

# God Hidden/God Revealed—an Essential Bertram Corrective, per Matthew Becker (Part 1 of 2)

Colleagues,

Pentecost is upon us. Would that preachers everywhere might catch and transmit the Pentecost point this Sunday, but many won't. The essential gift of the Spirit is not that we do the right stuff but that we trust the Right Doer. First faith, then works, to use some older language. The Right Doer, of course, is Christ Crucified, the topic of Peter's Pentecost sermon. See [Acts 2:22-36](#). Notice how devoid that sermon is of the sort of maudlin rumination one finds in recent Pentecost hymns like "Spirit of Gentleness" (# 396 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, and yes, you noticed, I don't like that hymn at all. How can you when you've cut your Pentecost teeth on the likes of "Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord"?)

Maudlin rumination and a sharp response thereto might be one way of characterizing the material you're getting this week and next. The sharp responder is the late Robert W. Bertram, channeled through an essay Matthew Becker presented at the 2018 Crossings conference, a companion to his essay on Werner Elert (see *ThTheol* [924](#) and [925](#)). As for the maudlin rumination, that would be a fairly recent and all too prevalent strain of theology that fails to find the nerve in Christ to face the problem of God head-on. That Lutherans too are susceptible to this "under-telling" of God and "under-selling" of Christ will become apparent as you read.

Speaking of that reading, lay readers among you are likely to find it a hard slog, and in places nigh impenetrable. Your patience, please. Matt, recall, is an academic theologian, reporting here on the work of other academic theologians. Every profession has its specialized vocabulary and a set of rules for using it. It helps the professionals get their work done. This is as true for theology as it is for medicine or engineering. Step One for initiates anywhere is learning the words and how to use them. Still, even professionals are bound to employ a lot of language in common currency, enough that the thoughtful novice, sticking with them, is likely more often than not to extract more nourishment from their prose than seemed possible at first glance. So do stick, do slog—and prepare to be fed, richly indeed, as I think you’ll discover. I’ll aim in next week’s intro to include a few pointers to matters you don’t want to miss.

Finally, you’ll notice early on that this is the text of an oral presentation with here and there a reference to one of its audiovisual components. I didn’t bother to edit such things out, even though I’m unable to pass along the items we were looking at as Matt spoke. I trust you’ll work past that even so.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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**From Faith to Faith: Knee Bracing for Troubled Times**

***Deus Absconditus and Deus Revelatus***

**according to Werner Elert and Robert Bertram**

(Part 2.1: Bertram)

by Matthew L. Becker

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For this second segment, I have been asked to speak for thirty minutes on Robert Bertram's understanding of divine revelation. This, too, is impossible. Even in the time allotted, I will barely scratch the surface of his approach to the distinction between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus revelatus*. Anyone who spends even a little time browsing the books in Bertram's library will quickly spot how frequently this theme pops up in his handwritten notes in the margins. What a pleasure it is to read a book that contains Bertram's "scholia" or "glosses" on the text! Having now read several such books, I'm appreciating more and more how he did the kind of careful reading that a medieval scholar would do—making intricate notes/commentary in the margins ("glosses")—in very neat handwriting, I might add—to indicate how he was thinking with or, more often, thinking against an author. So by reading Bertram's marginalia we are "thinking with" him as he thought with or against an author. For this session, I have chosen one book that Bertram glossed, which directly deals with this distinction between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*, namely, Ronald Thiemann's *Revelation and Theology*. <sup>1</sup>

I do need to make one correction right from the start: I am *not* "the world's only Robert Bertram scholar." Contrary to what the most recent Crossings newsletter mistakenly asserts about me, there are others in this room and elsewhere who are also scholars of Bob's theology. I had Bob for two seminars at LSTC when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, which was Bob's alma mater, too. In one of those seminars, we undertook a close reading of Elert's *Outline of Christian*

*Doctrine*, which was my first sustained examination of the Erlanger's theology. Later, when I was weathering some theological troubles as a professor of theology at an LCMS university, Bob and I kept in frequent contact, and he was able to offer me comfort and aid in light of his own history with that church body. He was very much a "faith brace" for me during that time. More recently, Bob's theological library has come under my temporary care. The marginalia in those many volumes has opened up for me new avenues of thinking with Bob, some of the tracings or trackings of which I hope to share with you today. There is faith bracing to be found in these writings.

This is an important photo for me. It is a 1960 photo of the theology department of Valparaiso University. It was taken two years before I was born. This photo visualizes a connection between Bertram, who was the chair of the department in those days, and Elert, in whose lecture hall three of these individuals had been students: Richard Baepler, Robert Schultz, and Edward Schroeder. Even though Bertram did not directly study with Elert, he knew the Erlanger's work from early on, and Elert's theology would have informed many discussions that he had had with those colleagues of his who had studied in Erlangen, perhaps especially Ed. (By the way, my copy of the American edition of Elert's *Outline* is actually Bob's copy! Inside is the original sales slip, which indicates Bob read this little book in 1955.)

One could argue that Valpo, and not Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was the real center for ongoing engagement with Elert's theology in America, at least in the 1950s and 60s—and those discussions in part led eventually to what would become "Crossings." (Six years earlier than the year of this photo, Ed Schroeder and Dick Baepler published their translation of Elert's essay, "Lutheranism and World History." <sup>2</sup> This happened

when they were students at Concordia Seminary and involved in the publication of the student journal there. According to Bertram's copy of this essay, Art Simon was the managing editor that year and Dale Lasky was an associate editor. In the same year that I received most of Bob's library, Art, who is a friend of our family, gave me his library, and Dale, who had been a colleague of mine at Valpo, bequeathed to me several volumes from his—much to my wife's consternation. I could not tell you how many of Dick's and Ed's books have also come into my temporary custody. One of these is the German original of Elert's *Die Lehre des Luthertums im Abriss*, which had been owned by Ed, although in order for me to get it I had to buy it from a Chicago bookseller!)

Before I turn to Bertram's theology, I should say a little about his life. He was born in 1921 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. His father, Martin Bertram, was himself a professor and author/translator. Just as Elert had two sisters, so did Bob. His family belonged to the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States. In terms of doctrine and practice, it was very similar to the "Old Lutheran" church body to which the young Elert belonged. Bertram's mother, Emma, was from another important LCMS family, the Dau's. Her father, William H. T. Dau, who had been a professor of theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was chosen to be the first Lutheran president of Valparaiso University in 1925. Just as Elert had attended schools affiliated with his church body, so, too, did Bob. After parochial school and college in Ft. Wayne, he matriculated at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he received his Bachelor of Divinity in 1946. After marrying Thelda Koch that same year, he then went to the University of Chicago, where he earned an M.A. in psychiatric social work in 1948. That same year, he began teaching philosophy at Valpo. As we heard from Ed last night, Bob later moved into the theology

department, which he chaired. He would teach at Valpo for the better part of fifteen years. In 1953, he was ordained as a pastor in the LCMS. In 1964, just one year after he joined the faculty of his alma mater, Concordia Seminary, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. His dissertation analyzes Luther's understanding of the subject of theology over against Karl Barth's position. <sup>3</sup> Bertram's doctoral mentors were Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan. (Aside: my own intellectual journey has traversed a lot of the same turf that Bertram traveled: LCMS college (B.A.), Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (M.Div.), the University of Chicago (M.A., Ph.D.), and Valparaiso University, where I have taught theology for the past fourteen years.)

Bob eventually became the chair of the systematics department at Concordia. Of course, he was near the center of the "church struggle" that roiled the LCMS in the 1960s and early 1970s, which eventually culminated in his being fired from the seminary in 1974, along with 44 others who comprised "the faculty majority." They had been accused of teaching "false doctrine." Bob then became a leading voice in the formation of Christ Seminary-Seminex. In 1983, he and the remaining faculty were deployed to other Lutheran seminaries, in his case, to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. It was there that my path would for the first time cross with his (in the fall of 1988). While St. Louis remained Bob's home, he would commute weekly to Chicago. During his years as a seminary professor, Bob did theological work in many countries. Like Elert, he was also involved in the ecumenical movement. For example, he participated in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and in several theology commissions of the Lutheran World Federation. We have already mentioned that he was also the co-founder of Crossings. After his retirement from LSTC in 1991, he taught at Washington University in St. Louis and at

the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis. He died in 2003.

