

# Theses on “Biblical Authority and Biblical Hermeneutics” by Werner Elert

Colleagues,

Recent ThTh postings have highlighted Biblical hermeneutics (HOW one reads the Bible) as the jugular in current church debates—especially within stateside Lutheranism. Along the way these postings have articulated a specific hermeneutic and then claimed that it is at the center of the Lutheran Reformation. Some readers have wondered where I got such ideas. ‘Tis now the time to ‘fess up. Here’s how it happened. It was Summer Semester 1953 at the University of Erlangen in Germany—just 50 years ago. Dick Baepler, Bob Schultz, and I were there doing theology. Schultz had just graduated from Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) and was getting started on his doctorate. Dick and I, only half way through at Concordia, had finessed scholarships for a year in Germany from Deutsches Hilfswerk. [Of course, we had to get the seminary’s permission to “escape” for a year.] We three wound up at Erlangen, largely upon the advice of Jaroslav Pelikan, who was prof at “the sem” right then. “Wanna learn real Lutheran theology?” he asked. “Then study with Elert at Erlangen. He’s a Lutheran confessional superstar and he’s free from Missouri’s hangup with verbal inspiration.” As you will see below.

So we made the pilgrimage. Dick and I came back after that year to finish at St. Louis in ‘55. Schultz pressed on and got his doctorate. One course we all attended that summer was Elert’s lectures in dogmatics. His pattern was to lecture for most of the hour, and then, minutes before the bell, stop and say: “Ich diktiere.” Whereupon he would dictate theses summarizing what

he'd just told us. [He called them "Feste Saetze," solid sentences.] These I was able to copy down—auf deutsch, of course—and subsequently translate into English. Here's the section of those these on hermeneutics and authority of the Bible. I've tried to "lighten" Elert's academic German a bit in my translation. Even so, my spouse/proof-reader says my English still calls for another translation—this time into "real" English. Well, I tried. Real theology takes real work. Marie says she does "get" it. I trust that you will too.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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***THE WHAT AND HOW OF GOD'S REVELATION  
[Das Offenbarwerden Gottes]  
(A section of the "Feste Saetze" from Werner  
Elert's lectures in Dogmatics at  
Erlangen University, Summer Semester 1953)***

*I. THE GOSPEL Intro: "Dogma" is the early church's technical term for the "Sollgehalt" of the "kerygma." "Sollgehalt" = what's gotta be there if proclamation is to be genuinely Christian.*

- 1. The kerygma of the Christian church is, according to the unanimous testimony of its primary witnesses, Good News, Gospel.*
- 2. The Gospel is both a report (indicative sentences) and a message personally addressed to us (exhortation). The Gospel indicatives predominate in the 4 written Gospels of the NT, the exhortation*

*in the apostolic epistles.*

- 3. As indicative sentences the Gospel reports about Jesus in such a way that the word of God is perceptible in him. Christ is the LOGOS (Word) of God (Jn.1). This LOGOS is the "logos tees katallagees," word of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:13).*
- 4. The human speech of the apostles is also called "God's word" because the person of Christ constitutes its substantive content. Insofar as later proclamation has the same substantive content, it too can be designated the Word of God.*
- 5. The Gospel as exhortation is the application of the report (the indicative sentences) about Christ to the hearers and readers. To this goal the written gospels report how Jesus called his hearers to come to him (Mt. 11:28). The witness of the apostles adds to the reportorial word of reconciliation the additional element of exhortation, an appeal (Greek: paraklesis) to the hearers: "We appeal to you, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).*
- 6. In its exhortation mode the Gospel expresses the fact that its substantive content is meant for the hearers. Its aim is to "strike" them, to lay claim to them.*
- 7. All of the apostolic speaking is but the means, the medium, for making the reported event audibly available. The apostles witness to the reconciliation; their testimony does not create it.*

## *II. FAITH*

- 1. The willingness of hearers to acknowledge the substantive content of the gospel as something meant for them and to relate its effective force to themselves is Faith.*
- 2. Faith entails an "obedience," namely, the*

willingness to submit to the Gospel's exhortation. In this sense faith is obedient submission—not however, submitting to a command, but to the “paraklesis,” the Gospel's appeal [I:5 above]. Faith shows that the hearer has indeed been “struck” by the Gospel.

3. The effective force of the gospel for the person of faith arises from the fact that its content is the incarnate Word of God.
4. The criticism that this is all an illusion (e.g., Feuerbach) arises from observers who persist in the posture of mere spectator. By contrast persons of faith know that they have been called out of their spectator position. Believers lose dominion over themselves by handing themselves over unconditionally to Christ as their new Dominus (Lord).

### III. THE LAW AS REALITY INFLICTED BY GOD

1. The gospel promises, and faith is, a change of existence. Humankind's old existence, according to the testimony of the apostles, is “life under the law.” For the apostles this phrase means: being dominated by the law, imprisoned by it, enslaved under it.
2. The law concretely effects God's curse and wrath.
3. The law is effectively in force, not because it is spoken or written, but because it is inflicted by God. Law is not moral prescriptions, but is instead the ominous destiny that hangs over every sinner's head.
4. The law applies to all without exception, for according to Paul's specific testimony it is effectively in force even where it is unknown, at least where it is unknown as God's written law.

#### IV. THE CONCEPT AND DIALECTICS OF REVELATION

1. Gospel and law cannot be coordinated as two segments of an historical development, nor as two communications mutually supplementing each other. Even if the term "revelation" is used for both in the Bible, it would be invalid to conclude that finally they are not contradictory in their respective effects.
2. God's law, which is inflicted upon us (III:3 above), and the Gospel of which we are the beneficiaries correspond to the NT testimony about God's dual revelation. Corresponding to the law is God's revealing his wrath and humankind's sin; corresponding to the Gospel is God's revealing his mercy and humankind's faith.
3. Both revelations, i.e., law and gospel, stand in a dialectical relationship with each other. They are like a speech and a rebuttal which contradict each other, and yet both are indubitably valid. What one reveals the other covers up; when one lights up, the other is darkened.
4. The paradox of this dialectical conflict reaches its finale in Christ, and finds its resolution in him alone. He alone could take the voice of the law and both make us hear it, and also on his own silence it. He was the victim of the law's order of sin-and-death and simultaneously its conqueror. He alone could open up the grace of God and simultaneously close off God's wrath.
5. The paradox is resolved only for those who have faith, the ones who have been struck by the Gospel because they previously were struck by the law.

#### V. FAITH'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

1. The knowledge of God we have, which is correlative

to God's self-revelation in Christ, is not to be confused with mere intellectual apprehension. Faith's knowledge of God entails the involvement of one's entire person, an involvement consisting in our prior awareness that we have been "known" and that we really are the ones who are meant in the summons that addresses us in Christ.

2. So-called "natural knowledge of God," the reality of which is not to be doubted (Rom. 1:19), is rooted in the fact that God actually does encounter humankind in every earthly event. Denial of this encounter is atheism.
3. Corresponding to this natural knowledge of God is God's revelation of his wrath (Rom. 1:18) in the law's order of mortality. This knowledge needs to be conquered by faith in the revelation of grace that comes in Christ.

#### VI. GOD'S WAY OF REVEALING THE SINNER

1. God's law is God's judicial action. It exposes sinners to be "under the judgment of God" (*sub iudicio dei*).
2. Through that action God passes sentence on everyone, together with our entire natural self-understanding.
3. Through God's law the power of fate's coercive force upon us is revealed to be God's power, and our self-assertion against it is revealed to be revolt against God.
4. Through the law not merely individual sins are uncovered, but each of us in our entire person is exposed as a sinner, as one who exists in hostility toward God (Rom. 8:2).
5. The law leaves no area of our life immune to its accusation. It thereby convinces us that our

*sinfulness extends all the way back to our natural origin. Sin understood as natural man's congenital opposition to God is designated original sin.*

