

Thursday Theology: “What I Learned from Ed Schroeder”

Co-Missioners,

Some fifty or sixty people met in St. Louis on June 1 to reflect on Ed Schroeder’s legacy as a teacher and colleague. A number came, per invitation, with thoughts to share on the topic “What I Learned from Ed.” One of them was Steve Kuhl, the former president and executive director of Crossings. Steve took an especially careful and thorough approach to the assignment. Later he sent us the text of his remarks. We pass these along in two parts, the first this week and the other next week, as one person’s reflection on the gifts God gave him through Ed. Those new to Crossings will find it helpful as an introduction to one of its founders.

About that day, June 1: technological glitches kept us from hearing a few video contributions sent from afar, including Finland. We’re in the process of posting these to our website. We’ll let you know when they’re ready for viewing.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

What I Learned from Ed Schroeder: A Historical-Theological Memoir

By Steven C. Kuhl



When I was first asked to give this brief talk on what I learned from Ed Schroeder, my heart was filled with fear and trembling. How could I possibly do justice to such an assignment? For the short answer is simply “everything,” but with this caveat: I no longer know how to distinguish what I learned from Ed and what I learned from Bob Bertram. But after Bob’s death, Ed became a central ongoing friend and mentor in my life, especially during my years of service as the president and, later, the executive director of the Crossings Community.

The Gospel as Hermeneutic

Of course, in one sense to say that I learned “everything” from Ed is an exaggeration. It can’t be taken literally. I’ve learned lots of things from other people, not the least of whom are my parents. I’ve also learned much from various books, and from formative personal experiences.

But in another sense, to say I learned “everything” from Ed is not an exaggeration. Ed, more than anyone else, taught me how to

think with the gospel, the good news that we are justified before God “by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from the works of the law.”

Ed called that thinking process “hermeneutics”-a method of interpretation. Hermeneutics is not about learning more “stuff,” more nuggets of information here and there, even though we do this. Rather, it’s about having a “point of view” that helps us to know what to do with all the “stuff” we pick up by discerning its key components and arranging it in a truthful and coherent narrative. In essence, hermeneutics inquires into “the grounding”-the organizing assumptions by which we answer the question, “What does all this mean?”

In a nutshell, Ed taught us that “to think with the gospel” means distinguishing between God’s two kinds of stuff, God’s law (the stuff that exposes our human problem, ultimately with God) and God’s gospel (the stuff that reveals God’s solution in Christ), and, then, “crossing” or arranging these so that the gospel (God’s solution) has the last word and “crosses out” the law (the God problem). This idea of the gospel *crossing out* the law is central. Most theologies, Ed taught us, don’t do this. As a result, they they ultimately end up “thinking with the law,” making the gospel subservient to the law. This, as Ed helped us grasp, is the problem with the outlook of [Karl Barth](#)-arguably the most influential theologian of the 20th century-where the law is viewed as the form of the gospel. It also the problem in that old Lutheran argument about “the third use of the law,” where the law, not the Spirit, is viewed as the guide for the Christian life. More on this later.

The Theology of Werner Elert

Of course, as Ed constantly reminded us, the idea of the hermeneutical significance of distinguishing law and gospel was

not his invention. He learned it from [Werner Elert](#) when he and Robert Schultz, along with a cohort of other young students from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), went to Germany in the 1950s to get their doctorates. This was at the urging of [Jaroslav Pelikan](#).

To put it bluntly, Elert showed Ed and his fellow students that the Christian faith was not a collection of doctrinal propositions to be believed (as rigid orthodoxy viewed it) or a matter of putting Bible verses into practice (as sentimental pietism viewed it), but a “way of seeing” how God’s two ways of operating in the world (the alien work of God condemning sinners through the law, on the one hand, and the proper work of God forgiving sinners through the gospel, on the other) fit together, correlate, cross.

In a nutshell, law and gospel correlate as problem and solution, which is a significant nuance to Paul Tillich’s question-answer method of correlation. Through the promise of Jesus Christ (the solution) God is rescuing sinners from God’s own, righteous judgment upon them (the problem). Without the Christ-solution the law-problem persists; through the Christ-solution the law-problem-indeed, the very need of the law itself-ends. That’s why Paul could so emphatically say that “Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified” (Rom. 10:4, RSV).

That “way of seeing” things, therefore, became “the lens”-another favorite metaphor for hermeneutics-for both reading the Bible and engaging the world. The clincher for this cohort of LCMS students was when Elert showed them that this “way of seeing” was not even original with him. this “way of seeing” is the outlook of Scripture, Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and even C. F. W. Walther, the revered patriarch of the Missouri Synod. (See [“Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?”](#) and [“C.F.W.](#)

[Walther on Law and Gospel: Toward a Revival of Lutheran Hermeneutics.](#)")

Teaching the Gospel: Return to Missouri

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, that when this cohort of “Elert-ians” returned home with doctorates in hand, they were eager to introduce Elert’s insights to their beloved Missouri Synod. Almost immediately, they began to translate Elert’s works into English (with Ed translating Elert’s monograph, [Law and Gospel](#)) and to teach this Elert-ian way of thinking to their students.

Concerning the latter, this gospel as hermeneutic changed the very way theology was taught; and Valparaiso University became the testing ground. To be sure, it was Bob Bertram who led the way in this educational project, but Ed was right there with him. No longer would teaching theology be seen primarily as “pouring information” into the empty heads of students. Rather,

education would be better likened to “lens crafting.” Here’s what I mean.

Theological education is about teaching people “how to see things,” specifically, the two ways of God in the world. But from the get-go Christian educators face this problem: their students come with faulty lenses. They have theological astigmatism, so to speak. Luther called that defect the *opinio legis*, the ingrained “opinion” that, in the last analysis, “the law” was given by God as the means of salvation. Because of this theological astigmatism, no matter what people look at they end up seeing it as law, even the work of the gospel. But the problem is even worse. This astigmatism gives people not only a twisted view of the law, but of themselves. This Luther called the *opinio iustitia*, the opinion that, with sufficient effort people are able to satisfy the demands of the law and be saved.

Therefore, theological teaching or pedagogy is always a matter of grinding those lenses with the gospel—the good news that we are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ—to turn them into bifocals that are able to distinguish law and gospel. This is not done all at once, of course, but by setting before the student example after example or case study after case study of how the prognosis of the gospel crosses out the diagnosis of the law to become good news for ordinary, everyday sinners. In a sense, that is what the Scriptures are—case studies meant to “correct our vision” (cf. [2 Timothy 3:16-17](#))-and so, that is what the curriculum at Valparaiso became: an engagement with case studies designed to improve the student’s vision. Scripture, history, systematic theology, ethics: these disciplines were all brought into service of the main goal of helping students to look at their vocational choices with new, bifocal, law-gospel lenses. This would later become the pedagogical model of Crossings.

Confessing the Gospel: Trouble in Missouri

Never in their wildest imaginations did these Elert-ians think that this “way of seeing” the Christian faith would get them into trouble with their Church hierarchy. But it did—big time! And so by the 1970s they were forced onto the witness stand, as Bertram describes it. That turn of events meant they were now not just teachers of the gospel, but confessors of the gospel; and, much to their surprise, their journey was now mirroring the journey of many of the case studies they encountered in Christian history, a fact of life that led to Bob Bertram’s first book, [*A Time for Confessing*](#), posthumously published through the editorial skills of Michael Hoy.

Why the LCMS hierarchy found this law-gospel way of seeing things so objectionable is a long story. As I learned from Ed, many of the books written on the subject fail to see the real issue. In a nutshell, the LCMS hierarchy itself had faulty lenses. Although it gave lip service to the idea of the “proper distinction of law and gospel”—it had to; after all, its key patriarch, C. F. W. Walther, had written a book by that title—it had not a clue as to what that meant.

As a result, “legalism” prevailed within the LCMS hierarchy, especially as it addressed two areas of contemporary theology and church life. The first was “biblicism” with regard to reading the Scriptures. The second was the “third use of the law” with regard to Christian ethics. Accordingly, they accused the Elert-ians for not taking the Bible seriously, meaning, “literally,” and for not taking ethics seriously, meaning, advocating for the third use of the law of God.

There is, as Ed taught, no doubt that the Elert-ian view of the Christian faith disagreed categorically with the LCMS hierarchy’s view. But it was also categorically wrong for that

hierarchy to say that the Elert-ians did not take the Bible or Christian ethics seriously. If you think about it, the Crossings Method, so simply visualized through the tool we call the [Crossings Template](#), is precisely designed to address these two egregious legalisms.

What It Means to Take the Bible Seriously



The battle over the Bible is a modern question that emerged with the advent of historical critical studies which said the Bible is a historically

conditioned book. This sparked a reaction called fundamentalism, which insisted that the Bible in all its particulars is the inerrant, “verbally inspired” word of God. It ultimately raised the question as to what it means to read the Bible seriously.

Of course, we cannot possibly get into the complexity of this battle here. But this much can be said. The LCMS hierarchy decisively sided with fundamentalism and uncritically employed a “literal” hermeneutic for interpreting the text. For them, the Bible is a book, verbally inspired by God, that tells stories to convey to us God’s eternal will, understood as propositions and dicta that we are to believe and do. Therefore, unless everything in the Bible from history to science to ethics is “literally” true, then nothing can be taken as true. Elert and

the Elert-ians, by contrast, had a nuanced understanding of the Bible as both a historically conditioned text (conditioned by many human assumptions of the times, some that may no longer be assumed) *and* as God's Word of address to those times and, with hermeneutical guidance, to us as contemporary readers. Therefore, the hermeneutical task is both historical and theological in nature. It entails employing both the tools of the historical critical method to understand the historical situation of the text *and* the insight of distinguishing law and gospel to understand the theological situation of the text.

Therefore, for the Elert-ians, the Bible cannot be viewed as a collection of verbally inspired propositions to be taken "literally," as the Missouri hierarchy insisted. That would be to reduce the Bible to something like the American constitution, a legal document. Rather, the Bible is to be taken "literarily," as case studies, with the gospel as its plotline. And that plotline is clear: The creator God who through the law exposes sinners and executes judgment upon them is the selfsame triune God revealed in the gospel who redeems sinners and gives them new life through the merits and grace of Jesus Christ.

This law-gospel plotline is ingeniously crafted in the diagnostic/prognostic structure of the Crossings template—the D's and P's, as Crossings insiders refer to them. Through the law, God exposes sinners' outward misbehavior (D-1), reveals their inward idolatry (D-2) and executes his divine justice upon them (D-3). But thanks be to God, that is not *necessarily* the whole story. For where the law ends, ultimately with death, the gospel decisively picks up, leading to eternal life. The triune God trumps the law through the death and resurrection of Christ (P-4), seats Christ on the throne of our hearts by faith (P-5), and establishes good works as our way of life by the power of the Spirit (P-6).

-to be continued

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community