

“Think Gospel, Preach Christ!” Lessons from Elert for Today’s Church (Part 2)

Colleagues,

Here is the second installment of Ed Schroeder’s “Kerygma, Dogma, and Ethos: What We Preach, What We Confess, Who We Become.” There is much to digest here. Chew slowly, with thanks to God.

Installment Three will follow in seven days. For the story behind this essay, see last week’s introduction by guest editor Stephen Hitchcock.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Center in Elert’s Theology

Elert’s definition of dogmatics and ethics rests on his notion of the heart of Christian theology: *the distinction between Law and Gospel*. The Scriptures themselves, says Elert, convey nothing about God apart from the rubrics of Law and Gospel. There is no undifferentiated “neutral” revelation of God in the Scriptures.

The rubrics Law and Gospel refer to the “double dialectic” about God and humans that comes into being by virtue of God’s revelation. Law/Gospel, on the one hand, indicates the

wrath/grace dialectic in God's own self and, on the other hand, the sin/faith dialectic in humans. The dialectic of Christian theology is not God vs. humans. Rather the dialectic is wrath/sin vs. mercy/faith, two antithetical relationships between God and his human creatures.

However, the revelations of God's wrath and grace—and the correlative revelations of our human sin and faith—are *not* the uncovering of secrets, nor the transmission of previously unknown information, but the *creation of a reality*. Elert calls this reality created by God's words of wrath and grace the *Geltung* (validity and effectiveness) of those two words. Despite the apparent paradox of those two words, both are "valid," namely, God puts each of God's two creative words into effect.

Therefore, the Law and Gospel tension cannot be resolved by subsuming the terminology or the content into a higher unity. The *Geltung*—the effective presence of two contradictory realities—is the point of conflict. If there is to be reconciliation between these two contradictory realities, it will only come from the One who stands behind them and who puts them into effect. This is exactly what happened through the manifestation of Christ. ¹ In Christ these conflicting realities were reconciled.

That is why the New Testament views *Christ as the central content of the Gospel*. He is the Gospel's content in two dimensions: first, as the announcement of the historical words and events of Christ's ministry *together with* a second announcement of the theological consequence of these words and events for the relationship between God and humans.

Thus the announcement that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself " (2 Corinthians 5:19) is followed by "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." This

second announcement is the hortatory proclamation of the consequence or significance of the announcement for the hearers and readers. This hortatory announcement calls for faith, but not faith in general, not even faith in God, but faith in the Gospel, the central content of which is Christ.

The alternative operative reality called "Law" is indicated by the apostles when they label their life before they had faith in the Gospel as a life "under the law." When they came to faith in the Gospel, it was their "redemption from this life under the law." ²

Because ancient Israel had a verbalized and codified law, it was easy for her to have a mistaken concept of God's law. Elert calls this mistaken concept the "moral misunderstanding," to which even the ancient church succumbed. ³ But the revelation of "law" is *not* the revealing of moral legislation and the resulting legal knowledge of God. The revelation of the law takes place not by its being verbalized, but rather by its de facto being put into effect. Law is being revealed *when its fatal consequences are taking place*, when the sinful human is being provoked to exorbitant rebellion against God. The law is revealed when wrath, curse, and death are in effect and operative.

The revelation of the law does not have to be verbally expressed to be in action. By contrast, however, *the Gospel must be expressed*. This Gospel was "originally spoken in the person of Christ, and subsequently proclaimed by the apostles," in order for it to be revealed and to be operative. ⁴ God's law can be and has been preached vocally and verbally, but it is also in effect and operative on those to whom it was not verbally addressed. As Elert puts it, "The Law of God is effective also where it is not known." ⁵

Christ and the Law

Elert contrasts this concept of the law with the “moral misunderstanding” that views the law only as God’s legislation. Law is not simply God’s legislation but *God in action administering justice* ⁶ This is the law that “always accuses” (cf. the *lex semper accusat* of the Lutheran Confessions). Thus the law is never simply divine information, but rather divine accusation, divine condemnation, and divine execution. This radical judgmental character of the law is central to Elert’s view of the important relation between Christ and the law. In a word: the law killed Jesus.

