

Politics and Theology

Colleagues,

We're going to make you work this week. We think you'll decide it was worth it.

What follows is an email interchange that happened not quite two weeks ago. On one end was Rich Jungkuntz who got a mention in the first of last week's post-scripts. Rich studied theology at Concordia Seminary and Christ Seminary–Seminex in the '70s. He jumped (or stumbled?) from there into a career of working with refugees and immigrants through an assortment of agencies, some private, some public. In 2009 he took an early retirement and is presently trying to figure out how to persuade Thai immigration authorities to let him hang out in his wife's home village for as long as he'd like to. That's where he wrote from, northeastern Thailand, not all that far from the banks of the Mekong River, with Laos on the other side.

And there, in that corner of God's earth, Rich keeps up with theology. You'll see that in his instigating note.

The one instigated was Robert C. Schultz, whom some of you may have met at past Crossings conferences. Bob lives in Portland, Oregon, where he retired after a peripatetic teaching career that started at Valparaiso University, passed through the Lutheran Southern Seminary, and led eventually to posts at Roman Catholic institutions. Bob was among a handful of pioneering Missouri Synod seminary graduates who, in the early 1950s, headed over to Germany for doctoral studies. Bob landed at Erlangen, where he came under the sway of Werner Elert. Perhaps you don't know Elert? He was a marvelous confessional theologian who did the bulk of his work in the second quarter of the last century. He contended mightily with Karl Barth over issues that

have classically divided Lutherans and the Reformed. Along the way he wrote a handful of thick, dense, and immensely rich volumes on dogmatics, ethics, and the history of doctrine, a couple of which texts were required reading for students of Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder in the 1970s. Ed had had the good fortune of taking a class or two with Elert during his own studies in Germany. For his part, Bob Schultz names Elert as his doktorvater.

Elert got a certain amount of attention in U.S. Lutheran circles during the '50s and '60s. Fortress Press published one of his books. Concordia Publishing House came out with a couple of others. When winds shifted within the LCMS he became a theologian-non-grata, so to speak, above all for the challenge he mounted against the old habit of trying to anchor confidence in the Gospel in a prior construal of the Bible as verbally inspired and inerrant. In recent years he's been attacked from a different direction, namely by theologians associated with Lutheran CORE who blame him for what they perceive as the ELCA's drift into moral decay. Ed Schroeder wrote about this some time ago. See Thursday Theologies [611](#) and [612](#).

Back to Rich Jungkuntz, who read Elert at seminary during the years of Missouri's tumult over the Bible. With the above as background you'll understand his note. You'll also be more equipped to follow Bob Schultz's response, a response we wanted to get to you because of the history Bob relates. We were unaware of much of it. Guessing that many of you were too, we figured you'd appreciate some new learning as much as we did. I for one have long thought that matters of culture and politics have far more to do with the shape of our operative theologies than most of us would care to admit. Bob does a nice job of backing up that point.

Just by the way, Bob is presently busy with a new translation of

The Christian Faith, Elert's opus on dogmatics. Rich has been helping him out as a reader. This too will shed a bit of light on the nature of their exchange.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce,
for the editorial team

From Rich, to selected recipients—

Thought you Elertians would enjoy this.

From a review of **The Sacred Text: Excavating the Texts, Exploring the Interpretations, and Engaging the Theologies of the Christian Scriptures** Bird, Michael and Michael Pahl, editors:

“The final essay in this section is John C. Poirier’s **thought-provoking** “Scripture and Canon.” Here Poirier challenges current reasoning about Scripture’s authority based on “inspiration” and **suggests that Scripture’s authority is derived from the doctrinal centrality of kerygma.** This, Poirier suggests, is closest to the New Testament’s view of Scripture. In support of his argument, Poirier provides an alternate reading of 2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:20–21, and Eph 2:19–20. Moreover, the role of kerygma and the biblical author’s relationship with Jesus was one of the pivotal reasons for a work’s inclusion in the New Testament (emphasis added).”

Source: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/8115_8873.pdf

But “current reasoning” of inspiration as source of Scriptural authority? Has it not been thus since... forever?

Cheers!

Rich

Bob, responding–

Thank you for the referral to this material.

There is an interesting similarity between the approach taken by Elert in Sections 32 and 34 of *The Christian Faith* and the approach of this article.

However, there are also radical differences going back to the differences between the basic formulation of the issues in classical Calvinism and classical Lutheranism. These differences have been blurred since the late 16th century. This blurring was motivated not by theological but by political reasons.

You may remember that the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 tolerated Lutheran princes in the empire until the essential issues would be resolved by a council. The text of that political document did not define who was a Lutheran. In 1555, even the Lutheran territories that later came together under the Formula of Concord (FC) had differing definitions. That FC definition of Lutheranism had political implications. Basic Calvinist and Zwinglian positions were rejected. However, some of the most politically and militarily powerful non-Catholic princes—especially in Saxony and in Southwestern Germany—held positions that were really Calvinist, Zwinglian, or Heidelberg Catechism that were rejected by the Formula of Concord.

There was no uncertainty about these non-FC princes' differences from the Formula of Concord on the part of either these princes or their theologians. Roman Catholics were also clear about that. Roman Catholics then claimed that these princes were not really Lutherans and challenged their toleration under the Peace of Augsburg.

