

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

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of Matthew Becker's paper on Werner Elert that some of us heard at the Crossings conference in January. It calls for the closest reading you can give it; and if, like me, you keep a stash of essential "must-keep" theological essays for future reference and sharing, you'll want to add this to that folder. Matt will use scarcely 2000 words to trot us via Elert through a summation of Lutheran theology at its best and most profound—anchored in Christ, descriptive of our daily experience in a world filled with rumors of God, and accounting for the fullness of the prophetic and apostolic testimony to this rumored God including those parts of it we don't like and that many choose these days to ignore or deny. Here too is the rationale for the constant attention we pay in Crossings to "the God problem," to God's own resolution of that problem in Christ, to the constant evoking of faith in that resolution, and to the goals such faith keeps driving us to embrace.

In brief, here is a basic toolkit for useful preaching and, better still, for clear-eyed living that celebrates God's gift in Christ and puts it to work. "Stick with me," says Jesus this Sunday. This will help.

About Matt, congratulations are suddenly in order along with our thanks. On April 20 the Associated Church Press handed him its annual "Best of the Church Press" award in the category of theological or scholarly article. This was for an essay in last

year's Easter issue of [*The Cresset*](#) entitled "[Christ in the University: Edmund Schlink's Vision](#)." Those who read will be very glad for the time they spent doing it. Schlink is at the center of Matt's scholarly work these days. He's in the thick of translating a recent five-volume German edition of Schlink's ecumenical and confessional writings. [The first volume](#) of Matt's English version was published at the end of 2016.

And yes, it's still Easter. Christ is risen indeed. With that above all in mind—

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 1.2: Elert)

by Matthew L. Becker

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Continued from last week—

The fact that God is "hidden" does not mean that we know nothing at all about God. According to Elert, two things we know too well: that God commands "Thou shalt" and that God allows us to be born in a condition which makes the fulfillment of this "Thou

shalt" impossible for us. "The sense and the purpose of this contradiction are hidden from us" (ML 1.31; SL 35). God is hidden from us because God has other thoughts about us than these. We are unable to reason our way out of this theological ignorance and uncertainty. It is thus not surprising that the *Urerlebnis* produces unbelief. So it is not only God who is hidden, but in a very basic way we humans are hidden, too. We need to be unveiled for who we truly are *coram deo* ("in the presence of God").

Elert appeals to Luther's two-fold understanding of the law to clarify this human situation apart from Christ. Through the law, God aims to preserve and protect the world. God does this in many ways, but they are all tied up with what Luther called "natural law," which is normatively and ultimately coercively operative through social orderings and cultural laws/norms in the world. This aspect of the law we experience daily in various ways. Elert expands Luther's understanding of this first use of the law to include a fuller analysis of how the hidden God works through nature, natural law (as it is summarized in the Ten Commandments and other legal codes), "fate," and death. Elert's analysis sets the stage for his exploration of Luther's second use of the law. Here the law functions to *unveil sinners* for what they truly are, namely, egocentric enemies of God. God's imperative "Thou shalt not" is not merely applicable to the actions of human beings nor is it tied merely to Scriptural commands; rather, God's imperative hangs as a threat over the entirety of a human's life and calls that life into question. This divine reckoning has its exacting fulfillment in the death of each human. Death is the enemy of life and of the human person. It serves as the final verdict above every human life. It is also that which creates *Angst* and dread/horror [*Grauen*] in the human life, an *Angst* that itself leads to further egocentric, sinful actions. (When I consider Elert's discussion of

Grauen, I cannot help but think of Kurz's judgment on his own life [and on humanity as a whole] in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The horror! The horror!" We find the same words in Coppola's film adaptation of that story, namely, in *Apocalypse Now*. Notice the meaning of the title: *Revelation Now*.) These sinful actions can themselves become the catalyst for further sinning, both one's own sinning and the sinning of others. This *Angst*, which hangs over the whole being of the human, should not be confused with despair or hysteria. The primal experience [*Das Urerlebnis*] is that *Angst* which engulfs individuals as soon as they find out that their life on its own is devoid of any sense or meaning and that they themselves are at the mercy of a mysterious judgment that stands over against their life, a judgment that they do not understand. To quote from the *Morphology*:

Dread/horror [*Grauen*] takes hold of the person. Dread of what? Perhaps every religion begins with dread. But here it is not merely a feeling of worldly uneasiness—the feeling that the world about oneself is uncanny, puzzling, and irrational. Neither is it merely a fear of one's own insufficiency, of getting old, or of having to die. Nor is it the feeling of being crushed by the infinite. On the contrary, it is the dread one has when in the night suddenly two demonic eyes stare at oneself—eyes which paralyze one into immobility and fill one with the certainty that these are eyes of him who will kill you in this very hour. (ML 1.18; SL 1.20)

On the next page, Elert offers up this lament:

This God, who holds us accountable for demands we cannot fulfill, who asks us questions we cannot answer, who created for us that which is good and, in spite of this, leaves no choice but to do that which is evil—this is the hidden God. It is the God of absolute predestination. It is the God who

hardens the heart of Pharaoh and hates Esau before Esau was born, the potter who forms vessels that fill one with loathing—and, in spite of all this, thunders at these luckless creatures in a brutally despotic manner. (ML 1.19; SL 22)

One does not get to the bottom of our problem with God, it seems to me, unless one wrestles for some time with this observation. (It fits with D3 in the Crossings paradigm.)

In view of the primal experience, which includes fear [*Angst*] and dread [*Grauen*] and the awareness of fate [*Schicksal*], but also in view of human suffering and evil, Elert acknowledged that skepticism and atheism are live options that must be explored and understood for what they reveal about Christ-less human existence. “*Schicksal*,” one aspect of which he later came to develop under the rubrics of law and gospel as “affliction” [*Heimsuchung*], pushes one either to unbelief—or all the way to the cross of Christ.

In Elert’s theology, God’s response to the *Urerlebnis*, as attested to in Holy Scripture, is the only true and lasting one, even if that response complicates this human situation and complicates our understanding of God. On the one hand, the Scriptures reveal God’s “will to destroy,” God’s will to recompense, God’s vengeance, God’s hate, and God’s wrath. For Elert this divine “motive” is the direct consequence of human sin; God’s wrath is as real as God’s law is real and not an illusion of subjective experience. And this law “brings wrath” (Rom. 4:15), both God’s wrath and our own wrath at God. (Aside: when my son’s dog, Skipper, was run over by a car, in the midst of my son’s deep grief he expressed anger at God. “Why did God allow this to happen? I hate God!”) On the other hand, the biblical texts disclose the revelation of God’s love, patience, benevolence, mercy, pity, and God’s readiness to save. Since there is little, if any, confirmation of this second divine

“motive” in human experience, the message of God’s mercy and forgiveness can only be received by faith, “against appearances.” This faith is directed to the hidden Jesus, concealed from our vision, who practiced forgiveness and mercy and who “turned the wrath of God away from others” (LLA 40; OCD 56).^[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] Central texts for this claim are Rom. 5:9, 2 Cor. 5:21, and Rom. 3:25, which speak of Christ as the one who propitiates or expiates God’s wrath. God acknowledged and vindicated Christ’s message and ministry and testified at the same time “that his wrath, which the dying Christ had drawn upon himself, was appeased” (LLA 41; OCD 57). “The divine will to forgive has taken the place of the will to recompense” (LLA 41; OCD 57). But this replacement is true only for faith, since faith is allowing oneself to be reconciled to God through Christ. Only by faith in the hidden Christ is the hidden God of wrath concealed behind

the mercy, love, and forgiveness of God, which is revealed in the gospel concerning Christ. This faith depends solely on hearing the good news that Jesus Christ has taken “the curse of God” (Gal. 3:13), “the wrath of God” (Rom. 3:25; Rom. 5:9), and sin (2 Cor. 5:21) upon himself to liberate human beings. To ignore the wrath of God, or to downplay it in one’s preaching and teaching, is to shortchange what Jesus has done for us! This reconciliation in Christ, mediated by the Spirit through the church, has now changed the relation of the faithful to the forces of the hidden God. The latter have been deprived of the character of enmity. Even death, the last enemy, is now accepted as a peaceful sleep (LLA 71-74; OCD 81-84).

