

A Lutheran “Op-ed” for Bible Reading in the ELCA, Part III

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh #545 is Part III of a four-part presentation of Werner Elert’s theses on Lutheran hermeneutics for reading the Bible. It is offered as an op-ed alternative to “Opening the Book of Faith” recently published to encourage Bible reading and study in the ELCA. These theses come from Elert’s lectures on “The Christian Faith” (aka dogmatics) at Erlangen University in Germany back in 1953. They are my English translation of what Elert called “Feste Sätze” (solid sentences) with some addenda from me. Previous postings ThTh 543 and 544 gave you sections #11 through #15 from the outline below. Today’s installment is #16. Next week’s post (American Thanksgiving Day) will, God willing—finally!—bring the conclusion: “#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15 Feste Sätze)”.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Overall Outline

Chapter 2: THE WHAT AND HOW OF GOD’S REVELATION

#11 The Gospel (7 “Feste Sätze”)

#12 Faith (4)

#13 The Fateful Reality of God’s Law (4)

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

#15 Faith’s Knowledge of God and “Natural” Knowledge of God (3)

#16 God’s Way of Revealing Sinners (7)

#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15)

#16 God's Way of Revealing Sinners

1. God's law is God's judicial action, a courtroom-style judgment coming from a judge. God's law reveals the truth about us as God passes judgment on us. [Elsewhere in his writings (e.g., in Elert's book on ethics) he examines the term "law" as used throughout the Bible. He concludes that "law" in the Bible is more than legislation, much more than God's commands and prohibitions. Although it is that too—"thou shalt and thou shalt not." But it is larger than the ten commandments. "Law" constitutes a three-fold web that permeates all creation after the Fall. And that is the only creation we know, since we have no access to "what it was really like" back there in Eden before our primal parents' catastrophic attempt to "be like God." In the now-fallen world, the world of our daily life, God's law constitutes a three-fold revelation. It reveals three distinct "law-links" between God and humankind. These three enwrap our lives, entangling us as in a spider's web.

In the law's first "web" God is creator and "manager," giving us our existence, placing each of us in a specific context of space and time with manifold relationships—to people, places and things. None of these did we choose; they are simply the "givens" of our personal existence. From that specific location in creation our individual lives unfold as God "manages" our personal history within his governance of world history. What gets revealed in the first web is that God is the creator/manager of our life and that we are "webbed" to God as our creator/manager whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. We are entangled in this web by the mere fact that we exist at all somewhere in God's creation.

In the law's second "web" God is legislator, giving us

orders, commandments, for how to live as his human being, as his “image,” in this specific location amid all these relationships. The second “web” reveals that God has expectations, aka commandments, for how we are to “image” our creator in the many relationships where he has placed us; what gets revealed about us is that we are under obligation to fulfill these expectations, to “obey” these commandments. Luther’s Small Catechism puts it this way at the end of his explanation of the creation-article in the Apostles Creed: “For all of this—[these gifts from God my creator]—I am obligated to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him.” Law as God’s legislation reveals a vast “web” of obligations, of tasks and assignments, within the first web mentioned above. It is a web of “oughts.” Its drumbeat: “thou shalt; thou shalt not.”

The law’s third “web” is the one mentioned in the “Fester Satz” above: God, the judge on the bench of world history (our personal history too) evaluates us individually for how well we do as his “image.” This third web puts us in the divine courtroom and we are on trial, in the dock. God the law-giver now becomes God the evaluator—and finally God the judge, who passes sentence on us for how well we have done in this complex network of many webs that makes up our personal histories. It reveals that we are overwhelmed by the web of obligations. This third web goes beyond the first two. It entangles us in a web of evaluation that reveals the value, the worth, of our lives. Simply stated: are we good or not good? Right or not right? In the law’s third web that question gets answered.]

2. In God’s judicial action a verdict, a sentence, is passed on our entire lives, on everything we think or understand about ourselves. God’s verdict in web number three is

total.

3. Before human beings learn of God's law revealing this three-fold webbing, they encounter the reality often called fate, destiny, my "lot" in life. The word fate comes from Latin "fatum," literally "what has been spoken," in this case, spoken by someone else but now applied to me. Things don't always go the way we wish they would. We become aware of someone/something "out there in the world" over which we have no control, but which seems to have control over us. A relentless "pressure"—some days more, some days less—lets us know "You are NOT the master of your fate, NOT the captain of your soul." We resist that pressure, of course, but it doesn't go away. To that planet-wide experience comes now the revelation of God's law. Re-velation = taking the veil off. God's law reveals that what we are bumping up against here is God our creator's power and pressure, not some "veiled" mysterious "fate," as the ancient Greeks and Romans thought, nor the anonymous "karma" of Eastern religions. God's law takes the veil off. It reveals our human self-assertion against that power and pressure, our resistance and protest against it, to be in rebellion against God.
4. Through the law, not only individual sins are uncovered, but the entire human self is exposed as a person living in hostility against God (Rom. 8:7). The Biblical concept of "sin" is not individual acts of commandment-breaking. Sin is a value-word—yes, a negative value-word—about our whole person. When the word "sinner" is the truth about me, all of me, not just some part, is hostile to this pressuring God. Sin is the "shape" of my person. That comes first. Sinful acts, breaking commandments, come as a consequence. The shape of the person determines the shape of that person's actions.
5. By not leaving any area of our life immune from its

accusation—neither some segment of our biography when we were supposedly “innocent,” nor some segment of our self right now that is not hostile—the law pushes us to the conclusion that our sinfulness has been with us from the very beginning of our physical origin. That is what the term “original sin” means: humans “by nature” living in congenital opposition to God right from the start.

6. Sin then entails guilt inasmuch as it is personally charged to our account. One element of human uniqueness among all of God’s other creatures is that human creatures are accountable to God. They get personally evaluated. God checks on them, examines them, when God moves through his creation-garden (Gen. 3) with the penetrating exam-question “Where are you?” That is not a question about geography, but about obligations and responsibilities: where are you on that list of obligations I gave you? Beginning with commandment #1 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind—all the time!” The term “guilt” carries the negative verdict of failure to carry out obligations and responsibilities. Failure is a fact. The word “guilt” adds another quality to the fact. “Guilt” says: you are in trouble because of this failure. Your “person” now carries a negative value, negative worth, because of this failure. The guilt element in sin arises from God being the examiner in the evaluation web. God is the one speaking the verdict about my negative value, the negative quality of my sinner-self, not just some human being whom I’ve failed. Though it regularly is fellow humans functioning as God’s agents who communicate the divine verdict to me.
7. Guilt is inescapable. That is revealed by the way the law makes no exceptions as it carries out its death threat—“the soul that sinneth, it shall die”—on every human being. But that then reveals God to be a god who

kills his own creatures. That is a terrifying revelation—both about God and about us. Luther's label for such a terrifying encounter with God (drawn from the Old Testament, Isaiah 45:15) is [Latin] "deus absconditus." Translated, that is "God hidden," terrifyingly hidden. No wonder Adam and Eve ran to hide from such a God. But where to go? There is no place where God's three webs don't entangle us. Everywhere sinners turn to escape Deus Absconditus they run into a sign: No Exit. Which ups the ante about God's self-revelation in law to fearful dimensions and prompts sinners, who have just been exposed by this law-revelation, to cry out: Is there any OTHER revelation of God, one which might rescue us from this revelation of deus absconditus? The good news is: There is indeed another revelation from the same God. It is THE Good News, aka God's Gospel. That was the other revelation we started with above in Section #11.

[Next time: 17th and final section—What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15 Feste Sätze)]