

“Think Gospel, Preach Christ!” Lessons from Elert for Today’s Church (Part 3)

Colleagues,

See below for the final installment of Ed Schroeder’s “Kerygma, Dogma, and Ethos: What We Preach, What We Confess, Who We Become.” For background I send you again to guest editor’s Stephen Hitchcock’s introduction of the piece in ThTheol 910. And again my sole suggestion as dispatching editor is that you read slowly and with care. You will come at length to one of several issues that are keeping assorted Lutheran camps at arm’s length from each other as they prepare for next Tuesday’s celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Suffice it here to suggest that those who want to digest Luther would do well to swallow some hefty doses of Elert. Our thanks to Dr. Ed for dispensing this one.

“For freedom Christ has set us free....”

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Who Can Proclaim the Kerygma?

The serious heresies in the history of the church have been those aimed at the distinctiveness of the Gospel. That’s why Elert’s separation of dogmatics and ethics into distinct

disciplines led him to highlight the anti-Donatist motif inherent in his separation of the two.

As did Luther, Elert considered what the enduring relevance was of that fourth century heresy for the church's proclamation of the Gospel. Originally, the question was whether those clergy who had renounced Christianity during Diocletian's persecutions could resume their duties. Donatists called into question the saving efficacy of their preaching and the sacraments they celebrated.

In his ecclesiology, Elert takes an anti-Donatist stance and states that "the church is not dependent upon the ethos of men."

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This means that the empirical ethos of the proclaimer, including his "faith," or the empirical ethos of the person addressed do not add to nor detract from the content of the message. The specific content of the church's message is what it is simply because God says so.

That is true even if no one in the world believed it and even if no one's ethos even suggested it. God's two-fold verdict is valid simply because God utters that two-fold verdict. This applies to a person's ethos under law where the empirical behavior might be so "good" that it would suggest that this person cannot be a sinner. It *also* applies to a person's ethos under grace, where a Christian's empirical behavior might be so "bad" that it would suggest that this person cannot possibly be a "forgiven sinner."

For Elert, ethics portrays a person as God perceives—or values—him or her. ² Insofar as this theological anthropology is part of the necessary content of the kerygma, it too will appear in dogmatics. But the degree to which the grace-ethos is visible

in the ethos of the “earthen vessel” does not affect the nature, extent, or genuineness of the “treasure”—the prescribed or necessary content of the kerygma.

In terms of his favorite passage (2 Corinthians 5:19), Elert might well have said that dogmatics is concerned with the “In Christ, God was reconciling the world... Be reconciled to God.” In other words, the *first* announcement, proclaiming the event of the historical Christ, is followed by the *second* announcement—and an imperative addressed to the hearers urging them to appropriate the first announcement for themselves. (*Bericht und Anrede* were Elert’s German words for this two-fold message.) Ethics, then, is concerned with the “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Elert says that both dogmatics and ethics address themselves to the same question: “Who is Christ?” But there are differences. Dogma is doctrine. When dogmatics raises the question “Who is Christ?” it seeks to understand what the church teaches concerning him (“God was in Christ”). Ethics is the quality or value of a person under God’s judgment as factual reality. The ethical inquiry into the nature of Christ is the question of his importance for God’s judgment of humans or—and this definition amounts to the same thing—it is the question about the quality of that human person.

The purpose of this ethical inquiry is not the formulation of a correct Christology, but the elaboration of the fact that the Christ-encounter endows human ethos with a new quality: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” ³

Elert’s anti-Donatist stance asserts that a person’s faith or unfaith is ethos, not dogma. Thereby, from another angle, any proposed scheme of *credenda/agenda* (things-to-be-believed/things-to-be-done) for dogmatics/ethics is invalidated.

The *credenda/agenda* scheme views dogmatics as concerned with God-human relationships and ethics as concerned with human-human relationships.

But this scheme is invalid because the person who exists in either of the two possible God-human relationships (Law or Gospel) is always and simultaneously in a multitude of human-to-human relationships. An individual's actual ethos is manifested both in relationship to God and in relationships to other humans. The quality of a person's ethos (either under Law or under the Gospel) includes "attitude" and actions toward God as well as attitude and actions toward human fellows.

Ethics treats the quality of human life as it is lived. Under the Law, it is life lived for ourselves, in rebellion against God and in enmity against our neighbor. Under the Gospel, by virtue of Christ's redemption, we live our earthly life in freedom for others. "To make this clear is the task of theological ethics. ⁴"

Since "faith" towards God is one quality of a person's life under the Gospel—and "unfaith" or sin the corresponding quality of life under the Law—both of these concepts belong primarily in ethics and not in dogmatics. The content of the word(s) of God as treated by dogmatics is Law or Gospel; the consequence of those words—the realm of ethics—is unfaith and its sinful manifestations *or* faith and its faithful manifestations. The church lives and grows by virtue of what God says, and not by virtue of the ethos of her people. To contradict this is to affirm Donatism.

Faith and Works

Again with Luther, Elert also saw that Pelagianism, another heresy in the early church, continued to threaten the

proclamation of the Gospel. In the early fifth century, Pelagius argued humans had the capacity—with God's grace—to carry out the good works necessary for salvation.