Elert points out that not only Paul but also John’s Gospel (1:17) *contrast* Christ with the law. Therefore, *Christ is no lawgiver*. The united testimony of the New Testament is that Christ was not on the giving but rather the receiving end of the law. If nothing else, Christ’s death testifies that he was “under the Law.” Although the law killed him, the end result of his willing submission to the law is that *Christ silenced the law*. His death destroyed the law’s “order of death” and brought life and resurrection into human history. As Paul tells the Corinthians, “in Christ, God was reconciling,” not for Christ’s own sake, but *pro nobis* (for us).

The *pro nobis* of the Gospel turns the announcement into an exhortation. For all who receive this exhortation in faith, the revelation of Christ is the revelation of the grace of God *and* the veiling of God’s wrath. The paradox that God’s wrath is *both revealed and done away with* cannot be grasped and understood apart from faith in Christ, the One in whom the paradox of God’s grace and wrath is finally resolved ⁷

Faith *in* this Gospel is faith in the promise that, because of Christ, the paradox of our relationship to God is now resolved.

Ours is always “faith *against* the law, faith against appearances, faith against the God of wrath and judgment,”⁸ “against the death verdict.”⁹ The paradox is always and only resolved in faith, specifically in faith in Christ. Christ is the only entity we can interpose “against” the law, wrath, judgment, and death that continue as one paradoxical side of Christian human existence.

The Shape of Elert’s “Ethics”

Many in the Christian tradition have shaped their writing about ethics around the basic question, “What ought I do?” Elert, though, says that question is inadmissible, for it necessarily winds up with the law. Even though such ethics admit the need for the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and thus avoid crass synergism, the law invariably has the last word. In this view, the Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ is used to help humans serve the law.

For Elert, the truth of Christian ethics is, of course, the exact opposite. The law is ultimately subject to and subjugated by the Gospel, for the Gospel is the “last word.”

An ethics oriented to God’s verdict about humans cannot simply dismiss the law but will have to deal with it. But how? Elert begins with the claim that the essence of life under the law is *thesemper accusat*. Life under the law is a life that is always under accusation, always under critique. That puts us under God’s negative verdict. Elert uses the qualitative rubric “nomological existence” to describe our life under the law.

Understanding nomological existence or acknowledging it does not by itself make an ethics Christian. Rather *Christian* ethics first enters the picture when we heed another of God’s pronouncements: the assurance of forgiveness. Not God’s law as

rules, regulations, demands, commandments, prohibitions, but rather God's verdict about us as humans is what Christian ethics presents.

Furthermore, the distinctive verdict of God that brings about the distinctive quality of the Christian is God's verdict of the Gospel. ¹⁰ Therefore Elert says that Christian ethics "must approach its subject from two directions." ¹¹ It must examine, first, our quality under God's verdict of the law and, second and necessarily, our quality under God's verdict of the Gospel.

So Part I of Elert's ethics is "Ethos Under Law," which treats the quality of our life in God's perspective, whether or not we acknowledge this quality of life. Part II is "Ethos Under Grace," which treats the person and work of Christ as his saving work *changes* the "quality" of humans.

The Church's Role

After these two major units, Elert unexpectedly adds a third part called "Objective Ethos." The term "objective" here is used in contrast to the "subjective" individualized ethos of Parts I and II, where individual human subjects are the subject matter. This third section on "Objective Ethos" considers *the church as a whole*. For Elert, the church is a community that is "still something other than the sum total of all Christians." ¹² The *community as a whole* is also subject to the judgment of God.

For Elert, the law is operative even if it is not proclaimed. Thus God does not "need" the church to get *this* word of divine judgment communicated. The wrath of God and God's justice upon the sinner happen "naturally."

But the Gospel does not happen "naturally." *It is operative only by special effort*. Christ's ministry is the special effort that

brought the Gospel into existence. And where this Gospel is not proclaimed by Christ's people in efforts corresponding to Christ's own ministry, the Gospel is not present and operative. But God really does want this Gospel, his last and final word, revealed to humans. Therefore, God has instituted the church for this role of ambassadorial communication (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

As God's ambassador, the church does not function "creatively" in producing her message. Rather the church passes on what she has been commissioned to speak by the One who authorized her. Not only in her life but also in her message, the church is "following after" (*Nachfolge*) Christ. The church speaks God's Word *after* Christ so that her theology is not her word about God, but her communication of *God's Word about God's self*. The church does not communicate how she "feels" about God, but rather announces God's Word about how God "feels" toward humans.

In executing its ambassadorial role, however, the church is not simply "on her own." God is personally present in the church. For it is *God's* church, and God supervises the work the church does on behalf of God. God's personal presence—God's supervision—is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit functions as the "plant director" for the church's operation. The Spirit is God present in the church promoting God's own Gospel.

The Link between Dogmatics and Ethics

Dogmatics is concerned with the "that" (*Dass*) and the "what" (*Was*) of the divine speech. Ethics is concerned with the actual "quality" that a human life takes on when we are the recipient of that particular divine speech.

Elert calls the relation between dogma and ethos the relation between cause and effect. *Dogma*—the essential Gospel content of the church's kerygma—produces in those who trust that Gospel the

new *ethos*—or quality—of “forgiven sinners.” The essential content of the other message, the law (whether consciously perceived or not) produces the equally genuine qualification of “sinners.”

For Elert, dogmatics investigates *what* God says we humans are—together with the need, the grounds, and the urgency of that divine communication. Dogmatics is the discipline oriented to and focused on the kerygma, past and present. Ethics, on the other hand, investigates what we humans are by virtue of that proclamation. Ethics is oriented toward those who are the object of the proclamation. Ethics describes what happens “qualitatively” to them and in them.

One might ask whether the common focus on Law and Gospel might not establish some common bond between dogmatics and ethics. Is there a bond in addition to the cause-and-effect connection already mentioned? The answer is obviously “yes,” but not in the sense that we could assign either Law or Gospel to one or the other discipline. Insofar as both Law and Gospel are God’s speech, *both belong in dogmatics*. And, insofar as both have an operative effect on people qualifying their actual existence, *both belong in ethics*.

For Elert, the common concern with Law and Gospel is the common concern of all theology – historical, exegetical, or practical. In fact, what makes any history, any philology, any systematics, *theological*, is that God’s verdicts are being heard in, with, and under it. And there are *only two verdicts* from God: judgment and grace, Law and Gospel. Elert states simply that there is no third option.

Why Distinguish Law and Gospel?

There is another way to see how Elert’s understanding of Law and Gospel leads to his distinction between the disciplines of

dogmatics and ethics. The sufficient reason or grounds for the Lutheran passion for the radical distinction of Law and Gospel is not Biblicistic (“That is the way it is in the Bible”) nor traditional (“That has always been the Lutheran position”). Rather, the grounds for the distinction of Law and Gospel is Christological and pastoral.

The Lutheran Confessions, to which Elert is committed, criticize the “mixing” of Law and Gospel in medieval Roman theology on precisely such Christological and pastoral grounds. In urging this distinction, the confessions note the consequence of mixing Law and Gospel:

- the merits and benefits of Christ are reduced, and Christ is dis-graced;
- the gift character of the Gospel is turned into performance-demanding law; and
- disturbed sinners are robbed of the genuine comfort which God wants them to have. ¹³

Thus Law and Gospel must be kept distinct from each other for the sake of the Gospel, for Christ’s sake. It is not enough for Christian theology to insist, “Let God be God.” It must also insist, “Let Christ Be Christ.” The corollary to letting Christ be Christ is to “let the law be law.” The law dare not be “evangelized.” Only Christ has taken the sting and strength out of the law with his death.

Thus, any attempt to manipulate the law into some sort of merger with the Gospel is finally a vote of “no confidence” in Christ. In his monograph on Law and Gospel, Elert criticizes the peaceful coexistence of Law and Gospel in Calvin’s theology. Elert says: “Thereby the law is actually disarmed. . . . which carries with it the consequence that the Gospel also is similarly reduced in power.” ¹⁴