

“Think Gospel, Preach Christ!” Lessons from Elert for Today’s Church (Part 1)

Colleagues,

Here is the first helping of the treat I promised you last Sunday, an essay by Ed Schroeder. Guest editor Stephen Hitchcock will set the table. The topic line above is my fault, not Ed’s or Steve’s. If someone else can conjure a better ten-word summary of what you’re about to work through, do tell.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Introduction

In this, the second decade of the 21st century, declines in attendance and offerings have left many anxious that the church’s message no longer appeals to today’s hearers. In our broader society, the intensely partisan nature of almost every dimension of life raises questions about the role of the church and of individual Christians in politics and civil society.

In the midst of this anxiety and confusion, the essay below offers insights that can help us grasp the essence of our proclamation of the Gospel as well as the core of the doctrine or dogma that serves as a foundation of our life as Christians.

In particular, as we observe the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting of his 95 theses, [more than half of all American Protestants](#) say that *both* good deeds *and* faith are needed for salvation.

At a time when so many fail to grasp the central tenet of Luther's teaching, the theology of Werner Elert [ref] Werner Elert, a Lutheran theologian, was born Aug. 19, 1885, in Heldrungen, Saxony, and died Nov. 21, 1954. Following his education at the universities of Breslau, Erlangen, and Leipzig (1906-1912), he served as pastor at Seefeld in Pomerania (1912-1919), director of the Lutheran Seminary at Breslau (1919-1923), and *Professor Ordinarius* at Erlangen (1923-1954). Among his chief works are *Morphologie des Lutbertums*, 2 vols. (1931-1932, Eng. [Vol. 1]: *The Structure of Lutberanism*, 1962); *Der christliche Glaube* (1940); and *Das christliche Ethos* (1949, Eng.: *The Christian Ethos*, 1957).[/ref] can be instructive. Based on his close study of Luther and the Book of Concord, Elert insisted that the church's dogma prescribes the necessary content of its kerygma or proclamation—and the prescribed content of that kerygma is Christ himself. Prescribed is not only "Christ himself," but "Christ alone with no addenda." *Satis est* ("that is enough") was the Augsburg confessors' Latin predicate to "Christ alone."

Without adherence to "Christ alone with no addenda," the church's proclamation too easily defaults to "works righteousness." Anything less than Christ alone becomes the futile—and deadly—attempt to justify ourselves apart from faith in the promise of our new creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The essay below represents an edited version of a summary (*Concordia Theological Monthly* 36:11, December, 1965) of one chapter of a dissertation written by Edward H. Schroeder and

submitted to the theological faculty of the University of Hamburg in 1963: *The Relationship Between Dogmatics and Ethics in the Thought of Elert, Barth, and Troeltsch*.

In revising the language and syntax of this essay, Ed Schroeder offered valuable clarifications and corrections. In several instances, new text was supplied to make Elert's analysis more understandable to today's reader. Throughout this process, Marie Schroeder and Ronald Neustadt contributed extensive editorial assistance. We can all rejoice that we continue to have opportunities to learn from one of the founders of the Crossings Community.

Stephen Hitchcock
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Kerygma, Dogma, and Ethos:

What We Preach, What We Confess, Who We Become

by Edward H. Schroeder

Elert's Foundational Definitions

A concern for dogmatics and a concern for ethics do not always go together. Werner Elert's Lutheranism led him to say yes to both a separate dogmatics and a separate ethics based on a specific understanding of their relation to each other.

Convinced that dogmatics and ethics are two distinctly different enterprises, Elert wrote separate volumes for each. His book on dogmatics he called *Der Christliche Glaube* (The Christian Faith) and his book on ethics *Das Christliche Ethos* (The Christian Ethos).

Here is how Elert comes to that conclusion. He begins by defining the four key concepts—dogmatics, ethics, dogma, and ethos. Dogmatics and ethics are separate theological sciences or disciplines. They are separate because they investigate two different subject matters: dogma and ethos. They are scientific in the same sense that other intellectual disciplines are scientific. That is, they follow a critical process (in the sense of *krisis*—making judgments) of asking and answering the question of the “sufficient grounds” for any claim made about any subject matter. In simple words, they ask the why? Question: “Why, for what reason finally, is this or that Christian claim made?”

Dogmatics does this with Christian dogma; ethics does this with the Christian ethos. The disciplines of dogmatics and ethics are separate and distinct because dogma and ethos are distinct entities.

Elert’s study of early church history convinced him that when Christians in that era (Greek speakers) used the word “dogma,” they understood it to mean “prescription.” Those early Christians asserted that dogma is the prescription for the kerygma, kerygma being their Greek word for Christian proclamation.

In Elert’s view, *only two explicit dogmas* were formulated in the early church: the Trinitarian dogma and the Christological dogma. The first dogma prescribes that, when God is proclaimed, you shall use the language of Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The second prescription is that, when salvation is proclaimed, you shall speak of the second person of the Trinity enfleshed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

And the overarching rubric in these prescriptions is that, when

you are proclaiming the Trinitarian God and the Christological message of salvation, it shall strike the hearers' ears as good news, the good news—about God and about salvation—that came with Jesus.

The Biblical report of Paul on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22ff) suggests that dozens of other prescriptions for God-talk and for salvation-talk were on the scene when the Christian message was first being proclaimed.

Thus dogma is the required or necessary content of the kerygma. The kerygma is the primal Christian message. Dogma prescribes the necessary minimum—and maximum—content of the kerygma that is required to keep it what it was originally intended to be.

Dogma's Authority

For Elert, dogma is neither what you have to believe (*credenda*) nor what you have to teach (*docenda*). Rather, dogma is what has to be preached (*praedicanda*) if the proclamation is to be Christian. The opposite of dogma is heresy—that which must *not* be preached under the guise of Christian proclamation. In this sense dogma is also the maximum necessary content of the kerygma. The “have to” in the sentence above signals a requirement, and that raises the question of authority: “By whose authority is this a requirement?”

When Christians refer to their dogmatic formulations as “confessions,” they are already indicating that the authority of their confessions is secondary. Confessions are responses to something prior, and the term “confessions” indicates that they are freely given. The confessions are not coerced; they are the personal convictions and commitment of the confessors. The authority of the dogma does not consist in coercion to believe something, but rather in the binding obligation and commitment to preach and teach something.

Neither the confessions—nor the ancient dogmas preceding them—stand first in line as authorities for a book on dogmatics. Those confessions and the ancient dogmas preceding them do not have the ultimate authority. Rather they come with derivative authority. *The original or primary source and authority is the Gospel itself—or even the Gospel “Himself,” Christ.* Both church dogma and church confessions are “confessions to the Gospel.” They are confessions to a message previously heard, trusted, and now confessed as authoritative for the one confessing.[ref] Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube. Grundlinien der Lutherischen Dogmatik*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1940), pp. 38f. Hereafter cited as *Glaube*.[/ref]

In seeking the sufficient grounds of this dogma, dogmatics is forced back behind the confessions and into the Bible in order to formulate the required content of the kerygma. However, just because kerygma is in the Bible is not “sufficient grounds” for its being authorized.[ref] A favorite illustration of this for Elert is the passage in Jude 9 about Michael and Satan arguing over the body of Moses. *Ibid.*, p. 261.[/ref]

As the dogmatician attends to the canonical books of the Bible—to which the church also listens—she must listen to the kerygma. And this means listening to Christ himself. The centrality of Christ’s own person is that he is the one absolute point, the irreplaceable center, in all the canonical documents. Christ is both “the authorizer as well as the content of the church’s kerygma because in Christ the formal and the material *Sollen* (what should be *in* the proclamation”) coincide.”[ref] *Ibid.*, p. 51. [/ref]

Of course, when we get all the way back to Christ himself, we learn that Christ claimed God himself as his authority for the kerygma. Thus the sufficient grounds of the church’s dogma finally is “thus says the Lord.” God himself authorizes this

kerygma with precisely this prescribed content.

What then is Christian Ethos?

Ethos is a qualitative label. "Value-words" are used in discussing Christian ethos: sinner/righteous, condemned/redeemed, lost/saved. Christian ethos is that quality—that value—that a person receives by virtue of God's own verdict about that person.

In defining ethics and its subject matter—the Christian ethos—Elert says that ethos is not descriptive of what Christians do, *nor* is ethos the *prescriptions* that they seek to follow. Ethos is not the corresponding *agenda* (what you must do) to the *credenda* (*what you have to believe*). That notion of dogma—dogma as what you must believe—Elert had already rejected when he specified the task of dogmatics.

Although the Christian ethos is normative, it is *not normative in terms of the laws* that guide one's daily life. Ethos is the quality—the value—that humans receive by virtue of God's verdict upon them. Therefore, the central task of theological ethics is to determine the sufficient grounds of God's judgment: what is it and how can we ascertain the quality of that divine judgment?

In this sense "kerygma and ethos stand in the same relation to each other as cause and effect." [ref] Werner Elert, *Das christliche Ethos: Grundlinien der lutherischen Ethik* (Tubingen: FurcheVerlag, 1949). English translation: *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), p. 15. Hereafter cited as *Ethos*. [/ref] The dogma in dogmatics delineates what has to be preached; the Christian ethos of ethics is the quality of our life that comes when we hear and believe the kerygma.

Thus, without the kerygma of the church—of which dogma represents the prescribed content—there can be no Christian

ethos.

But the cause-effect relationship is not automatic. The Christian ethos is not the necessary consequence that must follow in us when we have encountered the kerygma. Instead Elert's emphasis is that when God's verdict about us changes, *our quality and worth also thereby change*. This change takes place because we have come in contact with the kerygma, and in our believing its prescribed content—that is, Jesus Christ—the quality of our existence has changed.