

Remembering Werner Elert – Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death

Colleagues,

Sunday, November 21, 2004, is the 50th anniversary of the death of Werner Elert, Professor of Systematic Theology and History of Dogma at the University of Erlangen in Germany. In the year before he died three seminarians from Concordia (St. Louis) were in his classes at Erlangen—Bob Schultz, Dick Baepler and I. Not too many years thereafter all three of us wound up teaching in the theology department of Valparaiso University in Indiana. Before long another Erlangen alum and Elert student, Gottfried Krodel, came from Germany to join the department. With four “Schueler” at Valpo, Elert’s heritage took root in American soil. It was genially supported by the newly appointed theology chair Bob Bertram, whose own doctoral research on Luther rendered Elert simpatico.

If there is a thesis to this remembrance, it is this: Elert’s Confessional Lutheranism did not make a big dent on German theology—and that is a topic of its own. By contrast, however, the greatest number of “Elertian” pastors and theology teachers anywhere in the world today is quite likely in the USA. Here’s some support for that claim.

In the early 1950s in the Luth. Church-Missouri Synod [LCMS] Jaroslav J. Pelikan, young professor at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), was recommending to us students that if we wished to escape Missouri’s “hangup” with Verbal Inspiration of the Scriptures, we should go to Erlangen and study under Elert. Elert’s 2 volume “Morphologie des Luthertums” [literally: The

Morphology of Lutheranism], was “epoch-making”—he said—with its presentation of the “Evangelischer Ansatz” [“Gospel-grounding”] for Lutheran confessional theology.

So three of us students “went to Erlangen” for the academic year 1952-53. Bob Schultz, already graduated from Concordia, became Elert’s doctoral candidate. Baepler and I were only half-way through Concordia, but had finagled scholarships to go to Germany for the year. Elert died before Schultz finished his work. He attended Elert’s funeral. Elert’s colleague, Paul Althaus, took over as his “Doktorvater.” Bob’s dissertation (written in German, of course) was a flat-out Elertian theme: “Law and Gospel in Lutheran Theology in the 19th Century.” It was published by Luthersiches Verlagshaus.

Baepler and I were there only for the “Sommersemester” ’53. We all enrolled for Elert’s lectures and seminar. He even invited the three of us over for Kaffeeklatsch one Sunday afternoon, since he appreciated that the pioneer of the Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther, had been faithful to law/gospel Lutheranism and had even written a book by that title. At that Kaffeeklatsch Elert agreed to write an article for our Concordia Seminary student theological journal, “The Seminarian”—I can still hear him saying, “Das tue ich!”—which was then published when Dick and I returned to St. Louis. Its title: “Lutheranism and World History.” Most likely it is the one and only Elert article that first appeared in English—and probably never in German. He wrote it, of course, in German and we translated it. It was posted 6 years ago as Thursday Theology #29 in the first year of this enterprise. [If interested GO to the Crossings webpage (www.crossings.org) and click on Thursday Theology, December 10, 1998.]

By 1957 all three of us were at Valparaiso University, and were teaching what we had learned, not only to V.U. students, but to

the wider Missouri Synod. With Bob Bertram as dept. chair and Gottfried Krodel added to the staff later on, law/gospel Lutheranism became the trademark of "Valparaiso Theology." So there were 5 of us in one place at one time. We encountered conflict within Missouri, of course, with our teaching and writing. Verbal inspiration and "Evangelischer Ansatz" were not compatible.

This Elertian sort of Confessional Lutheranism, though hardly ever acknowledged as such, was also near the center of the eventual explosion in Missouri in 1973-74 that took place at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and then created "Concordia Seminary in Exile, a.k.a. Seminex. That is, of course, one man's opinion. Bertram and I were then on the faculty at Concordia—and "Elertian" confessional Lutheranism, already at home there (but hardly majority opinion), got additional support.

The fuse for the explosion was the LCMS national convention in 1973. By a 55% to 45% vote the convention declared the "faculty majority" [45 of the 50 professors at Concordia Seminary] to be "false teachers." Three false teachings were specified. Two of the three were actually Elert's own "heresies," although he was never named. One heresy of the Concordia faculty was called "Gospel-reductionism." In nickel words: grounding the Bible's authority on the Gospel itself [= Elert's Evangelischer Ansatz] and not on verbal inspiration. The second heresy was on the so-called "third use of God's law," a constant hot potato among Lutherans ever since the 16th century. Our "false teaching" on the law's "third use" was that we opted for Elert's Gospel-grounded interpretation and not the one the LCMS had supposedly "always" taught.