If the FC Lutherans were to survive politically and militarily under the Peace of Augsburg, they needed to unite all the Protestants they could find, especially the most politically and militarily powerful non-FC Protestants. That is why the FC is—I think surprisingly—not interested in the conversation with the Counter-Reformation theologians of the Council of Trent. Trent is basically ignored. Rather the focus is on differences between Lutherans, Calvinists, Zwinglians, and Heidelberg Catechism types. By 1600, the FC Lutherans are from a military and political perspective an essential but also the least important group among the Protestants.

At the end of the 16th century, both the FC Lutherans and the RC rulers of Bavaria were still hopeful that the conflict between the Lutherans and the RC (in this case, Jesuits) could be resolved. To that end a colloquy was held in 1601 in Regensburg, site of the failed meeting in 1541 between Cardinal Contarini and Melanchthon, Bucer, and others. In 1601 both sides expected that the other would be overwhelmed by their arguments and come to truth. Lutherans presented only one thesis: that Scripture is the sole judge of doctrine.

Quick and broad analysis: This departed from the FC in two ways. First, the distinction between law and gospel is no longer a factor. Second, Scripture is no longer the norm applied by the theologian to the task of judging but is rather the judge itself.

The Jesuits basically asked how—supposing they agreed with the Lutherans—they could know whether the Calvinist or the Lutheran interpretation of Scripture was correct. The Lutherans responded that God would reveal that on the Day of Judgment. The Jesuits responded that they couldn't wait that long.

The Lutherans were unable to respond and the colloquy ended with

their disgrace. Basically, the person they were trying to convert felt so sorry for them that he stopped the disputation.

The papal party had asked similar questions in the past, e.g., please tell us how many blind men were outside Jericho when Jesus left town. But the Lutherans had avoided being trapped by focusing on issues of law and gospel. At Regensburg they took the bait.

Within 20 years, they had adopted the Calvinist doctrine of verbal inspiration.

Having given up hope for conciliation with Roman Catholics, the FC Lutherans were now totally dependent—going into the Thirty Years War—on political and military alliances with other Protestants. That now became the focus. Since the other Protestants were the dominant force, Lutherans had to adopt some basic Calvinist presupposition in order to enter into conversation and to make it clear that their rejection of Calvinist teaching in the FC was not their final position. The FC left no room for moderation on the person and work of Christ or on predestination. However, it was still possible to find that basis in the doctrine of Scripture.

There were also reasons to move away from law and gospel. Lutherans had become Aristotelians in the latter part of the 16th century and the dynamic distinction between law and gospel in FC V was increasingly uncomfortable. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1530), Melanchthon defined the distinction in terms of content. FC V defines it in terms of process and acknowledges that the distinction cannot be based on content—at least sometimes not. FC VI is so broadly written that they would have to clarify it later.

So they built a fence around law and gospel and moved it from the beginning of systematics to a carefully limited role in the

doctrine of the means of grace.

Now they could say to the Calvinists and other non-FC Protestants, there's a lot of what we agree on-basically on the doctrine of Scripture and the basis on which we will decide the issues. We Protestants are every bit as close together as the RC are. The Jesuits and the Augustinians have their differences, but they agree on how they are going to solve them. We Protestants are just like them except that we are resolving our differences by agreeing to accept whatever the Bible says. This was the broad-tent Protestantism their governments needed going into the Thirty Years War. You Calvinists and Zwinglians aren't so bad after all because you would agree with us if only you more accurately interpreted the Bible.

Rich, I see that is still the presupposition underlying your e-mail. Still, the article is speaking about the Bible in a better way, I agree.

However, as an Elertian, I would respond that this way of talking about Scriptural authority as anchored in the kerygma pertains to the gospel but never the law. On the one hand, this should not concern us. From a theological point of view it really doesn't matter whether the law as we hear and respond to it is true or not. The law is anything and everything I experience that results in my not trusting in God. For example, as a pastor, I attempt to help people clarify the difference between real guilt and neurotic guilt. I may be right in the way in which I do that or I may be wrong. However, the mistrust of God which they both generate is the real issue of pastoral concern.

To be sure, all of us could benefit from more clarity about the law. Bonhoeffer was an official of the German government's CIA. All the signers of the [Barmen Declaration](#) had taken an oath of

loyalty to Hitler. Bonhoeffer was part of the plot to assassinate Hitler. The USA supported Stalin and financed his war crimes. These days Obama has decided not to prosecute the members of the Bush Administration who committed war crimes and appears to me to continue to authorize them. Even so I will vote for Obama in November—assuming I am still alive. These are important issues. However, for my theological position, it doesn't matter. What does matter is whether the message of reconciliation is valid.

I have my own opinions on law and social policy. I hold them very strongly. On some of them, I disagree with the ELCA. However, my most serious issue is that the ELCA does not distinguish its certainty about these social issues from its certainty about the gospel. In that respect, it might properly be called crypto-Calvinistic.

In this respect the article you send is hopeful but also troubling. It continues to mislead by answering a question about the Bible in ways that are relevant only to the gospel—not the law, not the whole Bible.

Bob Schultz

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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