If the law unveils the wrath of the hidden God and it unveils the human sinner before God, then the gospel unveils the mercy and forgiveness of God and it unveils the hiddenness of the baptized in Christ. You who are baptized have died with Christ, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory” (Col. 3.3-4). That latter hiddenness is contingent on the crucified Christ, who suffered the wrath of God for you and bears it away ultimately. Christ has you covered! The saints are concealed; the church is hidden. (One thinks here of Bonhoeffer’s use of the ancient notion of the arcane discipline, the hidden discipline...)

We receive this contingency of God’s Christocentric grace through another contingency, namely, faith. Faith makes a difference. It makes a difference in the believer’s own existence, as Paul indicates in his second letter to the Corinthians: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, always carrying the body of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be visible in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4.8ff.). This change in existence for the believer has also affected “his will to be free,” which now becomes “the expression of his peace with the

Creator" (LLA 76; OCD 86). Freedom, inner freedom, is what God gives us when we respond in faith to his promise. God thus frees us by faith from guilt and anxiety and fear of death.

I think I can make the case that Elert is a kind of liberation theologian, albeit not the kind we are accustomed to hearing. For Elert, the practical consequence of the gospel is that the Christian now thinks not only of his own freedom, but also of the will of the Creator "that all of God's creatures shall be free" (LLA 76; OCD 86). The task of Christian ethics, then, is to develop Christian freedom in relation to "the orders of creation" (*Schöpfungsordnungen*), which is the focus of the final part of this 1924 book on Lutheran doctrine. All the creaturely conditions and relations of the Christian's life—"blood" (family and social relationships), law (relation to government), feeling (relation to art and culture), knowledge, and business—are the arenas in which the "new creature" lives out the life of faith and love. According to Elert there is an actual conflict between "the order of nature" ("blood," art, science, business, the state) and the "order of grace" ("the communion of saints" [LLA 89-92; OCD 98-101]). The communion of saints is in conflict with the kingdom of Satan that seeks to expand in the order of nature. "The weapons with which the communion of saints fights the kingdom of Satan are different from those with which the natural associations protect themselves against the same kingdom. All of the weapons of the communion of saints belong in the sphere of the Spirit (Eph. 6.13ff.), but within the natural associations evil must be fought according to the rules of the order of creation, i.e., with natural weapons" (LLA 93; OCD 101). Although "the order of grace and the order of creation," "the two-fold divine order for society," are in tension with each other within the individual Christian until death, their true purpose under God is to serve together for "the development of true life in the world" (LLA 96-97; OCD 103). The new life in

Christ thus seeks the liberation of others through the reconciliation of Christ, "that we become *Schicksal* for others" (LLA 80-81; OCD 90). As those who bear the name of Christ in the world, our basic question in our various callings is this: Which ethical choice best serves human flourishing and freedom? Christian freedom is thus a key concept in Elert's theology that finally unites creation and redemption, doctrine and ethics, the triune God and humanity, the church and the world. At the heart of this freedom is our longing for the liberation of the whole cursed creation (Rom. 8.20ff.).

I do not have sufficient time to examine the criticisms that have been leveled against Elert's understanding of the distinction between the hidden God and the God revealed/concealed in Jesus Christ. I will only point to a principal question: Does "the *diastasis*" between God's wrath and mercy, between "the hidden God" and "the God revealed in Jesus," between the law and the gospel, entail a schizophrenic God? Is Elert's theology merely a modern version of ancient polytheism? How is it possible to affirm God's unity, in view of such contradictory divine judgments, namely, judgment, wrath, and mercy? Has not Elert overstressed the distinction between God the Creator and God the Redeemer in Christ? Between God the Preserver and God the Reconciler? Between God the Law-giver (and Judge) and God the Forgiver? Are we not here dealing then with two very different deities? Several examinations fault Elert for undermining the unity of God and for thereby calling into question the certainty that God's will and purpose for creation are essentially loving and gracious.

