

Werner Elert and Moral Decay in the ELCA!

Colleagues,

The last thing I could ever have expected—the one thing I could NEVER EVER have imagined—is that Werner Elert, a German theologian who died in 1954 and who never set foot in the USA, let alone taught anywhere in Lutheran schools here, could be exposed “in these last days” as a major source for the current moral decay of the ELCA. Can you name any other theologian who ever spoke so effectively—and allegedly so destructively—all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, from his grave in Bavaria, Germany, over half a century after he was interred there?

In America it can indeed happen and in the ELCA it IS happening. Who is claiming that? Several major-league theology profs at ELCA schools are now fingering Elert as villain for mentoring the ELCA to thumb its nose at God’s law.

I’m a Johnny-come-lately to all the kerfuffle. Several of you colleagues have recently drawn my attention to the brouhaha and alerted me to several documents now in the public domain. Two that I have read link ELCA’s disregard for genuine Christian ethics (=ethics true to the Bible, in their definition) to Elert’s influence, because he was “soft” on God’s law. The critics claim this even though the last thing Elert published before his death was a 595-page textbook on Lutheran Ethics with the first 200 pages labeled “Ethics according to God’s Law.”

One of these critiques can be found on Michael Root’s blog and the other in Robert Benne’s article in the current issue of the journal Lutheran Forum (Winter 2009).

For today's ThTh, let's look at the first of those two.

MICHAEL ROOT's opening paragraphs I reprint below. [For the extended conversation he has elicited GO to this address: <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/the-problem-isnt-just-liberalism/>]

The Problem Isn't Just Liberalism

By Michael Root

A mistake being made by some opposed to recent developments in the ELCA, I think, is to blame everything simply on 'liberalism.' Omitted is a reflection on how modern developments within Lutheranism, even and especially among some counted as confessionalists, are a large part of the problem.

Take this quotation from Werner Elert I ran across today (The Structure of Lutheranism, p. 412 = p. 361 of Vol 1 in the German): "Christ's righteousness is my righteousness because the Word pertains to me. But it pertains to me only if this righteousness remains unentangled with my empirical existence. Faith, which hears this Word, has no other function than this hearing and exists only by hearing. If in spite of this it is my I that hears and believes, it can be only the 'pure' I, that is, the I cannot be further qualified in an empirico-psychological manner, therefore the transcendental I."

Once this move is made (and it is made in a similar manner by Gerhard Forde, without the Kantian trappings), the 'empirico-psychological' self, the self that actually lives in the world, is cut off from the self that truly lives in Christ. Ethics, especially as it relates to physical actions, then exists in a different dimension than faith. From here, it is downhill to where we are today in the ELCA. The church cannot be divided

over an ethical question. Granted, it may be a ways down this hill to get to where we are now and admirers of Elert (and Forde) may believe they have ways of stopping the slide down the hill, but this sheltering of the new self in Christ from life in the world (the 'gnostic' move in Forde that David Yeago has identified) is one element in the mix that has produced our present mess.

So far Root's text.

[ES comment. This book of Elert suffers throughout by very poor translation. Often it is clear that the translator did not understand what Elert was talking about.: Here's what Elert really says in his original German text:]

(The Structure of Lutheranism, p. 412. That is p. 361 of Vol. 1 in the German edition): Christ's righteousness is my righteousness because Christ's word (of forgiveness) is spoken to me. But it is true about me only if this ("alien") righteousness is not confused with the empirical righteousness I have produced for myself. Faith, which receives this word (of gifted "alien" righteousness), has no other function than to receive it. Faith exists only by receiving this gift. Nevertheless the "I" which receives and believes is still the "I," the human self, that I am. But it is not the self of my accumulated psychological-empirical biography. [For a "sinner-self" by definition does not, cannot, believe the Gospel.] Instead it is the "pure" new self, a self that transcends the sinner-self, which receives and believes the gifted righteousness."

[ES comment: Elert is reiterating St. Paul's discussion of his own "I" in Gal. 2:19f. Check it out. That's a key NT text for the reality of this "transcendent" self. This new "transcendent"

self is a “Christ-living-in-me” self. What that new self transcends is not daily life down here on the ground. Until the resurrection of the body (“soma” [=body] is also the Greek word for “self,” replicated even in English: some-body, any-body, no-body, every-body), new selves have only one place to exist, namely, in creation, in the nitty-gritty of daily life, at the same address where the old self lives. What the Christic-self transcends is the sinner-self. New Adam is qualitatively more, goes beyond—yes, transcends—Old Adam. When my self is “in Christ,” I am a new creation, the “old” Ed is trumped, aka transcended. But both selves live IN the the world, have the same street address. In my case Russell Blvd., St. Louis, Missouri.]

