God Hidden/God Revealed; according to Werner Elert, via Matthew Becker (Part 1 of 2)

Colleagues,

Dr. Matthew Becker of Valparaiso University was one of three core presenters at our Crossings conference last January. The theme, arising from Romans 1:16-17, was "The Power of the Gospel for Times Like These." To further focus our thinking, we prepended that title with "Up Weak Knees," a line borrowed from the English translation of a 17th century Bohemian hymn that became an anthem of sorts for students at the late, great Seminex. We asked Matt, a systematic theologian by profession, to help us hear how Werner Elert and Robert Bertram might approach the topic. To the extent one can speak of a distinct "Seminex theology" now channeled through Crossings, Elert and Bertram were the two thinkers who, more than any other, gave shape to it. I say this as one so shaped, in ways that Matt would elucidate in the course of two successive papers. For example, without his help I would not be able of a sudden to identify myself as a fierce proponent of *Erfahrungstheologie.* Tongue in cheek: I need to figure out a way to get that on a business card. As to what it means, see below.

What you'll find below is the first half of Matt's presentation on Elert, the second half to follow in seven days. After that we'll send along his Bertram paper, again in two parts. My apology in advance both to Matt and to you for the arbitrary breaks in the flow of his prose. I continue to aim for about 2000 words as sufficient for a single post in this Thursday Theology format. Those who yearn for prose unbroken will find

the papers fairly soon on the Crossings website.

As for now, *gesegnete Mahlzeit.* "God bless the eating," to paraphrase inexactly. Or as I used to say to the kids when forks were poised for Thanksgiving dinner, "Chew slowly. Savor as you go."

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

From Faith to Faith: Knee Bracing for Troubled Times

Deus Absconditus* and *Deus Revelatus

according to Werner Elert and Robert Bertram

(Part 1.1: Elert)

by Matthew L. Becker

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When Jerry Burce gave me this assignment, the image that came to mind was that of a knee brace. Wobbly knees can often benefit from such bracing. That is one of the points of historical theology, it seems to me. The insights and ideas from theologians who went through periods that echo or parallel our own might assist us, strengthen us, realign us, brace us—especially when our faith and theology have become misaligned, weakened, even a bit wobbly. Of course, the externality of Christ, *Christus extra nos* ("Christ outside of us"), is the ultimate brace for weak and wobbly faith, and yet the living Christ chooses to work through physical means,

including his poor and weak and broken and sinful instruments for “gospeled” teaching and preaching. While there might be other purposes for studying the writings of past theologians, surely one of them is to find theological wisdom, guidance and strength for one’s own time and place. We could label this “faith bracing” or “bracing faith.” Both phrases seem to work here. Think about how a “brace” functions to support a weak or injured knee, but also consider how we can be stimulated or invigorated by a “bracing speech.” Is it not the case that at times, our faith and theology need “steadying”? “Brace yourselves!”

I have been asked to make two presentations today. The first is about an important German-Lutheran theologian, Werner Elert (1885-1954), whose theology has significantly shaped many in the Crossings Community. My second presentation is about an important American-Lutheran theologian, Robert Bertram (1921-2003), who was the co-founder of Crossings and thus another significant “shaper” of many who are here. Elert and Bertram not only set forth a “bracing faith,” one that can invigorate us, but they also provide theological insights that serve as “bracing” for our weak theological understandings. What “bracing” do Elert and Bertram give us? How are their faith and theology “bracing”?

For the past fifteen years, I have been studying Elert’s theology in relation to political and ecclesial events that took place in Germany between the start of WWI and the end of WWII. I regularly teach a course on Christians in Nazi Germany, which allows participants to explore various theologians from that era, including Elert and his colleague, Paul Althaus, but also Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Edmund Schlink. These are theologians who interest me and whose ideas, I think, are still important today. I developed that course in part so that I could try to understand them better. My interest in this period of

church history is not purely academic. I study the past not merely to understand it and how it has shaped the future but also to gain wisdom for actually trying to live faithfully as a Christian in the present. While I do not believe that history repeats itself, I do think it offers up echoes or rhymes (to use the old cliché), and when that happens, attention to past parallels or historical echoes and rhymes might prove instructive.

In this first segment, I have been given thirty-five minutes to talk about Elert's understanding of "divine revelation." This is not possible. So I am only going to focus on one slim aspect of his thinking, namely, his analysis of the distinction between God who is hidden *apart* from Jesus Christ (and who is partially revealed in the law) and God who is revealed and concealed *in* Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. In the second segment, on Bertram's theology, we will examine the same issue, namely, the distinction between *deus absconditus* ("God hidden") and *deus revelatus* ("God revealed").

Let me begin with just a brief word about Elert's life. He was born in 1885 in the small village of Heldrungen in the province of old Saxony. So he was one year older than Karl Barth and a year younger than Rudolf Bultmann. Elert was the youngest child of three, and the only son. His father was a small-town businessman, who moved his family to the village of Lunden in Schleswig-Holstein when Elert was a young boy. The Elert family belonged to "The Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Prussia," the so-called "Old Lutheran" Church, which had been formed by confessional Lutherans who resisted the 1830 decree of King Frederick Wilhelm III. The latter had hoped to unite the Reformed and Lutheran churches into one state Protestant Church in Prussia. The old Lutherans resisted this forced merger with other Prussian Protestants because they were convinced that doctrinal unity did not exist between them and those other

Christians. The old Lutherans, that little confessional church body, was very important to the Elert family, and it deeply shaped young Werner's faith and piety. I should add that Elert's two sisters married Lutheran missionaries, and one of these eventually became an ALC pastor here in Iowa.

Elert's early education did not prepare him for one of Germany's world-class universities. While he did attend two different high schools—one near his home in Lunden and the other on the outskirts of Hamburg—neither of these was the kind that prepared a person for university study. Rather, these schools gave him the type of education that would be basic for a church missionary. That is what he was preparing to become, an overseas missionary for his church. However, for some unknown reason, in 1906 he matriculated at the University of Breslau, where the "old Lutherans" had a small preachers' seminary and their church headquarters. In addition to Breslau, Elert also studied at the universities of Erlangen and Leipzig. He completed both of his doctorates at Erlangen. Each of his dissertations examines theological issues in the philosophy of history.

Elert would address these issues more concretely during his years as a parish pastor in the town of Seefeld (1912-1919) and as a military chaplain in the First World War (1914-1918). He served on both fronts throughout the entire war. Similar to Paul Tillich's experience and that of other German theologians who served in the German army at this time, Elert's war experiences impressed upon him the realities of tragedy in history and of questioning the ways of God in the world. Elert learned first-hand how people could rage against God, against the seeming lack of human and divine justice in the world, against human suffering and evil. Several of Elert's sermons from this period offer a theological understanding of what Luther called our experience of "the hidden God." (By the way, one of Elert's last students, Niels-Peter Moritzen, has edited and published many of

Elert's sermons from this period. I hope to translate these and some additional ones, after I finish editing and translating the collected works of Edmund Schlink.)

After the war, Elert served for a few years as the director of his church body's seminary in Breslau, and then, in 1923, he was called to Erlangen, where he would teach church history, dogmatics, ethics, and the history of doctrine until his retirement in 1953. He died one year later.

Between 1923 and his death in 1954, Elert was a leading theological light at Erlangen, along with Paul Althaus. One could argue that in these years, that university's theology faculty became a principal center of "global Lutheranism." In their respective ways, both Elert and Althaus sought to make the theological work of the classic Lutheran reformers fruitful for all of Christendom.

We will not understand Elert's theology of the hidden God properly unless we appreciate that the theology faculties at Erlangen and Leipzig were thoroughly stamped by a particular form of Lutheran confessional theology. It is usually called "*Erfahrungstheologie*," experiential theology or theology of experience, whose origin can be traced to the nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians at Erlangen, notably Johannes v. Hofmann, Theodosius Harnack, and F. H. R. Frank, but also to Schleiermacher and his focus on the nature of Christian faith as a human experience. We could also describe this as an empirical theology, at least insofar as it begins with an analysis of concrete human experiences. This particular form of confessional Lutheran theology does not begin with Scripture (as in Protestant-Fundamentalist Biblicism) nor with the word of God (as in Barth's theology) nor with the apostolic kerygma (as in Bultmann's theology). Rather, *Erfahrungstheologie* begins with the actual experience of God that people have in the world. This

is a complicated experience, to say the least. According to Elert, God not only speaks with us but actually encounters us in every moment and every place of our lives, again and again. In our experience, God confronts us, calls us to account, addresses us, deals with us, judges us, and God does so in more than one fashion. This encounter with God occurs through suffering and death, our sense of guilt and shame, our experience of alienation, fear, and anxiety, but also through such experiences as joy and gratitude.

Elert's experiential theology thus begins with how God encounters people apart from Christ and the good message about him. This is the encounter with the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God. After analyzing that human experience, Elert then moves to unveil the *deus revelatus*, the revealed God, who is present and visible (and ironically hidden) in the person of Jesus. In Elert's theology the *deus absconditus* is related to a complex set of phenomena, while the *deus revelatus* is actually a three-fold revelation: (1) there is the revelation of God in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Jesus as the "visibility" of God in the world); (2) there is the revelation of the hiddenness of God in Jesus Christ, particularly in his suffering and death on the cross; (3) And there is also the hiddenness of the risen Christ in God. (This latter hiddenness entails yet another one, namely the hiddenness of the believer in the risen Christ, which I will also examine briefly toward the end of my remarks.)

