomb, then, of course he would have been just one more unfortunate victim of "them." And we might try to use him, identify with him, against "them" in our suffering. The suffering Jesus would be our "Lord." And our sin would still be masked from us. But the point of it all is that Jesus did not remain in the tomb, that God has made him Lord and Christ by raising him from the dead—not just by sending him to suffer. So now the tables are turned. Now it becomes apparent that there is none righteous, no not one. Now it comes to light that had Jesus remained in the tomb, then we would be right, and he wrong. But since he is raised, then we are wrong and he is right. Or as Paul could put it, since he is alive, we, as old beings, as sinners, are dead, but nevertheless alive in Christ. In brief, we can take the truth about the cross only in the light of the resurrection. We don't need God just to be miserable with us, but rather finally, as the saying goes, to put us out of our misery.

But now enough of this jeremiad. If it is true that the danger once again is precisely the confusion of Christian freedom with American freedom, that the temptation is to slip into the idea that freedom means the right to do whatever we fancy, what is to be done about it? What is the road we should be taking? How, that is, are we to stem the tide, the slip into decadence, permissiveness, sweet security, sentimentality—the ills which beset American Christianity?

Perhaps it is well to begin by noting that the problem we face is not a new one. It is, in effect, the chronic problem of Protestantism, the chronic problem of the attempt to preach the gospel of

justification by faith alone. What is to be done if such a gospel is taken advantage of? What can we do when faith is on the wane? What do we do when it seems as though the gospel just leads to laxity or accommodation, when freedom is taken as license? Anyone who undertakes to preach the gospel of salvation by faith alone knows this problem. Paul knew it. Luther knew it. You all, no doubt, know it. Goodness knows, I know it. I am constantly being harried by those who suspect that, because I am weak on sanctification!

If we are to make any progress on the question we are addressing here, I think we need to look back over the way Protestantism has tended to handle this chronic problem. We are justified by faith alone without the deeds of the law. It is all God's doing, not ours. And in classical Protestantism, this was backed up with the doctrine of election. God decides the whole matter. So, briefly, the position is stated. But then, of course, as my students always show every year with infallible inevitability, the immediate question is: But don't we have to have faith? And isn't that somehow, at least a little bit, our doing? Now, it has not been sufficiently recognized, I think, that the entire fate of Protestantism hangs on the way that question is answered. Overwhelmingly what happens is that we are trapped (for the question is a trap) into answering, "Yes, of course, you have to have faith. Faith is the only proper response." True enough of course, but then we are off and running. A host of questions spill out like water over a broken dam. "But does that not mean we decide?" One may try to forestall disaster for a moment by calling on the all-around anti-pelagian handy-person, the Holy Spirit, and say "no, it is the Spirit's doing." But then we only get farther and farther into the woods. "But how do I get the Spirit, know I have the Spirit?" "Well, you can feel the Spirit." "You have to have the proper experience." You have to get converted. The normal way to become a Christian, to get faith is through the experience of conversion. If you are converted you can lay claim to a true faith. So, virtually all of Protestant revivalism.

It is crucial to note what happens in this kind of move. The major effort of theology and preaching comes to be invested in describing faith. We are justified by faith alone. Indeed. But then all the attention shifts to the subject, to the question of faith. What

does it mean to have faith? It is not enough to have just plain ordinary faith, we are told, but we must be possessed of "real," "true," "sincere," "heart-felt," "experienced," faith. Theology becomes descriptive and adjectival, or adverbial. And as the adjectives and adverbs pile up, the confidence of believers goes down. It may, of course, be salutary and even necessary for theology to describe faith. However, when, as inevitably happens, one resorts to preaching the description we are in big trouble. Preaching descriptions is deadly. We think we are preaching gospel, but actually it is one of the worst forms of law. Preaching a description is like reciting the characteristics of "true" love to your spouse during a quarrel, and complaining, "The trouble with you is that you just don't know what love is and you don't love me enough." Even if it is true, it is not likely to be very salutary!

Yet I think we can say that this has been the basic method for Protestantism, particularly in America, for curing its ills. To cure a flagging faith, one preaches faith. Something, I say, like trying to make flowers grow by pulling on them! You only kill them.

The result has been to introduce a fundamental split in the body ecclesiastic, a split between those who think they can lay claim to all the adjectives and those who can't, between the real Christians and the ordinary or luke-warm Christians, the ins and the outs. This was evident in this country already in the distinction between real full-covenant Christians and the half–way covenant, or perhaps between what William James called the once born and the twice born, or today between "evangelical" and (what?) non-evangelical? (Whatever that is?) And in general, this has simply meant that the "ordinary" Christians have been written off, cut adrift, and so have gradually slipped away into their various forms of secularization, whereas the "real" Christians continue their business of converting folks in their various ways. The split, I think, has been rather disastrous. Perhaps our real question in America is "is there a true gospel for ordinary Christians—who don't think it necessary to get out and blow a gasket?"

So, whither away? Whither Lutheranism? What shall be the road ahead for us? How shall we recover and speak an authentic message to America without slipping into the swamp of the secularization

on the one hand, or reverting just to hollering at people about faith on the other? How shall we preach the Christian message in the face of an American freedom that has lost its religious moorings? As you are all aware, there are various suggestions being made, various parties forming. Some maintain that what we need is to reappropriate some of the hierarchical machinery that was jettisoned at the time of the Reformation, that the answer to the slide into the swamp is to establish a stronger teaching office and shore up our discipline, to restore a historic episcopate. Some would suggest that we try to recapture the rigor of the authentic Pietism of our past, that we press for a reawakening of the Pietist spirit. Some would suggest, that we insist on more serious ethical effort over against the injustices of contemporary culture.

Without going into the pros and cons of such suggestions it seems to me that there is still an underlying question we have first to attend to. It is still a matter of law and gospel. For Lutherans, do we think that the way ahead, the fundamental solution to our problems, lies in the law or the gospel? It seems to me that the various suggestions made all revert too hastily to the law: episcopal succession, Pietist revivalism, ethical exertion. The way to renewal is somehow via the law. If we live in an anti-nomian culture, what is the solution to that? Once again, the question is an old one. It was really the first basic problem of the reform of the sixteenth century. When they discovered in the Saxon visitations the sorry state of affairs and feared that the gospel of justification by faith was just leading to laxity, they faced the question what to do—similar to ours. A great debate ensued—largely forgotten—the "antinomian" controversies—which stretched over several decades and took various shapes, one of the most salutary questions to investigate for today. At the outset it was the question: how to counter the moral laxity and the misperception of the gospel as "sweet security." Melanchthon and those who followed him thought that rigorous preaching of the law first was the remedy. If folks are always abusing the gospel and Christian freedom they must be brought to true and heartfelt contrition and repentance by preaching the law in all its rigor. If they were apprised of the seriousness and consequence of sin they could be brought to repentance

and proper living. (A standard "evangelical" approach? It has evolved into "fire and brimstone" in some instances.)

On the other hand, there were those (starting with Johann Agricola) who smelled a rat in this method. They held that you can't really scare people into faith. Repentance that comes from the fear of consequences is merely *legalistic* repentance based on the self's own desire to preserve itself. True evangelical repentance, Agricola held, comes from preaching the gospel. And because he insisted that the law should be banished from the church and the pulpit he earned the title *Antinomian*. The law, he said, doesn't belong in the pulpit. It belongs in the courthouse and the sheriff's office. From the pulpit we preach the gospel alone and the gospel brings true and heartfelt evangelical repentance.

Now in those days, when all is said and done for one reason or another, the general outcome tended in Melanchthon's direction. One is to preach the law first in all its rigor to produce repentance and then come with the comfort of the gospel. This position in one form or another became the staple of evangelical preaching. But now comes the question: will it work anymore? Moderns—especially Americans?—don't scare anymore; they lack "consciousness of guilt," supposedly. Are Americans inherently anti-nomian? Does the separation of church and state mean the gospel in the church and the law in the court-house? Whither away? Are people impervious to "the law," or are they already suffering so much under the thousand natural (and unnatural) shocks that flesh is heir to that they don't need any more ill treatment? The message seems to be faltering here and uncertain—the trumpet gives an uncertain sound. Usually I suppose we try to preach to people's or societies' problems, assuming that the problem has somehow already done the work of the law. But is that so? Or is the gospel as such the answer to those problems?

Whither away? In my own theological career—as is no doubt obvious!—I have tried consistently to follow the premise, the strategy, that the way ahead is to preach the gospel that Christ is the end of the law to faith. What is to be done if such faith falters? Play it again, Sam! Only a little louder. The move that appears to

me the right one is never, never to fall back first on the law, but to become more radical about the gospel. Spread it on a little thicker and wait! (There are always those who want to clean up after me.) Here, I think, I rest my case largely on what I find in Luther himself. Luther's hermeneutics and, in terms of the question we are pursuing, Luther's response to the "antinomians" was very subtle:

1. Antinomianism is impossible in this age. (The only heresy that can't actually be done!) Law is not only a set of propositions, a thing; law is a power that haunts us as long as sin and death hang over us. To be sure, Christ is the end of the law—to faith. All Pauline Christians/Lutherans ought to be antinomians. But not yet!
2. The gospel alone, Christ alone, as crucified and the risen one is the end, the goal, the telos and finis of the law. It is the preaching of the gospel as the end that finally puts the "finishing touch" on the law. That is to say, there is a bite, so to speak, in the preaching of the gospel. The law just tries to gum you to death; the gospel has the teeth to do the final deed. For the old Adam/Eve can't be frightened into faith just to save his/her skin—but must be put to death, finally, graciously (coup de grace!) put out of misery. Faith is a death to the old, and the hope of the new.

So the antinomians were partly wrong, partly right.

It is, it seems to me, precisely this that we need to think about in preaching the gospel. It is neither possible nor profitable nor theologically proper to fall back on the attempt to scare old beings into being Christian. But we might get farther if we concentrate on a gospel which has teeth.

The law, I think, might be said to be the cutting edge of the gospel. The words of the gospel itself function in the first instance as law. They do the final work of the law. The ultimate attack on us is not the laws, the demands, but the unconditional gift. Jesus was not crucified because he spoke the law, but because he spoke and embodied the gospel.

So when I preach, I usually look for the bite, the way the gospel impinges on the hearers, the hard saying, the controversial word, the unsettling word and use it, first as the attack and then turn it around—because it is finally the good news. I was trying to do something like that in the little sermon last evening. The nastiest word: am I not allowed to do what I choose . . . ? What an offense to those poor laborers? Not "relevant?" Not out to be relevant to old beings, but to put an end to their desperate story in a double sense: to end it and do so by giving it an end.

So to bring this to a close, I am convinced that as preachers today—even if faith is on the wane—we will gain nothing by all the attempts to shore up a sagging enterprise or exercise by various applications of law, institutional, moral, or otherwise. We have to go with *the gospel.* However, we should consider a proclamation of the gospel that actually out does the law—a gospel with a cutting edge that doesn't coddle old beings, but goes on the attack to end them, and has the aim of making new beings.

And to return at last to the question of freedom. I expect the difficulty in the American view of freedom is that it can be a dangerous thing to set old beings free. When religious restraint fails, when even the law has problems coping—where are we to turn? The role of the Lutheran church in this venture has certainly not been very prominent to date. But it would seem to me that if somehow the original restraint could be replaced or at least augmented by the spontaneity that Luther envisaged, American freedom would also stand on firmer ground. If American freedom has turned out to be bondage then what is needed is liberation at the deepest level. And that is what the gospel is for.

[This lecture was the second of two given by Forde to a group of pastors in the autumn of 1992, as saved by Pastor Peter Gundersen who has shared them with Lutheran Quarterly. *The handwritten marginalia have been incorporated into the text during the normal course of copy-editing. The companion lecture is available on our website, lutheranquarterly.com, along with an invitation to conversation about Forde's remarks.]*

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