Just as Elert stressed the importance of distinguishing between the *deus absconditus* in relation to the *deus revelatus* for the sake of the gospel and faith in Christ, so too did Bertram. The three-fold (or four-fold) hiddenness of God—God hidden apart from Christ, God revealed/concealed in Jesus Christ, and Christ hidden in God (and the baptized Christian hidden in Christ)—is a key theme in Bertram's theological reflections. We find it, for example, in his "Theses on 'R is for Revelation,'" which forms part of another essay, "Postmodernity's CRUX." <sup>4</sup> We also find this distinction in his two published reviews of Ronald Thiemann's book, *Revelation and Theology*. <sup>5</sup> Bob's first and shorter review appeared in the January 1986 issue of the *Christian Century*. <sup>6</sup> His longer review was published the following year in the journal *dialog*. <sup>7</sup> All of these published essays and reviews, however, are only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, since Bertram's marginalia in Thiemann's book function almost like a third essay on the theme. As far as I can tell, no book in Bertram's library contains more such marginalia than this one. In my comments today, I want to draw attention to some of Bertram's scholia and glosses in his copy of Thiemann's book with respect to this distinction between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus revelatus*.

It is clear from the marginalia that Thiemann's book caused Bertram no small consternation. In reply to the assertion that "the central modern theological question has been: How can human beings with our finite concepts and categories have access to a God who is ontologically other" (47), Bertram wrote the following:

Whether or not that is in fact "the central modern theological question," it is, I suspect, a major shortcoming in RFT's

whole argument that he allows his agenda to be determined by that question. For that question, real as it may be, has the effect of underasking the Christian gospel. –Anyway, it would be my own contrary impression that a larger motive behind revelationist theologies (at least some of them) is universalism. They are concerned to show not only that our knowledge of God is not of our own making—not “reason” but “revelation,” though it is still “true”—but, beyond that, that God is only gracious and nothing else but gracious, indeed is so sovereignly and insuperably, inescapably gracious that no human perversity nor even any human rejection of his grace can prevent anyone from being the beneficiary of his grace. His grace does not consist only in his revealing of it. For if it did, then only those would be the objects of his grace to whom he successfully reveals it. No, according to this sort of revelationism revelation is merely the showing forth, the communicating of God’s grace, which—i.e., the grace itself—is in no way affected or diminished by the human being’s response to it. That is, the divine grace is not only “prevenient” (which strikes me as a mere tautology) but irresistible. That way, Calvinism’s notion of a sovereignly gracious God could make peace with the Enlightenment’s universalist optimism concerning the human prospect. Later on, RFT will stress, almost as a refrain, that the “faith” by which believers respond to the divine promise is not constitutive of that promise, though he admits (he has to) that it is only when the promise evokes faith that the promise turns out to be “successful.” Here is the petard on which RFT is hoist. (Bertram gloss, 47)

This horseshoe-shaped gloss on page 47 unveils Bertram’s basic criticism of Thiemann’s version of “revelationism.” Bob roundly criticized many of Thiemann’s assertions and statements in a way that he, Bob Bertram, ever the Christian gentleman, did not



fully express or reveal (!) in public. He kept those criticisms veiled, hidden—or relatively so—save for the person who might take the trouble to work through them by reading his copy of Thiemann's book and encountering all of these hand-written comments. In the remainder of my comments this afternoon, I want to unpack this pregnant quote by referring to several other marginal notes by Bertram as well as to his published review in *dialog*.

Before I do that, however, I need to provide a little further background on Thiemann. He was born in 1946 and died in 2012. (Aside: he was best friends with one of my colleagues, Mel Piehl, and the seminary roommate of another, Gil Meilaender.) Thiemann had studied with Bob at Concordia Seminary between 1968 and 1972. After graduation, Thiemann received his M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale, where he wrote his dissertation on, guess who? Yes, Werner Elert!

Actually, Thiemann's 1976 dissertation, which he wrote under the direction of Hans Frei, examines the conflict between Elert and Karl Barth that took place in the early 1930s.<sup>8</sup> This conflict was in part a disagreement about the distinction between the hidden God (and the function of God's law), on the one hand, and the God revealed in the gospel concerning Jesus the Christ, on the other. So Thiemann had studied Barth, just as Bertram had done, but they came to very different assessments. Indeed, one could argue that Bertram's *Auseinandersetzung* with Thiemann carries forward the *Auseinandersetzung* that had occurred half a century earlier between Elert and Barth. Whereas Bertram seems to have agreed with Elert's basic criticism of Barth's theology—based as that criticism was on key features from Luther's theology that Elert directed against Barth (particularly with respect to the natural knowledge of God and the role of the law within God's creation)—Thiemann essentially

sided with Barth's criticism of Elert.

Thiemann's Barthian perspective shines through this later book (*Revelation and Theology*), which was an effort to retrieve Barth's basic understanding of revelation and make it intelligible for an American audience. (I should add that this book came out right around the same time that its author was appointed dean of Harvard Divinity School.) In this Barthian view, knowing God at all is itself grace. God's grace always goes before any human response to it. According to Thiemann, "faith's knowledge of God is a gift of God's grace" (3). Accordingly, for Thiemann, following Barth, our knowledge of God does not require "foundations" to justify our beliefs. <sup>9</sup> Our knowledge of God does not require some kind of direct or immediate "intuition" of God, the self, the Bible, etc. Thiemann argues against one version of what is usually called "foundationalism." In this version, sometimes called "hard foundationalism," our knowledge of God can arise only if our beliefs about God result from valid arguments on the basis of self-evident, non-inferential, intuitive beliefs that are themselves universally accepted to be true. For the hard foundationalist, e.g., for philosophers like Descartes and for theologians like Schleiermacher, some of our knowledge of reality is directly given or intuited, thereby constituting self-evident truths upon which the remainder of our knowledge is founded.

But there is a problem with this version of foundationalism, for if the knowledge of God itself occupies this fundamental foundation, how is it that not everyone is a believer? If knowledge of God does not occupy this fundamental foundation, how can such knowledge itself be believed? The foundationalist enterprise falters because the foundationalist cannot give a coherent account of how non-inferential or intuitive beliefs are

known apart from dependence on some prior conceptual framework. If such a version of foundationalism is no longer plausible (as some recent American philosophers have argued, e.g., Richard Rorty), then, according to Thiemann, a new situation prevails for theology—one in which revelation should no longer occupy the central place at the beginning of theological reflection. Following Karl Barth's lead, Thiemann asserts that revelation should be understood as *an element in the doctrine of God itself*—that is, how God is both a giver and a promiser—while the basic conviction that the earlier doctrine of revelation was set to protect, namely, the conviction of the prevenience of God, will be better maintained than before. To quote from Thiemann's book:

[The Gospel of Matthew's] narrative portrayal of God demonstrates that God's prevenience is a necessary implication of his identity as God of promise. Theology would be well advised to follow the logic of Matthew's identifying description by locating its justificatory account of God's prevenience neither in the prolegomena to theology nor in a separate doctrine of "God's Word" but within its account of God's identity. The doctrine of revelation ought to be a subtheme within the doctrine of God. (137)

Thiemann thus argues that the category of "promise" can render claims about God's prevenient grace intelligible, that the biblical narratives (particularly Matthew's Gospel) depict and identify "the promising God," that the gospel is best articulated as a nonfoundational "narrated promise," and finally that God's prevenience is warranted when the doctrine of revelation is merely an account of God's identifiability. "That biblical narrative, not some philosophical substructure, is the thing. Scripture narrative depicts a God who acts mostly through the actions of other characters, but who is known as God, and

becomes identifiable through the story.” <sup>10</sup> Along the way, Thiemann gives up trying to articulate a universal theological anthropology, that is, a theological understanding of human beings that is applicable to all cultures in all times and all places. He is content to stay focused merely on what the biblical narrative and God’s narrated promises unveil about God and God’s identity. “The promissory element in biblical narratives both identifies God and discloses God as one who acts. Thus the themes of identity and action, promise and provenience, are held together in the narrative.” <sup>11</sup>

*–to be continued.*