

# Calvin/Luther conference at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota)

Colleagues,

Funny thing happened at the very end of the Luther-and-Calvin conference at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, earlier this month. [If you want to see the full program, google Calvin Studies Society, and click on "colloquium." Also to find out who the scholar is mentioned in the next sentence.]

In the final session the speaker (the final one, number twelve) spoke early on about Werner Elert, whose name had never been mentioned before in the three-day event. It was Elert's monograph on Law and Gospel (English translation by yours truly and published way back in 1967). So both of my ears twitched to hear his name mentioned as well as my translation. Significance of these 43 pages according to the speaker? a) Elert gave Luther's genuine Law/Gospel theology a twist toward antinomianism, and b) that little booklet has had widespread influence in the USA Lutheranism.

I did groan, but when the presentation ended, I didn't rise to object to both claims. It was the end of the conference that had been full of heady stuff. Everybody was tired. And the Elert issue was more an "aside" in this final presentation as the speaker then got to the heavy stuff of her lecture entitled "The Game: Luther vs. Calvin."

I had spoken once or twice from the gallery (maybe more!) during the three days. E.g., during the discussion of Luther and Calvin on prayer that came with one presentation, I suggested that

Calvin commends Christians to pray in confidence of God's providence, while for Luther it is confidence in God's promise. The latter being fundamentally Christocentric, the former only incidentally so.

I also was twitched into saying something after the umpteenth recitation of the old saw: "Of course, Luther was no systematician." So I trotted out my own aged saw of a wooden wagon wheel, which many of you have seen/heard before: In Luther's theology the "system" is such a wagon wheel. [Definition of system: Multiple differentiated parts configured into a whole that functions as a unit.] The hub is the promising Gospel. All the theological "parts" are the wheel's spokes anchored into the hub. The distinction between law and gospel is the rim that holds the doctrinal spokes fastened to the hub. Working with farm wagons in my early years—even learning how to grease the axle without taking the wheel off—all of this I "told 'em" at the close of my intervention. I got no objections that such a wheel is a system, and even a few nods that maybe ML did have such a system.

After getting home I just had to say something about the Elert reference, so I posted this email to the speaker.

---

*Dear Colleague, Your detailed analysis of the Barmen Declaration and its consequences was fascinating for me. Especially when you mentioned (early on) my teacher Werner Elert. I heard him "live" back in the early 1950s when I was Austauschstudent in Erlangen.*

*But I did twitch more than once when you evaluated Elert's monograph Gesetz und Evangelium. I did the E.T. on that one "anstandshalber" for my teacher. If I heard you aright—for we had no printed texts before us—you told us two things: a) Elert*

*gave Luther's genuine Law/Gospel theology a twist toward antinomianism, and b) Elert's antinomianism has had widespread influence in American Lutheranism.*

*Both claims are untrue. Cannot be documented.*

*Take the second one first. I'll wager my entire Missouri Synod pension (100 dollars a month) that less than one out of ten clergy in US Lutheranism has even heard the name. And that less than 1% has ever read that modest monograph (or anything of Elert)– let alone agreed with him. So where's the documentation for his influence in US Lutheranism?*

*And for the first one, one-third of Elert's Ethics textbook (Erster Teil) is "Ethos unter dem Gesetz." And when you get to "Ethos unter der Gnade" (the next third), the only aspect of "Gesetz" that Christians are free from is the *lex semper accusat*. If that is anti-nomian, then so is the entire New Testament.*

*Elert an Antinomian?*

*"Gegen" Gottes Gesetz?*

*Bitte schön!*

*I heard his lectures live.*

*Elert is "anti-" the antinomians.*

*Where/what are the warrants for those two claims? Elert anti-nomian. Widespread influence in USA Lutheranism.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ed Schroeder*

---

I received a friendly response, thanking me for the correction. But then came this line:

*"Although I think his ideas about law and gospel are too much influenced by neo-Kantianism, I really appreciate his careful historical work in Morphologie des Luthertums."*

That "neo-Kantian" comment also made me twitch, even though the appreciation of Elert's magnum opus the "Morphologie" was cheering. But not enough. Elert was a critic of the neo-Kantian way of reading Luther. In my dissertation (50 yrs ago) I sought to show that in Elert's major works he disagrees with the neo-Kantians in their Luther-research, and offers his own "au contraire."

