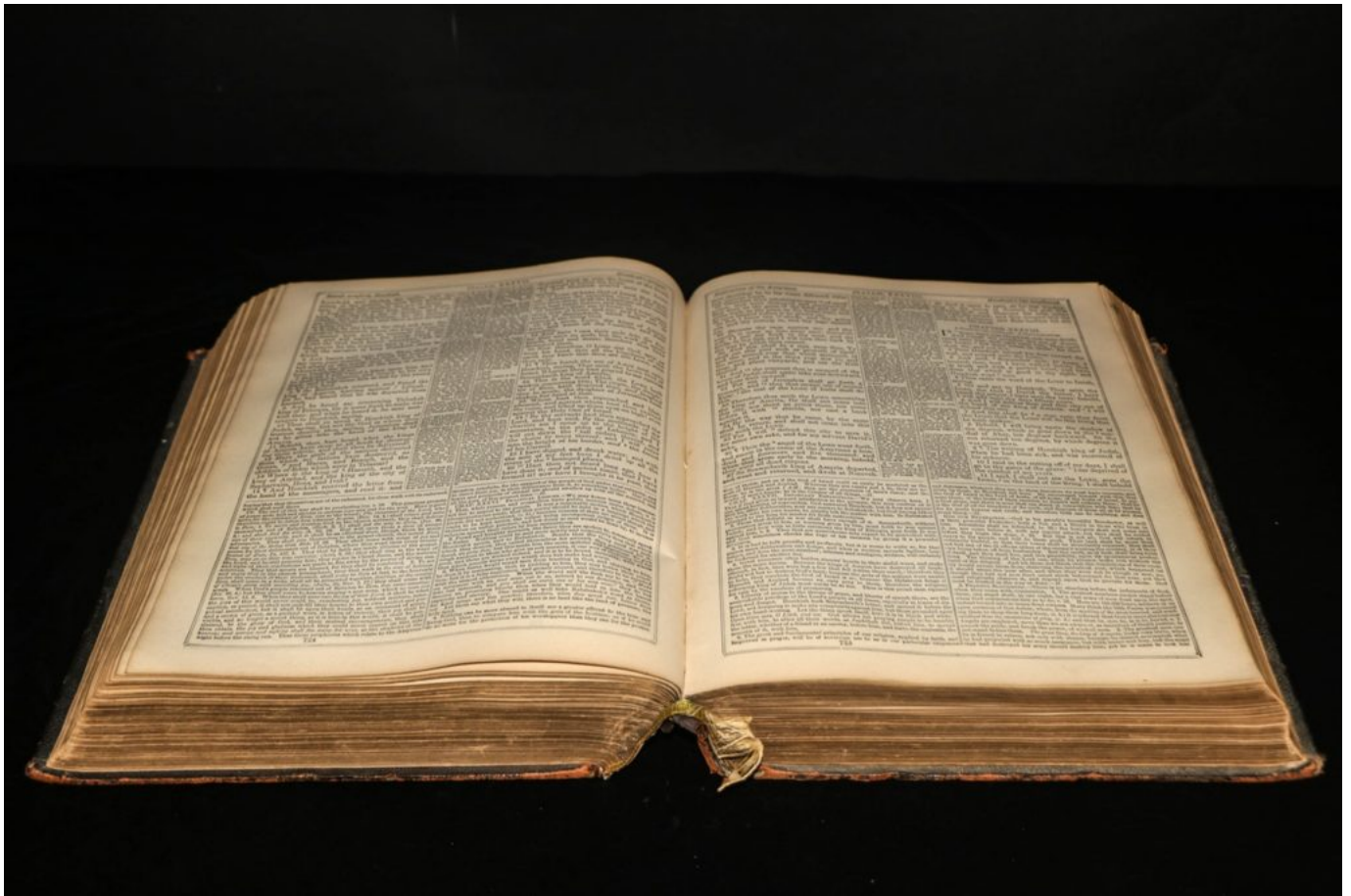


# Humanity coram Deo – Pieces of a 1947 Lecture by Werner Elert

Colleagues,

Some weeks ago I met a young woman who had just earned a master's degree at a local university in the technicalities required to earn a living as a translator. She had grown up in Switzerland speaking German and came to the U.S. as a college student. Her conversational English was impeccable. So was her American accent. After wishing her well in the technicalities of landing a work permit I ventured the sort of question she has surely come to expect from the Anglophilic ignoramuses who surround her these days, asking whether German is anywhere near as breathtaking in its addiction to nuance as English is. "More so," she said.