Elert’s German text continues: “I showed in the earlier section on ‘Luther’s view of Justification’ that for Luther the logical presupposition for speaking of this ‘transcendent self’ DOES NOT follow Kant’s formula (reduction to the categorical). Instead, for Luther the logical presupposition for speaking of a self that transcends the sinner-self is the judgment (the death-verdict) on that sinner-self [Selbstgericht], which when joined with faith, constitutes repentance.”

[N.B. Elert is not adopting Kant in place of Luther, but opting FOR Luther CONTRA Kant—as he does in all the books he ever wrote where Kant and Luther get into the text, I can only conclude that Root does not comprehend what Elert is talking about here. Which makes me wonder how he comprehends Luther—and possibly St. Paul too.]

Picking up again with the last line cited above, and continuing with Elert’s text (my translation):.

“. . . for Luther the logical presupposition for speaking of a self that transcends the sinner-self is the judgment (the death-

verdict) on that sinner-self [das Selbstgericht], which when joined with faith, constitutes repentance.

However, when faith in Christ's word brings forgiveness of sins, the deus absconditus in this same crucified Christ becomes deus revelatus. At that point Luther stands before "das Jenseits." [German has this pair of contrasts: 'Diesseits'—this side—and 'Jenseits'—the other side, the Eternal, the side of the Eternal One.] This 'Jenseits' is totally different from the world of agnostic determinism, which is the end of the line when one combines [Kant's] theoretical and practical reason. Faith perceives God's call, and that is the end of agnosticism. Faith receives God's forgiveness, and that is the end of determinism.

For determinism means that we will never be able to fulfill ethical demands and therefore also never be able to escape guilt. In the forgiveness of sins, the gift of alien righteousness, the ethical IS fulfilled and guilt IS overcome. Later on the Enlightenment viewed hearing God's word to be a corrective for errors in human knowledge. But Luther's concept of revelation is fundamentally different. Agnostic determinism for him is no error of judgment. Instead [for unredeemed humanity] it is the only possible and only correct way to interpret the world we live in along with its ethical demands. When one hears the Gospel, it does not abrogate this reality as though showing it to have been an erroneous view of the world. Instead the "Jenseits" [of God] reveals itself only there where this rational analysis of the world is carried through to this endpoint [punctum mathematicum] and has come to its final outcome in the knowledge of death.

In just this way the forgiveness of sins does not at all annul the validity of the ethical demand. If this demand had no validity, there would be no sin, and consequently no forgiveness either.

From this follow three consequences.

1. "Diesseits" and "Jenseits" are not related to each other as beginning and end of the same reality. The "Jenseits" of God rather shapes the "Diesseits" of our world-reality into a self-contained whole, i.e., it confirms not only the accuracy, but also the completeness of our knowledge of the world. By completeness we do not mean exhaustive knowledge of everything that may be known, but that the limits come into clear focus, the limits within which all knowledge of the world must be confined, regardless of whether or not we have already exhausted all that can be known about the world.[Then follows another page and a half of brilliant (and complex) German text, p.362-3—which I summarize as follows:]
2. The relationship between Diesseits and Jenseits is the relationship between the old and the new creations as spelled out in the scriptures.
3. Despite their totally different character and content, Diesseits & Jenseits have this common denominator: both of them are valid and operate effectively. But not deterministically. Yet it is only when one comes to faith in the Gospel that one comprehends that behind the validity of each stands the authority of God in his word/action of law and Gospel. It is such faith-in-the-Gospel that holds the two together. Conclusion: "This is the connection between justification and viewing the world (Weltanschauung). [The title for this Section 29 in Elert's Morphologie is "Rechtfertigung und Weltanschauung" (Justification and world view).] Lutheranism's Weltanschauung is incomprehensible apart from faith in God. But such faith does not call for any diminution of the great facts of the natural world and knowledge of its details. Faith receives this knowledge too in its totality

and affirms its validity. But it relativizes that world-knowledge at the same time by subsuming it into the majesty of God, where it is both affirmed and transcended.”

So far Elert’s text.

To identify this sort of Lutheran theology (Elert’s brand) with the “ELCA’s [alleged] downhill slide into Gnosticism” is impossible. Imagine what the ELCA would be if this brand of gold-medal Lutheran theology actually DID have influence on its slippery slopes. Also on slippery slopes of these Elert-critics. Some things would have to be different.

Next week, we intend to look at Benne’s article in the Lutheran Forum—where yours truly gets linked to Gerhard Forde as another subversive infecting the ELCA with what Benne calls “Elert’s gravely flawed construal of Luther and Lutheranism.” And what was Elert’s “gravely flawed construal”? “The essence of that construal was an almost monomaniacal focus on justification, to the exclusion of other crucial Christian doctrines.”

Gravely flawed. Monomaniacal. Those are hefty charges. But are they true?

For next week’s ThTh, more on Benne’s article, wherein I intend (in a sidebar) to identify the primal “villain” who brought Elert into 20th century American Lutheranism. Was not Forde, nor me, but ironically a bloke who once taught at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, the very same ELCA seminary where two of the most vociferous Elert-critics are now tenured profs. Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder