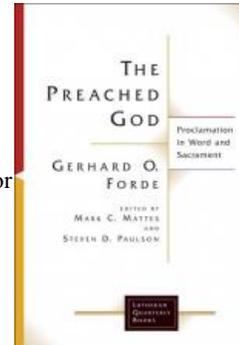


Ex Libris — The Preached God

Tuesday, September 18, 2007

The editors of *The Preached God* describe Gerhard O. Forde as “one of a small number of American Lutheran theologians who have made an indelible mark in theology in the United States and internationally.”

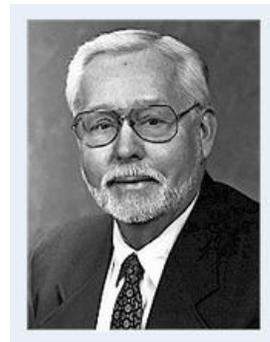
Edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson, *The Preached God* (Eerdmans) is a collection of essays by Professor Forde, who taught at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota for many years before his death in 2005. The book will mainly interest Lutheran theologians, of course, but the book is also a feast of theological substance. This Baptist enjoyed watching a robustly Lutheran mind at work. I especially appreciated Professor Forde’s courage on the issue of Scripture and human sexuality.



Consider these two paragraphs:

Finally, if Scripture exegetes us rather than vice versa, we will likely ask a somewhat different set of questions in these matters. What is it that we are up to here? Why this incessant knocking on the door of the church for approval or blessing? Can even church pronouncements help us? A task force is not the end of the law! Why are we constantly looking for loopholes in Paul’s argument? Paul’s point in Romans 1-3 surely is exactly that there is no way out. Shall we come away from this exercise with the hollow consolation that this text holds only for some long forgotten Romans, perhaps, who knew no better than to worship snakes and birds? Can we really rest comfortably with the claim that Paul did not even consider or know of the possibility of loving and committed relationships between persons of the same sex? Could one really expect Scripture to support the idea that loving and committed relationships justify just about any sort of sexual activity? Or is it possible that had Paul known that sexual preference is an orientation rather than a conscious choice he would not have said the things he did? From the biblical perspective, and certainly from Paul’s, this would seem hardly persuasive. Sin in the biblical view is never simply a willful act. The tradition has always held that sin was “original,” some would even say “inherited,” and not at its root just the result of a conscious and deliberate act of will. But that does not make it any less a sin. It only makes it more tragic.

No, I fear Paul’s point is that there are no loopholes, there is no way out but the one God has set: “Jesus Christ my sure defense,” as the hymn writer put it. Jesus Christ alone is the end of the law, and the law will sound until we arrive here at last. We would be less than sympathetic if we did not direct our hearers to that end. For when it comes down to it, if we are to honor Scripture all we have to offer finally is not loopholes but absolution. If that is not the end of our conversation, I fear it has no end at all.



This is powerful stuff. Indeed, it is prophetic in its courage and candor. Professor Forde knows that the Apostle Paul leaves us no loopholes in Romans 1. Those who look for loopholes deny the obvious.

He also affirms that sin is never “simply a willful act.” Sin is an act of the will, of course, but can any of us fully understand our own will? Why are we tempted to this sin and not some other sin? This deeper and more complex understanding of sin, Professor Forde insisted, does not make sin any less sinful. To the contrary, “It only makes it more tragic.”

In the end, we have no loopholes to offer — only forgiveness in Christ. As Professor Forde understood, if this does not end the conversation, “I fear it has no end at all.”

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