I mention this as prelude to this week's post, an effort by George T. Rahn (of whom more in a moment) to translate a 1947 lecture by Werner Elert that has not appeared elsewhere in English. Prepare already for heavy wading.



I waded heavily in Elert during my seminary years along with a few hundred other Seminex students, including George. With Ed Schroeder and Bob Bertram as taskmasters, we slogged through the swamps of *The Christian Ethos* and *The Christian Faith*. The first, published by Fortress Press in 1957, was translated by Carl J. Schindler. The second was a mimeographed production by the printshop of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, dated 1974, as in *The Year of the Exile*. For those unfamiliar with Seminex lore, that's when four-fifths of Concordia's faculty and student body decamped under duress to launch Concordia Seminary in Exile, later relabeled as Christ Seminary-Seminex. How it was that the Concordia printshop was able in that very year to churn out a 319-page teaching text for the "rebels," I can't begin to say. Still, there it was, a thick, dense translation by Martin H. Bertram and Walter R. Bouman of Elert's *Der christliche Glaube*, fifth edition (1960), a work that Concordia Publishing

House had recently declined to publish on ideological grounds. Have I said already that it was heavy going? The *Ethos* text was even heavier. The difference arose from the translation. Bertram and Bouman were more adept than Schindler was, to say nothing of Schindler's editors (for some astonishing reason they chose to omit the all-important section divisions in Elert's chapters when they printed the text). Even so, and in either case, those students who sweated and persevered through their reading assignments came away enormously enriched—and some of us heard the Gospel as if for the first time.

The present point is that turning precise, nuanced German into clear, accurate English is a tough racket, and all the more so when you're working in areas as specialized as academic theology has gotten to be. George approaches the task, as he told me in a note, with four semesters of college German under his belt. I suspect that his decades since have included a lot more reading in German than the vast majority of Seminex graduates have been willing or equipped to tackle. George is rostered these days in the ELCA's Southwest Texas Synod as a minister of Word and Sacrament, though he earns his daily bread through the Texas Department of Public Safety, for which he administers state policy in the Driver's License Division. He has long been connected to Crossings and is a regular participant in our annual conferences and seminars. Those who may have met him there will recall him as Tim, the name he goes by in ordinary conversation.

With that, kudos to George for his chutzpah, and to God for the faith that drives it. I can't pretend that what you're about to plunge into is felicitous reading. Truth is, I've been breaking my own head on it for a week or so. George gave me permission as editor to fiddle with the English for clarity's sake, though without access to the German I've done so sparingly, and there are plenty of places where I'm not altogether sure what's going

on. Still, what will come through loud and clear for those who persevere is well worth that effort of perseverance. It cuts to a hard reality that every human being lives with, whether they recognize it or not. It also “necessitates” Christ, as Bob Bertram liked to put it.

To point this reality out is an ongoing imperative these days. All the more is lifting up the One who addresses it. George says as much in some thoughts he passed along when I asked what led him to tackle this project. It makes sense to share these with you as a forward to the translation, as a summary of what to look for when you get there, and as a rationale for why George’s labors, and yours, are worth the time and effort that you invest in puzzling through all this.

What you’re getting, by the way, are the first and third sections of the five-section lecture identified in the title. Section 1 lays out the lecture’s premise. Section 3 takes you to its theological heart. George also translated some or all of Sections 4 and 5. If anyone wants to see them, let me know, and I’ll pass them along by email.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

---

**Translation of sections of W. Elert’s lecture for the student community at the University of Munich, June 16, 1947: *Humanitaet und Kirche* (on the 450th anniversary of the birth of Philipp Melanchthon)**

by the Rev. George T. Rahn

+ + +

## *Translator's Preface—*

In offering this translation, my deepest concern is with the issue of how to connect the assertion of God's law as always accusatory ("...with the law comes the knowledge of sin," Rom. 3) with the way that people might experience God's close-ness as threat to one's existence (thus setting the stage for an articulation of the saving Word, i.e. Christ and the Gospel). Preaching needs to convey this emphasis today, in my opinion.

