

Werner Elert's Law/Gospel Textbook on Christian Ethics (Part II–Conclusion)

Colleagues,

Here's the second half of my offering at the Crossings International conference earlier this week. And "international" it was indeed with participants from Korea, Nigeria, Liberia, India, Singapore and Germany. The gathering was mountaintop stuff. More next Thursday.

A bunch of us spent most of one day looking at the theology of Werner Elert (1885-1954). Bob Schultz, who did his doctorate under Elert, and Matt Becker, a youngster alongside octogenarians Schultz and EHS and today's Elert insider, rounded out the troika. Bob and I knew Elert "live." We were his students in the early 1950s. Matt's expertise has come from "just" reading Elert's half dozen "big" books and manifold essays. It was a three-session seminar. Matt took us through Elert's life and work, deftly weaving his theological biography through the Sturm und Drang of the first half of 20th century Germany; Bob took us through Elert's dogmatics [The Christian Faith], which Bob is translating for English language publication, and I did a show-and-tell on Elert's ethics [The Christian Ethos]. Last week's ThTh 606 and this week's post, when pasted together, were my handout at the seminar.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Werner Elert: THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS

Chapter 6. THE NEW CREATURE

32. The New Creation

- New creation is “brand new” – “creatio ex nihilo” – a creation from no pre-existent material.
- The “ex nihilo” character of the new creation means that it is done exclusively by God independent of all human prior prerequisites. This is the meaning of “sola gratia.”
- In Roman Catholic theology grace is so understood that the new ethos is not a new creation, but a renovation of the old, repairing the defect, restoring it into the original product it once was. Not so God’s new creation in the NT.
- God’s word of pardon actually creates a new ethos, a new person—does not build upon some prior “good” still present in sinners—and this word in and of itself possesses such creative power.

33. The Power of the Holy Spirit

- The creative work of the Holy Spirit in Christians is tangible but some of it is manifest only to the eye of faith.
- When the apostles speak of the Holy Spirit, they do not refer to psychological processes at all.
- The power of the Spirit is “axiological reality” [=value-bestowing, value-changing power] from outside myself. Because it is God’s power, it does make things happen, some of which all can see. The full picture of what all is going on—the Spirit’s generating a whole new existence for former sinners—is perceptible only to the “pneumatic” person, the one animated by this Holy Spirit coming from Christ.

34. Repentance and Rebirth

- Not WHEN but WHAT is the key question about the new life. Just what is it? The new ethos concretely operating in the life of Christ-trusters
- We cannot draw from the NT an outline of a normative “standard” process, a step-by-step sequence, for the beginning of the new life. Repentance, conversion, rebirth are different NT terms for the same basic thing: God’s grace-verdict becoming concrete in us.
- “Grace-imperatives” of the NT have humans as acting subjects AND God as author at the same time. Not to be confused with “law-imperatives.” The two kinds of imperatives differ in the same way as law and Gospel differ in indicative mood sentences. One is a requirement, the other an offer. [Bertram: one is “you’ve got to,” the other “you get to.”]
- The NT recognizes no state of perfection in the life of a Christian. It recognizes only a state of growth.

35. Re-integration (restoring the “status integritatis.” restoring the image of God, replacing the shattered mirror)

- God himself rehabilitates world history, giving sinners the status of being “re-integrated” back to God..
- Jesus Christ is the reintegrated “imago dei” present in history, who by that very fact already transcends “standard” human history, the continuing story of fractured images of God. With God’s image restored Christians also transcend history in the same way.
- The daily life of re-integration is not “imitating Christ,” but “hidden” servanthood to this master.

36. Freedom

- The new person is not free FOR the law, as Kant

insists, but FROM the law, as Paul teaches.

- Freedom is found first of all in our relation to God, wherein we are free from law and live a life without law, but not a lawless life.
- The concept “already, not yet” applies to freedom which is on the increase in the world actively at work secretly razing nomological reality. [The full text (in English) of Elert’s #36 Freedom exists on the Crossings website. Here’s where to find it: <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur1217.shtml>”]

Chapter 7. THE NEW OBEDIENCE

37. Faith

- Faith is the “human side” of the new ethos of the new person. The “God-side” of it is grace.
- Despite differences of expression, the NT usage of the word faith has this in common in all instances: person-to-person trust in Christ.
- Faith in the gospel is not another way of obedience, for, strictly speaking, one cannot “obey” the gospel; either you trust it or you distrust it. The “obedience of faith” mentioned in the NT is precisely this, trusting the gospel.