Although Elert, in my opinion, did not devote sufficient attention to such criticism (only two pages in the dogmatics are given to these problems), he did seek to counter it by asserting that the unity of God can only be believed on the basis of the reconciliation between God and humanity accomplished by the

crucified and risen Christ. The theologian may not speculate on what that atonement means in and for God, but only may speak and think upon what has been revealed in the gospel.[ref]One thinks of Luther's famous aphorism: "He deserves to be called a theologian...who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and cross" (WA 1, 354, 17-20 [1518]; LW 31:40).[ref] According to the gospel, the judgment of the law and the judgment of the gospel are both verdicts of the one holy God.

To quote again from the *Morphology*:

[T]he same God who pronounces judgment bestows grace. If it were not the same God, the belief that he bestows grace would, at the very outset, have to give way to the suspicion that this is an illusion. At the very least the fact that it is the same God protects faith from itself against the suspicion that through an intellectual accomplishment of its own it has overcome one concept of God by means of another, "higher" one—one that in reality would be more comforting only to itself. Here faith is not primarily opposed to faith, but God is opposed to God. And not even one God to another God; the contradiction lies in the God who is identical with himself. (ML 1.94; SL 107)

Elert was convinced that human experience and the testimony of the prophets and the apostles will not allow one to avoid the real tensions and contradictions in God's own self-witnessing. While "holiness" is the term that Elert used to affirm the essential unity and simplicity of God, the term does not resolve the conflict between law and gospel, between wrath and grace, this side of the Last Day. *Christian faith* has only to do with the revelation of God's mercy and forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ, the person of the reconciler. Christ's merciful work cancels out the validity of God's law and wrath for the one

who trusts. Thus the triumph of the gospel over the law is the goal of the distinction between the law and the gospel. The conflict between the law and the gospel is a real dialectic that is only resolved by the gospel that itself serves as the proper ground of faith in the crucified and risen Christ. Law and gospel are thus distinguished in order that they might be rightly related, and these two words of God are rightly related only when the gospel is heard as God's final, ultimate word for a person so addressed by both law and gospel. "If one considers the relationship between law and gospel as dialectical, i.e., represents it as a conversation, this cannot be understood as if yesterday God spoke one way, today speaks another way, and tomorrow will speak the previous way again... [I]n this conversation the gospel irrefutably and irrevocably has the *last word*." [ref] Werner Elert, "Gesetz und Evangelium," in *Zwischen Gnade und Ungnade*, 156 (emphasis original; ET: *Law and Gospel*, trans. Edward Schroeder [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967], 30) [/ref] The final paragraphs of sec. 23 in Elert's dogmatics affirm that in and through Christ "the law is silenced," "the law is abrogated," and with that abrogation the rebellion against God is ended. This is not "a formal picture of God," but the actual and effective overcoming of the law through the death of Christ. This overcoming is now only known and received or fulfilled in personal faith and not through speculation about what God has or has not willed from eternity. The resolution of God's wrath and mercy occurs nowhere else than in the word about Christ's atonement that is received by faith alone.

To bring us back to the image of knee braces: Repentance and faith in Christ alone provide release from a guilty conscience, assurance of God's abiding gracious presence in times of suffering and trial, and confidence of God's goodness in the face of God's hiddenness, that is, in the face of *Angst, Grauen, Anfechtungen*/afflictions, suffering, evident injustice,

downright evil, and death. More directly, mutual spiritual consolation, the kind that we are attempting to fulfill at this conference, strengthens faith, braces faith, which alone could perceive the goodness of the hidden God hidden under its opposite. Braced faith is thus equipped in Christ to face radical injustice, humiliation, helplessness, tribulation, sufferings, and death—all things that were manifested in the suffering and death of Christ. Baptized into Christ, you are hidden in him. Hidden in him, you are now sent by his Spirit to work for freedom in the world.