The upshot was Seminex. Seminex lasted for 10 years. Not every Seminex graduate was an "Evangelischer Ansatz" confessional Lutheran, but many were, and they are pastors and theology

professors both in the LCMS and in the ELCA, and elsewhere in the Christian church. At least six of the current bishops that I know of in the ELCA are such confessional theologians. They say so themselves. They are Seminex graduates.

When Seminex went out of existence 20 years ago, the heritage moved over to the Crossings Community, and the rest is history, the history that most of you know. If not, GO to the Crossings webpage.

The Crossings "method" for Sabbathology text studies is the Biblical hermenutics we learned from Elert—which he doubtless learned from Luther and from Apology 4 in the Lutheran Confessions. The Thursday Theology postings operate with the same hermeneutics—both for reading the scriptures and for reading the world.

All of what I have said may suggest that this Elert heritage is confined to our circles here in the USA. Not so. The Crossings website, of course, is open to the whole world. Our web-master tells us that people from over 100 countries come to our Crossings web site. If current usage persists, 100,000 distinct computers will have come to our website during 2004. Each day the website gets 1,500 "hits," one per minute 24 hrs a day. Each day the people who come to our website download over 1,000 pages of material. We don't know who they are. Nor do we know if they "believe" what we offer. But what they get (most of the time) is theology in the Gospel-grounded mode, a.k.a., the Elert tradition of confessional Lutheranism.

Elert's theology had been brought to America a generation before Pelikan was recommending him to LCMS seminary students in the 1950s. Charles M. Jacobs, Reformation scholar at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, apparently was doing the same for his students. He translated and published in 1926

Elert's "An Outline of Christian Doctrine" (German ed. 1924). In his "Translator's Preface" he says: "This volume introduces to American readers a new author, and a new system of theology. . . . The value of the book lies in its new approach to the problems of theology." But Jacobs makes no mention of the "old" Lutheran roots of this new author, new system, new approach.

Elert's own "Preface to the American Tradition" does so as he offers his book to American Lutheranism. With one eye to the chaos in Europe after World War I—also in Lutheran churches—he has higher hopes for American Lutheranism. "The inner steadfastness of American Lutheranism . . . has long had a keen eye for the necessity of keeping the abiding foundations of Lutheranism in the foreground. . . . We believe that, for this reason, it is the special task of our American sister churches . . . to be the standard-bearers who will carry forward the old banners. We dare not deceive ourselves, then, into thinking that the inner situation of Lutheranism in America and Europe is the same. But if, as children of the same mother, we do belong together, then we must look each other in the face, talk to each other, and try to see into each other's hearts."

Whether Elert's wish was fulfilled in American Lutheranism is dubious. There is scant evidence that Jacobs' translation brought any of Elert's sort of "newness" into the United Lutheran Church in America, Jacobs' denomination. It had no impact on the LCMS at all, as Pieper's dogmatics and his "Brief Statement" articulated its brand of Lutheranism in those days and for some time thereafter.

Two of Elert's books did get translated and published after WW II. The LCMS publishing house printed volume one of Elert's "Morphologie des Luthertums" under the title "The Structure of Lutheranism," but never did volume two. Muhlenberg Press, the ULCA's publisher, printed Elert's ethics book, "The Christian

Ethos," in 1957. Unhappily Elert's dogmatics, "The Christian Faith," never was published, although it was translated into English by Bob Bertam's father, Martin Bertram. The story I heard was that "Missouri" did get the rights for English publication, and Martin Bertram, life-long professor of German, did the work. But then the LCMS censors read Bertram's manuscript, noted that Elert was "heterodox" on verbal inspiration, and the project was scrubbed. A mimeographed version exists, prepared by Walter Bouman during his years of teaching at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio.

But the impact of these publications on both the ELCA and the LCMS today does not support Elert's hopes for "the inner steadfastness of American Lutheranism . . . to be the standard-bearers who will carry forward the old banners." That's a sad note on this 50th anniversary of his death. And, of course, it's not Elert, but the "Evangelischer Ansatz" that is the one thing needful—and not only in American Lutheranism. He'd be the first one to say that. It is "Gospel-grounding" that is the one-string banjo of Crossings listserve postings. But you know that.

The four of us mentioned above, who were "there" at Erlangen 51 years ago, are now retired septuagenarians. The "Meister" left his mark on all of us, even though—no surprise—we each "processed it" in distinctive ways, and thus remember Elert differently. My own remembrance on this anniversary parallels Melanchthon's at Luther's funeral in 1546. After a long sermonic eulogy [yes!] about Luther, he concluded: "But most of all I thank God for Dr. Luther because he taught me the Gospel." Elert did that for me. I too thank God.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder