

An “Op-ed” for Bible Reading in the ELCA, Part II

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh #544 is a continuation of an op-ed alternative to “Opening the Book of Faith” recently published to encourage Bible reading and study in the ELCA.

A number of you said “more” when I asked last week if I should continue passing on to you Werner Elert’s “Feste Sätze” [thesis sentences] about the Bible. These theses came from his lectures on “The Christian Faith” (aka dogmatics) at Erlangen University in Germany back in 1953. So here are some more. Remember, they are my English translation of Elert’s German with some addenda from me. Last week’s ThTh post gave you #11 from the outline below. Today’s post starts with #12.

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)

#12 Faith (4)

1. What is faith? It is the willingness of those who hear the Gospel to acknowledge that its substantive content is meant for them and then to appropriate for themselves—to trust—what it says about them. Faith is saying yes to the indicative-sentence element in the Gospel. E.g., Saying yes to “God was in Christ reconciling YOU to himself.” In one of Luther’s metaphors for faith: it is “to hang your heart” on the Good News that you have heard. That is the indicative-sentence element of the Gospel.
2. Now comes the imperative-element of the Gospel. The willingness to say yes to the Gospel’s imperative brings with it obedience. In this sense faith is obedient submission—however, not obedience to a command, but to a promise, to an “entreaty, a beseeching.” [Greek term is “paraklesis” as mentioned in #11:5 above with reference to 2 Cor. 5: “We beseech you, be reconciled to God.”] That sort of obedience shows that the Gospel has hit home in the hearer.
3. The validity, the effective power, of the Gospel for those who trust it is grounded in the heart and center of that Gospel, Christ, the incarnate Word of God. It is not “strong” faith on the part of the believer that makes faith powerful. Christ at the center of the Gospel is the power source. Gospel-believers plug into that power center. That’s why the Augsburg Confessors were so insistent on “sola fide” (faith alone, or possibly better rendered into English, “only faith”). For it is ONLY by faith, by trusting that power center—nothing else—that humans have access to that power center. This is the heart of Luther’s classic proverb: “Glaubstu, hastu. Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.” “When you believe, you have it. When you don’t believe, you don’t have it.” [Faith is a

“having.” St. John’s Gospel often renders it that way. E.g., the very last verse in his Easter chapter 20. “These [signs] are written so that you may BELIEVE that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that BELIEVING you might HAVE life in his name.”]

4. The criticism that all this is an illusion (for example, coming from Feuerbach) arises from observers who persist in standing outside as mere spectators. By contrast believers see themselves called out from being mere spectators. They lose their spectator position, giving up their self-lordship [“I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”] and handing themselves over—without reservation—to their new Lord. [Remember “Lord” means “owner” in biblical vocabulary—who you belong to, “whose” you are.]

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

1. The Gospel promises, and faith really is, a genuine change of existence. Before faith changes our existence, that prior existence – according to the testimony of the apostles– is “life under the law.” When the apostles use that phrase they interpret it to mean that, apart from Christ, we are ruled by the law, imprisoned by it, enslaved by it.
2. The law carries out God’s curse and wrath. In Bob Bertram’s posthumous book published earlier this year, I learned (for the first time) that Bob often talked about God’s wrath as “Sinners infuriate God.” God’s wrath is not God’s blind rage, but mega-vexation. And “curse” too is not “Burn, baby, burn in hell.” It is the opposite of “Blessing.” Both blessing and curse are statements about now—with consequences for eternity. One rendering of the Beatitudes [Matt. 5] translates the “blessed” term in each verse this way: “You are in the right place when you are

poor in spirit You are in the right place when you are meek . . . when you hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . when you are merciful . . . pure in heart . . . peacemakers . . . ” And the backup for saying that all of these are “right places” is the consequences: “When you are in this ‘right place,’ yours is the kingdom of heaven . . . you shall be comforted . . . you will inherit . . . will be filled . . . will receive mercy . . . will see God . . . will be called children of God.” The opposite “place,” the “wrong place,” is the curse-place. “You are in the wrong place when you are not poor in spirit . . . not mourning . . . not meek . . . not hungering and thirsting for righteousness . . . not merciful . . . etc.” For then none of the blessings of being in the right place come your way. “Curse” is to be missing out—possibly to be doomed to miss out forever—on all those benefits.

It is clear in Matthew’s presentation of those beatitudes—as he says at the end of chapter six—that they are predicated to those who have come in under Christ’s lordship, God’s new kingdom, the new existence mercy-regime. Christ’s kingdom, Christ’s regime brings a “rightness” that puts sinners in the “right place” with God. And from that primal “right place” all the other right places flow.

3. But not so—not yet so—for “life under the law.” That law rules human existence. It is effectively in force everywhere that Christ’s new regime is not operational. It is in charge even if it has never been spoken or written to those under its regime. God’s law is in force because God imposes it on all creation. It is not moral prescriptions. It is the reality of the givens of human existence—call it fate—the reality confronting all

humankind in a fallen world.

4. It applies to all humankind without exception. It is effectively in force—as Paul says explicitly—everywhere, even where it is unknown as God’s written law. In the opening chapters of Romans Paul makes his case that God’s law is operating full force among the Gentiles even though they never heard of Moses or Sinai in their lives. He does not say that they somehow have the ten commandments working in their societies, that these “thou shalt’s” and “thou shalt not’s” are written in their hearts. Instead he shows that what the law does when it goes to work is indeed working among the folks who never heard of Israel’s God or his commandments. He uses a Greek word usually translated into English as conscience. He doesn’t try to show what commandments might be “in” the Gentile conscience, but instead he shows how conscience works—in everybody. It functions as a judge of behavior—this was OK, this was not OK. In Paul’s words, Gentiles too have an internal evaluator at work that “accuses and excuses.” Some sense of right and wrong—even if it is not what Sinai says is right and wrong—works within them and makes its evaluations of what they do. “Though not having THE LAW, [they] are a law unto themselves.” “What law requires – namely, good behavior by whatever yardstick of measurement—is written on their hearts. And when their consciences go to work, it verifies that that yardstick is present within them. And you see it surface as they engage in accusing or excusing themselves or one another.” So God’s law—especially law as some courtroom judge somewhere giving critical evaluation, “accusing” as Paul says, (and even sentencing the guilty)—is at work throughout creation even when people don’t recognize it. Elert calls it “Verhängnis,” a fate that “hangs” over human existence after the Fall. We are “stuck” with it—unless or until

some Word of God comes along to grant us a new existence. If/when such a new existence did come along, its first trademark would be existence “free from the law.”

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

1. Gospel and law cannot be coordinated as two different phases of a historical sequence—law in olden days of the OT, Gospel since the time of Christ. Nor are they two messages that mutually supplement each other. Even though the concept “revelation” is used for both in the Bible, that dare not be understood to mean that finally they are basically the same thing, and not contradictory in what each one says and does.[Here in section #14 Elert is making his case against the opposite proposal made by Karl Barth that there is really only one message in God’s revelation. That both God’s law and God’s gospel present God’s grace offered to sinners. That though there is difference, both are “in synch” with each other. They are not contradictory at all. Barth admits that Luther claimed what Elert says, but that here Luther was mistaken. Barth’s theology was widely accepted in Europe and in North America. And still today—also among Lutherans—it has loyal followers. The ELCA text Opening the Book of Faith is solidly in Barth’s corner with its frequently repeated thesis, beginning with this on p. 2: “The Bible . . . communicates the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Grace comes to us as law and gospel, demand and promise.”]
2. God’s law, the fate we are stuck with, and the Gospel offered to us correspond to the NT testimony about a two-fold revelation, and in each of these two revelations two things are revealed. In the revelation of the law God’s wrath and human sinfulness come to light. When the Gospel is revealed, God’s grace comes to light and also the reality of faith in people trusting that grace. Paul

speaks of these two revelations and the double-exposure coming from each one in no uncertain terms in Romans 1:16-18.

3. Both revelations—law and gospel—stand in a “dialectical” relationship with each other. They say opposite things about the same subjects. They are like a speech and a rebuttal which contradict each other, and yet both without a doubt are valid. What one reveals the other covers up; when one lights up, the other is darkened.
4. The paradox of this dialectical conflict finally ends in Christ, and finds its resolution in him alone. He alone could make people hear the voice of the law AND also silence it. He was the victim of the law’s order of mortality [“the wages of sin is death”] and simultaneously its conqueror. He alone could make God’s grace accessible for sinners and at the same time close off God’s wrath.
5. The paradox is resolved only for the believer, the one who has been struck by the Gospel because he previously was struck by the law.

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

1. The way we know God through this faith linked to God’s revelation in Christ is not to be confused with mere intellectual apprehension. Faith’s knowledge of God entails personal involvement and commitment. This amounts to a believer’s prior awareness that he has been “known” and that he is the one Christ is addressing with his Gospel call.
2. So-called “natural” knowledge of God is not to be denied, as Paul tells us in Rom. 1:19 that the Gentiles, having no contact whatsoever with God’s action among the chosen people, nevertheless “knew about God, because God had shown himself to them, ever since the creation of the earth.” Such natural knowledge is grounded in the fact

that God actually does encounter us in every earthly event. Denial of such a God-encounter in every earthly event is atheism.

3. Corresponding to such natural knowledge of God is what Paul talks about in Romans 1:18, the revelation of the wrath of God, the law's order of mortality, that sinners not only DO die, but that they MUST die. Such natural knowledge of God needs to be overcome by faith in the revelation of God's grace that comes in Christ. Christ is not an add-on to what we know about God from daily experience. That knowledge is law-knowledge, finally, the "law of sin and death." What faith "knows" about God in Christ is rescue, liberation, from law, from sin, from death.

Next time

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

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

P.S. The Crossings board of directors is at work to see if it can publish in some form—hard copy or cybercopy—some or all of Elert's book of dogmatics, *The Christian Faith*. An English translation exists of the whole book—all 664 pages, done years ago by Bob Bertram's father Martin, but it was never published.