For Elert, the enduring appeal of Pelagianism resulted in the false view that ethics could be taught—and that God's Law could be instructive for Christians.

Dogmatics concentrates on the core content of the church's kerygma as it is preached and taught. Although one can teach the core content of the kerygma, one cannot teach the subject matter of ethics. *Ethos as a quality*—as a value bestowed on humans—*is not taught*. Rather ethos is produced by God revealing God's Law and God's Gospel, a revelation that creates a relationship. That quality or value cannot be produced even by teaching people what ethos is, what quality they would have *if* they believed, or what quality they will have *if* they do not.

As Luther's apple tree bore apples because it *was* an apple tree and not because it had been taught to do so, so our life *has* specific qualities because we are either a sinner or a forgiven sinner. We do not become a sinner—or a forgiven sinner—by producing, achieving, capturing, learning, or being taught the qualities. The work of God—God's verdict—creates the qualities.

In the dogma (the prescribed or necessary content of the kerygma) we hear what God's creative work is and—and to the extent that God has revealed this—why God is doing it. Ethos is the anthropological manifestation of that work of God. Ethos is the concrete theologically "tangible" human life that really is created by this work of God.

Faith and works, of course, are joined in one and the same forgiven sinner. Likewise, unfaith and its works are joined in one and the same unforgiven sinner. But dogma cannot be coupled

with ethos for this reason. This is especially so because ethos is *never empirically clear and definite, but always partially hidden*. In contrast, what God says about Godself and me *in Christ* (dogma) is clear—and must be clear—if faith is to exist at all. For faith is always faith in *that* message and never faith in the qualities I have learned to produce or even such as I see God producing in me.

Conclusion

To articulate “the majesty and certainty” of the Christian church was Elert’s life-long agenda. That pair of terms—*Hoheit und Gewissheit* in German—appears often throughout his works. For Elert, this majesty and certainty is grounded in the church’s relationship to the Gospel.

Isn’t that today’s agenda for Christians too, as we seek signposts during this 21st century journey of anxiety and confusion?

The greatest “danger” to the church’s Gospel-grounding is the law in Elert’s day, in our day, and every day all the way back to the time of the New Testament. One form of the “danger” is “pre-Gospel minimizing” of the law. The law is operative naturally, automatically. It is the way the Creator manages the “old” creation. The church makes this situation worse when its preaching is “law-shy,” when it minimizes the law. In this situation, the church allows the law’s all-pervasive penetration into human life to remain veiled.

As a result, the hearers do not hear the law’s radical call to justify oneself before God. Or, on the other hand, they hear it but not in its radical condemnation. In this way, they delude themselves into believing they have succeeded in justifying themselves before God but without the Gospel.

Another “danger” is “post-Christian maximizing” of the law. This happens in the so-called *tertius usus legis* (third use of the law) or any similar attempts to rehabilitate the law into some combination with the Gospel for the Christian. ⁵

The “informational” notion of the law in all forms of the third use of the law stems from the notion that humans generally *do not* know what they ought to do. The more realistic truth of the matter is that they do indeed know what they ought to do. The trouble is that they do not *want* to do it. Such an “ethical” dilemma can only be solved by the subject matter of dogmatics, the kerygma.

Elert’s separation of dogmatics and ethics into relative independence from each other is thus related to (though not identical with) his basic and central distinction between Law and Gospel.

For Elert, there is a theological ethos apart from the Gospel. It is the ethos of a sinner. But there is *no dogma apart from the Gospel*. Without the Gospel, there is no kerygma to proclaim, and dogma only comes into existence as the prescription or necessary content of the kerygma.

Because the living Christ—one might even say, because Christ’s own *ethos*—is present in the kerygma, there is no place for human ethos, for human biographical qualities, to be part of the saving message. In fact, human ethos *dare not* be part of the kerygma. For if it were, then ethos would become a *competitor to Christ’s exclusive claim*.

This proposal to keep ethos distinct from dogma and kerygma does not, however, exclude the “preaching of good works” from Christian proclamation. But it does exclude the legalistic preaching of good works. Christian preaching of good works means

reconnecting humans to Christ so they can be free to be Christ's people under his Lordship. Then in this freedom, the Christ-connected persons do *in faith* what the indwelling Spirit with the Spirit's imperatives of grace prompts them to do. ⁶ _

Because such preaching is the preaching of Christ, it is kerygma and thus it belongs in the province of dogmatics and not ethics. In contrast, legalistic preaching of good works tells people what good works they ought to do, now that they are Christians. It *mixes* dogma and ethos, which in this instance is also a mixing of Gospel and law. Instead of implanting the indwelling Christ anew, this legalistic preaching is evicting Christ. It is seeking to implant God's written code—or worse yet, the preacher's own code—in place of the living “mind” of Christ.

Whether presented as God's “rules for living” or the preacher's notions of good works, such preaching offers a false—one might say, deadly—solution to life under the law apart from the Gospel: we know we ought to do, but we do not *want* to do it. Such an “ethical” dilemma can only be solved by the subject matter of dogmatics, the kerygma—which is always Christ himself.