Elert nailed the articulation of this in remembrance of Luther's terms of being constantly accountable "before God's face"—*coram Deo*—within family and vocation. (To an extent Heidegger and then Rorty address these same issues from their philosophical systems.)

In the traditional language of Christianity, we come face to face as individuals before God who, through the operation of God's law in our personal and collective histories, makes us stand before his immediate closeness as sinners hopelessly making answer for who we are and what we have done. This is the Church's traditional way of talking about the originality of the sin of the sinner.

Elert, and then Bertram and Schroeder, with updated language, successfully found a way to connect this immediacy of God's presence to the historical nature of current events. For all three, the biblical concept of *coram Deo*—standing in God's court before the Judge of human existence as one who cannot escape nor successfully make a right answer for oneself—was key to crossing God's law with God's Gospel. God is a real and present threat to the sinner's existence (because an individual must always answer thoroughly and unsuccessfully to the ever-present God). The sign that a human being is under this present threat is illustrated

in the fact that humans are born only to die at the end of their lives. Life never goes from death to life (except in one Person)—and we as Christian preachers and teachers are called to tell others that this human fate has been switched out for Another's.

I for one work with these ideas and reflections on a daily basis. The mess in which we as Americans and Christians live politically and socially has direct reference to them, forcing us to raise questions like these: In our complex and technologically-based world how does our own immediate connectedness through internet and social media contribute to our experience of living *coram Deo*? How does our coming together as a public society through technology leave us subject to God's wrath under the guise of personal, one-to-one and corporate accountability? (The old language still has validity and force here in that we can speak about being in God's court, the arena in which we must make answer for ourselves.) These questions are ones with which I have engaged over the years as a "worker-priest".

And there are other questions too: What is it about the unique message of the Gospel that changes and then ends these matters and produces something new? How has the Body of Christ in the world already shaped the path of resolution through the death and resurrection of Jesus? And finally, how do we as preachers and teachers convey this in a language consistent with yet accessible for our current American ethos?

George Rahn

+ + +

### **W. Elert: Humanity and Church**

*In the paragraphs below, parentheses contain explanatory*

*comments by the translator. Square brackets denote conjectures by the editor, proffered in the hope of advancing clarity.*

## 1

In both his writings and his person, Philipp Melanchthon embodies the German version of humanism as a cultural and historical movement. It is a type of humanism which according to older [analytical] fashion binds together the basics of the 16th century's reformation of the Church. Others see its influence continuing today. And according to these opinions it constitutes, at least in the realm of a very broad influence in theology, a dangerous counterpart [to the Reformation]. Whether this type of humanism has led to an erroneous influence or not, Melanchthon not only was claimed by its basic ideology but was also a representative of this movement during the 16th century's attempt at reforming the Church. Even today we are affected by this variety of humanism.

Melanchthon 's type of humanism is not simply an academic program. It is more than that. It is a specific way of being human, a determined kind of "human being-ness" in its attention to [actual human] existence as the de facto bearer of humanity. Even today it is impressed upon us as a common cultural possession in an essential sense. Without the influence of this type of humanism there would have been no cult of personality of the 18th century, no Kantian philosophy, no Lessing and no Goethe. The French Revolution would have suffered in terms of expressing its claim to accentuate human rights. Even in modern democracies as forms of state and common life it is an essentially political type of humanism.

For us both as Germans as well as theologians, Melanchthon stands next to Luther, the lesser to the greater, the scholar next to the genius, the doctrinal theologian next to the

prophetic voice.

Luther [himself] had seen something unique in Melanchthon. [Yet] the research and study of the reformation in the last generation (1910-), and certainly since the First World War, has been almost silent on this topic.

Since the dissolution of the *Landeskirche* in the year 1919, the Lutheran churches of Germany have had no leg on which to stand in terms of confessional identity. The Lutheran way of confessing the Gospel in Germany [has been obliged] to find its own way through reflection on its unique original source material. There is no one to blame or criticize here for this situation. Theology must find its way back to the study of Luther, Luther being the “consciousness” of this particular version of Christianity. Luther embodies for us the understanding of our denomination in its theological dimension even as Melanchthon embodies a variety of humanism as a cultural ideology.

But what [some may ask] do both Melanchthon and Luther have to do with one another? Is it not enough for one to be simply a representative of the church? God’s person? a creature of God? a servant, slave or child of God? Is it not enough to be brothers and sisters in Christ? To exchange our humanity for divine characteristics? Is not belonging to Christ the breaking apart and cessation of all humanity into something new and unique?

Our theological reflection primarily since the First World War has moved in this direction [*Trans:* toward a Barthian/Reformed influence and away from the influence of Luther/Melanchthon.] Theology at this time would again be shattered by the weaknesses brought about from the influence of Schleiermacher’s theology as well as from the great word of God by which God breaks apart all that is human. On the other



hand, theology would also be influenced again by Luther's theology of the Cross (*theologia crucis*). Under these influences, the church's habits of thought would take on an anti-secularist and anti-humanist flavor.

Luther's struggle against Erasmus was over a humanity conceived of as autonomous. Erasmus's brand of humanism appeared as [a contradictory alternative] to Luther's *theologia crucis*. It was also contrary to Melanchthon's view.

Was it by accident that when these issues disappeared from our cultural view the value of humanity did the same? Could one not write a political history of the last generation (of WW2) with the title "The Political Struggle against Humanity?" Was what we experienced in the 1920s and 30s not the destruction of western humanity—its end, corruption and decline? [Can the church avoid facing] the consequences of these events? Would it be fair to claim that, in light of them, the church should only be concerned for its own perpetuation as an institution? Is a conception of humanity spun from the influence of Erasmus's humanism—a self-possessed humanity—the only [approach to life]?

During the Second World War there appeared a small book entitled *Dialogue in the East*\_(trans: as on the Eastern Front?) by Martin Raschke. This German was killed on the battlefield, but his words live on: "There is a growing silence in the feeling for the ordinary person's responsibility to maintain a healthy image of [human personhood]." Yet the fact is that the body politic has a common responsibility for maintaining a healthy image of humanity. And this is the precise meaning of the humanism of Melanchthon: the common responsibility/accountability for the image of "human beingness" both as individuals and within our collective groups. Humanity so defined is the theme of this lecture: "Humanity and the Church." Can the church distance itself from this theme of

humanity? Can the collective responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the image of humanity be left up to fate?

Melanchthon was involved with these questions.

### 3

Again: are we talking about one Melanchthon or two men with the same name? Is there in this situation an inner factual quality which adheres to them both? Or is there only here a puzzling personal union? A factual connection certainly does exist here and not only in thinly related threads. Indeed, what we have here is Melanchthon, man of the church, and Melanchthon, humanist and man of the world, both representing the same issue. Moreover, this matter stands not only at the fringes of Melanchthon's own relationship [and contribution] to Luther and the church's reformation. It also stands at the center and midpoint in the formation of Luther's theology: the justification of human beings in God's sight. (*Translator's commentary*: It is interesting that Elert in other writings uses the phrase: the justification of the *sinner* in God's sight. I suspect that here "sinner" is presupposed in his use of *Menschen*.) We know of this matter in [Luther's formulation of] the doctrine of justification, and it is fashioned together this way in the Augsburg Confession. We are only justified (before God) through faith, and it is Christ who is our justification before God. Melanchthon learned this as the Gospel from Luther.

But behind the teaching on justification as so formulated, there lies a presupposition of something else. Where theology itself is concerned, nothing of a particular nature gets expressed, only that in general people have to justify themselves before God. Naturally this is so. But is it so [in actual experience]? Does the person on the street, the man of today, the unique

concrete person of our time know that he must be responsible before God? The politician of today, the office manager, the CEO, the politicians who manage the day to day life of society and public church? Doesn't the world view this differently? Is [our human situation] not viewed differently than what was proposed above? In fact, no; it is viewed in the same way, only using different terms. We talk of responsibility, accountability for the shape of the human image, the quality of how western culture develops this image. That we have to justify ourselves before God means the same as being responsible before him. It is no wonder that the world of today no longer understands the teaching of justification, [let alone] justification by faith.

Both Luther and Melanchthon knew the gravity of this teaching. They knew the importance that it would have for society. This knowledge is the presupposition for the Wittenberg teaching of justification by faith. There arises no doubt of the theological merit of the way Melanchthon formulated his teaching of justification by faith. It is also clear that he formulated it forensically, that is, as the pronouncement as a verdict given in court. This means that justification, which we, believing, receive, consists in the hearing of a divine verdict. This is because the grace [of God] imparted to us is not, as the theology of the Middle Ages taught and Roman Catholic theology teaches still, a substance, to be infused into us in a miraculous way. Rather, grace is imparted to us by way of forgiveness through the verdict of God. This is evident already in Melanchthon's first edition of his *Loci Communes* of 1521, as well as in the Augsburg Confession [of 1530]. We see it even in Luther's great commentary on Galatians as well as in the young Luther as the researchers of Luther's works in the last generation have conceived him to be. However, we must confine our remarks to Melanchthon. Nor can we continue to draw out the development of his teaching on justification here. It is enough

now to draw out Melanchthon's particular assertions regarding his brand of humanism.

Let us now look at the essential elements of his forensically developed teaching of justification by faith.

All "human being-ness," the handling of all matters, [the unfolding of] all events are related to and drawn into God's [judicial domain], the arena of God's judgment. Melanchthon expresses this through the phrase *coram Deo*—before God, appearing before God's critical eye, [standing] under his *judicium*. *Coram Deo* has no moral hue of merit or quality about it. [When faith in Christ enters in,] *coram Deo* unfolds as authentic justification, [by which a person who], without escape, must appear before God's critical eye in the court of existence and remain there until the final verdict [is pronounced], is rendered accountable by means of acquittal, forgiveness, and being adorned with grace. *Coram Deo* has to do also with the God who has reconciled himself to humanity [in a way that] results in a peaceful and happy conscience. This *coram Deo* will mark the orientation from which the collective image of humanity is viewed by Melanchthon. It certainly has nothing to do with predestination thought as, for example, understanding human events out of the providential and governing act of God without reference to God's office as judge. There is a differentiation to be made here whether the human image is directed out of or toward God's legislative office or his office as judge and critic. In the first case it is nearly unavoidable today for a person to understand himself as occupying an ethically neutral position. The post-modern person believes that he is placed in a position of free choice through God's legislative will. This is the *Menschenbild* (view of humanity) of Erasmus. In this connection, Melanchthon stands decisively on the side of Luther and St. Paul. There is no moment of ethical stability or evenness in our life. The law which, according to

St. Paul, [drives us to ruin] from the very beginning of our life, is not only a moralistic prescription but also and always a simultaneous *judicium* (judgment), the condemning verdict of God.

To know that we [spend our whole lives] *coram Deo* (before God) or, to say the same thing, *sub iudicio dei* (under God's judgment) is to be conscious of our responsibility. It is total responsibility because there is no interruption in the encounter *coram Deo*. This means: that we are not only accountable for single events in our lives but are also personally responsible before God for our collective [humanity and all that this includes.] This understanding of total responsibility before God is what binds together Melanchthon the humanist with Melanchthon the theologian in the teaching of justification by faith. Nearly all Melanchthon's theological critics have [reproached him for having developed], in reliance on Aristotle, a philosophical ethic in which human handling of events is conducted on purely rational grounds. In the introduction to his ethics, however, Melanchthon makes a clear differentiation between philosophy and the Gospel. Philosophy is a part of the one law of God, namely the *lex naturae* (nature's law), by which reason is cogently applied. It serves for the purpose of discipline, education, the legal order, and politics, all of which are certainly of concern also to the theologian. Yet the latter know that these ways of cultivated culture and accessible *justicia civilis* (civic justice) never justify before God. Through the *coram Deo* they are bracketed in a collective philosophical ethic [for which all of us are responsible]. Humanist though he is, Melanchthon never forgets the theological concept: *lex semper accusans* (the law is always accusing).

This bracketing grants a free play space for the rational, secular, political handling of events. But even these will

[unfold] under the *coram Deo*, forensically understood. This strict forensic understanding of justification, for which we are indebted to Melanchthon, uniquely preserves the tough fact that we are totally responsible before God. No civil action, no good work is excluded from the responsibility. Also, no inner event, no hope, no love, no piety, and no cultic act is excluded either. All these things stand *sub iudicio Dei* (under God's judgment) and we remain delivered over to this verdict even when it forgives us.