- 6. Sin is designated as guilt inasmuch as it is personally charged to our account.*
- 7. The inescapable nature of guilt (revealed in the way the law makes no exception as it carries out its death threat for every sinner) reveals God to be the one who kills his own creatures, the deus absconditus (God with mercy hidden).*

## **VII. THE SACRED SCRIPTURES**

- 1. The theological problem of the authority of the scriptures confronts both the individual Christian as well as the total church. It is both subjective (the Bible as authority for me personally) and objective authority (Bible as authority in the church's public life).*
- 2. Subjective authority: The OT and NT scriptures certify themselves to the Christian via the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" as God's word of law pertaining to each Christian and God's word of Gospel meant for each one.*
- 3. Objective authority: For the church at large the problem divides into three questions:*
  - the authority of the NT,*
  - the authority of the OT, and*
  - the authority of the canonicity of individual NT books.*
- 4. THE OBJECTIVE AUTHORITY OF THE NT resides in its character as source and norm for the Gospel actually is.*
- 5. It is the only authentic SOURCE for our knowledge of God's historical self-revelation in Christ, since this could only be certified authentically by*

eye and ear witnesses (Luke 1:2; 1 John 1:1), and since we today have no access to the oral, but only to the written testimony of these witnesses.

6. It is the only and absolute NORM for the church's total kerygma (Gospel-proclamation), since the apostles themselves (via their reception of the Holy Spirit promised them by Christ) became organs for God's self-revelation, and because all subsequent events that happen in the church must be normed by this revelation.
7. As the sole source and norm for what the church does, the written apostolic witness needs no supplemental additions from other witnesses. The "sufficiency" of scriptures needs no filling-out from "tradition."
8. THE OBJECTIVE AUTHORITY OF THE OT: Before Gentile audiences the apostles did not make the validity of their witness to Christ depend on any previous acknowledgment of the OT. This fact is significant even today for Christian mission to other peoples in the world.
9. For three reasons the Christian church acknowledged the OT as a normative word of God.
  - A. The God of the OT is also the Father of Jesus Christ and thereby also our Father.
  - B. In its promises the OT too is testimony to Christ.
  - C. The OT (not in the Mosaic law, but definitely in the prophets) is not merely witness addressed to the ancient covenant people, but also witness about all peoples and addressed to all peoples.
10. For the first two reasons (A & B) the authority of the OT in the Christian church can only be

*understood from the authority of the NT; its content can only be understood from the content of the NT.*

- 11. CANONICITY OF INDIVIDUAL NT BOOKS: The opinion that the post-exilic church is the guarantor of the NT canon is misleading, since the church as far as she was concerned stood uninterruptedly under the apostles' authority—at first that of their oral testimony, and after their death, under the authority of their written testimony. Instead the reverse is true: it is the church which received the canon from the hands of the apostles; she did not create it.*
- 12. Concerning the canonicity of the vast majority of the NT documents there never was any doubt in the church. They are the "homologoumena" (agreed-upon texts).*
- 13. The decisive factor for their canonicity was and is the bond between their content and their origin. The criterion of content is that all the homologoumena engage in what Luther called "Christum treiben." They "push" Christ. In contrast with all later witness of the church, of which the same "Christum treiben" would also hold true, the homologoumena are original witnesses—derived from no previous source known to us. Wherever earlier sources are drawn in, as in Luke 1:1, these are nevertheless available to us only via the mediation of the canonical homologoumena.*
- 14. The question of the canonicity of the "antilegomena" (books spoken against by some) still confronts the church today just as it did the church of the fourth century.*
- 15. For interpreting the scriptures two fundamental*

axioms apply. Their classical Latin labels are a) *perspicuitas* (*scriptura scripturam interpretes*) [[transparent clarity, with scripture interpreting scripture], and b) *analogia fidei* [the yardstick of faith]. In practice that means: “dark” passages of scripture are interpreted with the help of “clear” ones to get clarity. “Clear” passages are clear Gospel (=promise) proclamations. Since faith is always faith-in-the-promise, these two Latin mottoes are correlative: the “yardstick” of faith means faith in the “clear” promissory Gospel of the scriptures.