But that's an egghead's debate, not exactly stuff for ThTh.

Now that I think about the conference again, I wish the last lecture had been the first. For that might have put law-and-gospel at center stage and led to discussion of the same-or-different between Calvin and Luther on the topic. It was a gathering of historians, and so the conversation centered on "look what Calvin or Luther said about this topic, and here's how/why they came to those conclusions." Seldom did the discussion move to ask: "If there is difference (or a congruence), what's the significance of that difference (or congruence)?"

For that is the question raised in Elert's 43-page booklet on Law and Gospel. Elert is arguing with the super-Calvinist of the 20th century, Karl Barth, and spells out the difference between Calvin and Luther on the L/G issue. Barth had goaded the Lutherans with an essay titled "Gospel and Law," claiming that the Lutherans (Luther too) had gotten the sequence wrong. All God's speaking to humankind is grace, fundamentally Good News, he claimed. Its grand finale, of course, is Christ. And after that came God's commandments—also graciously revealed—on how now to live that Gospel-grounded new life. So the sequence is gospel

and law. Luther had it wrong.

Elert's L&G essay takes Barth on, not so much for the sequence, but for the "equal grace" Barth claims in both law and Gospel. And Calvin and Luther are always backstage, says Elert, for his debate with Barth.

Here are two paragraphs.

*Barth had already presented his view of the issue in his 1935 monograph, "Gospel and Law." He states that law and gospel stand in a dialectical relationship. Absolutely correct. But the question remains what one means by dialectic. If one means thereby a dialectic of the substance, this would imply what we said at the outset, that when the one speaks the other is reduced to silence, and vice versa. Law and gospel speak contradictory lines and therefore can never talk in unison. According to Barth, however, law and gospel merely designate one and the same act of God, the content of which is always the same, although it is manifested in God's twofold manner of speaking. When God speaks in the law, it is simultaneously a promise, therefore also gospel. When God speaks in the gospel, on the other hand, he simultaneously expresses his demanding will, and therefore it is law. "The Law is nothing else than the necessary form of the Gospel, whose content is grace." The explanation for this reduction of the substantive dialectic of law and gospel to the verbal dialectic of form and content lies in Barth's statement: "The very fact that God speaks to us, that, under all circumstances, is, in itself, grace." The idea that God speaks only grace to man is a fundamental error. What God said to men at the beginning of world history as he expelled them from the garden of their origin was not grace in the mind of the Old Testament narrator, but punishment! The statement of the decalogue about God visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children has the same significance. "God*

*threatens to punish" is the way Luther interprets this, and without a doubt he is correct. The threats of the law CAN fulfill a pedagogical purpose and thereby stand in the service of God's grace, but they do not have to do so. And where they do not fulfill this purpose, they cannot be understood as grace. No exegesis can twist Isaiah's words about Assyria, Moab, and Egypt into declarations of grace for the victims. Or should the infants of Babylon destined to be dashed against the stones, and the women who were to be outraged, understand this somehow as the grace of God? With the statement that God speaks only grace, the divine law is rendered impotent.*

That's a tidbit.

Deo volente, there'll be more of this in posts to come. Here's the reason why: It is not a tempest in a teapot, just theologians with nothing better to do. It is the elephant in the living room of many conflicts in church life and scholarly theology today. It always has been, as signaled by Elert's opening words in this Law/Gospel essay.

"For Paul the apostle a great deal was at stake, to say the least, in the proper distinction between law and gospel; for Luther, ultimately everything. For Paul, as well as for Luther, the very substance of law and gospel stand in dialectical opposition to each other. When the law speaks, the gospel is silent. When the gospel speaks, the law must hold its peace."

FYI, here are the section headings in Elert's booklet::

1. Need for a Clear Differentiation
2. "The Law Always Accuses"
3. Law as Security
4. Christ and the Gospel
5. The Meaning of Christ's Death

6. Life in Freedom
7. Is the Law Still Valid for Christians?
8. The Question of the Law's "Third Function."
9. A Critique of Calvin.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Just remembered this. Ed Krentz recently told me this, which I didn't know:

*The notion of the law serving three functions – curb, mirror, and rule – comes out of Judaism (see Josephus, Against Apion).*