I want mainly to focus on Elert's understanding of the two-fold hiddenness of God—God hidden apart from Christ (a concealment that is partially revealed through the law) *and* God hidden in Jesus Christ (a concealment that is revealed in the gospel). This is a key theme in all of Elert's most important writings. We find it in his 1924 little book, *The Doctrine of Lutheranism in Outline*; in the first volume of the 1931 edition of the

Morphology of Lutheranism; in the first part of his 1940 dogmatics; in the first part of his 1949 ethics; and also in several of his essays, notably his 1945 lecture on "the Philology of Affliction" [*Heimsuchung*], which he wrote not too long after the deaths of his two sons, who died as army officers on the Eastern Front in WWII.[ref]See Werner Elert, *Die Lehre des Luthertums im Abriss*, 2d ed. (München: Beck, 1926; ET: *An Outline of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs [Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1927]; hereafter, the German second edition of this work will be abbreviated as LLA and the American edition as OCD); Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, 2 vols. (München: Beck, 1931-32; ET of vol. 1: *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962]; hereafter, the German edition of this work will be abbreviated as ML and the American edition of vol. 1 as SL); Werner Elert, *Der christliche Glaube*, 5th ed. (Hamburg: Furth, 1960; hereafter, the German edition of this work will be abbreviated as CG); Werner Elert, *Das christliche Ethos*, 2d ed. (Hamburg: Furche, 1961; ET: *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl J. Schindler [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957]; hereafter, the German edition of this work will be abbreviated as CE and the American edition as CEA); and Werner Elert, "Philologie der Heimsuchung," in Werner Elert, *Zwischen Gnade und Ungnade* (München: Evangelischer Presseverband für Bayern, 1948).[/ref]

In his book, *The Doctrine of Lutheranism in Outline* (LLA; OCD), Elert treats the distinction between the hidden God and the revealed God in the first section, which begins with an inductive analysis of human freedom and its limitations, including the human experience of "fate" (*Schicksal*).[ref]Some of the following analysis also appears in my chapter, "Werner Elert (1885-1954)," in *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians*, ed. Mark Mattes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013),

93-135.[/ref] At this time in his thinking, the concept of *Schicksal* served as an important bridge between the cultural situation of post-WWI Germany and his attempt to provide a contemporary articulation of the law and the Christian gospel. He defined *Schicksal* as "the product of all the factors which shape our lives, other than the will to be free" (LLA 4; OCD 20). These factors include where and when we are born, into which family and nation we are born, the conditions of our body/mind, external forces that impact our lives (including the force and consequences of history), the possibility of illness and suffering, the threat of death, etc. I do not know if Elert studied the philosopher Martin Heidegger closely, but the latter's concept of *Schicksal* is similar to the Erlanger's, namely, the notion of "being thrown into existence." These involve matters about which we have no choice (e.g., if I could have picked different parents, I would have, i.e., taller ones!). Elert's analysis of the sovereignty of *Schicksal*, a power that stands over every human life, leads directly to the question of the living God, "that power which places limits upon our will to freedom" (LLA 8; OCD 25). Elert's analysis of human experience stresses the fundamental opposition between God and humanity, which is experienced as an immediate feeling of separation from God, as a limitation to our knowledge, as the moral contrast with God that arises from reflection on our behaviors and accomplishments, a sense of the uncanny, of mystery, of "the *numinous tremendum et fascinans*" (to cite Rudolf Otto's famous phrase). Of course near the heart of our awareness of *Schicksal* is the experience of guilt and shame and the fear of death. (Aside: Elert's theology of *Schicksal* also has points of contact with Schleiermacher before him and with Tillich after him. Tillich's notion of *Angst*, in particular, seems to fit quite nicely with Elert's own understanding. This correlation between Elert and Tillich may be the result of both thinkers being significantly influenced by Spengler's *Decline of*

the West and Otto's *The Holy*.)

While every human being—simply by being a creaturely sinner—undergoes this experience of the hidden God, people do not "see" this experience as necessarily an experience of God. People do not naturally interpret this experience of the hidden God as an experience of God's wrath. On the contrary, they persistently deny it. So one task of the Christian theologian and preacher, therefore, is to reveal the nature of this experience of *Schicksal* as an experience of the hidden God. Human existence is not fully explored theologically until it is exposed as sin, as alienation from God, as opposition to God, as under God's condemnation.

In his large, two-volume history of Lutheran doctrine, the *Morphology of Lutheranism*, Elert calls this specific human experience "*das Urerlebnis*," the original experience or the primal experience. Elert uses this term to refer to Luther's own account of his experience of the hidden God and of God's wrath. While many people become aware of the threat of the hidden God simply by attempting to live their lives to their own highest standards (and those of others)—and failing in the process—others try to flee this problem and attempt to save themselves by their own actions or by losing themselves in activities that take their minds off these threats and problems. Yet the harder people try to save themselves by their own actions or by losing themselves in mindless behaviors or some other diversions, the more they attempt to justify their existence on their own terms—apart from God. Even on this mundane level, however, people cannot escape the experience of the hidden God, they cannot escape the fact that even the most vital aspects of their lives can be wracked with guilt and condemnation, nor can they escape the elements beyond their life that mysteriously and contingently impinge on their life. The hidden God is wrapped up with the threat of "fate" that hangs

over every life.

—to be continued.