38. Obedience and Faith

- The motivation for Christian obedience to the Lord Christ is faith. Trusting Christ, we do what he calls us to do.
- Obedience under the authority of Christ is first and foremost suffering obedience.
- Good works are necessary, but they do not “have to” be done to make faith happen. They are faith’s fruit.

39. The Venture of Works (“Wagnis der Werke” in German, the “risk,” the “daring aspect” of works)

- Luther and Kierkegaard differ on interpreting the temptation of Abraham. It is not Abraham's ethics that are challenged: to kill or not to kill (Kierkegaard,) but his faith: to trust God's promise or not to trust it when God himself seems to be destroying that promise (Luther).
- Every human act is an adventure (a Wagnis, a risk) which the Christian dares to undertake because of his faith in the promise.
- Common works done "naturally" within the orders are just as much a "Wagnis" as works which are extra-ORDER-nary (outside the order, even breaking the order, the "Gefüge" where God has placed us). Both are good works when they are done trusting Christ's promise.

40. Renunciation

- Christ himself confronts us with the call for the "infinite resignation." To give up everything and follow him.
- Traditional Roman Catholic theology leaves the issue of renunciation up to the individual, but Christ does not.
- The infinite resignation which Christ calls for is not a renunciation of, a flight away from, the material finite world. Rather it is the application of faith to the total and specific content of our own particular life. To hold things dear, but not to cling to them for dear life.

41. Sanctification

- Sanctification and renovation raise the agenda: How can donated life also become an active life (i.e., my human acts have me as the subject yet they are originated by God)?
- Sanctification belongs to the "cultic sphere." 1.)

It literally means drawing close to God; 2) It is redemption from guilt so that a saint (but only a saint) can sanctify himself; and 3) It makes humans capable of becoming living “spiritual sacrifices.”

42. Love of the Neighbor, Love of Enemy, Brotherly Love

- If a “religion of love” is what the NT proclaims, then there is nothing new in the NT. The “law of love” is still law, nomological existence.
- The NT itself has set a threefold defense against the “religion of love” orientation. Its portrayal of neighbor-love, brother-love and love-of-enemies (3 different categories) do not match the particulars of a generic religion of love. Christ is a necessary player in this NT trio. He is unnecessary in a religion of love, other than as a teacher, but someone else could just as well be that teacher.
- Since Christ always stands between God and the loving Christian and the receiver of the Christian’s love, “agape” is different from “eros” and different from humanitarianism.

43. Love of God and the First Commandment

- Contrary to Augustine, “love of self” cannot be the motive for loving the brother, nor for loving God.
- The Christian’s “agape” for God is identical with “faith” in the Pauline-Luther tradition.
- Love fulfills the law and at the same time annuls it and sets up a replacement order to the law’s order, an “order of love and forgiveness ” This new order of love and forgiveness unfolds in mutual interaction (ping-pong “agape”!) between God, Christ, the Christian, the fellow Christian.

Chapter 8. THE INVISIBLE STRUGGLE

44. Two Ways and Two Eras

- The struggle in the Christian's life runs right through the middle of his entire existence as a constant call for faith. The NT has several sets of terms for the invisible struggle—two ways (broad and narrow), two eons (old and new) two kinds of time (chronological and eschatological, the latter being “kairos” time).
- The difference between chronos time and kairos time is the difference between time “managed” by law, and time managed by the promise.
- The “Kairos” of Christ's promise makes chronological time in all its parts a gift of God.

45. Two Kingdoms

- Another pair of NT terms for the invisible struggle is the two “basileia,” the two regimes that Christians live under, both created by the Word of God.
- The present age, although Satan's domain, is also God's realm
- Living in the two realms entails the problem of relating and distinguishing the two kingdoms. Fundamental here too is that one is God's regime of law, the other God's regime of promise.

46. The Third Use of the Law

- The place of the law in the life of the regenerate has been a point of conflict throughout Christian history.
- In Reformation Lutheranism it became the debate about the twofold or threefold use of God's law . Luther: only two. Melanchthon: three. Formula of Concord: only two.
- The third use of the law “recapitulates once more the fundamental problem of Christian ethics.” It seeks to bridge the opposition between God's two

verdicts of law and Gospel. Law has the last word. The Gospel is there only to assist in getting people to do the right thing. But in reality, the Gospel's goal is faith, getting people to trust God's promise.

- Calvin's notion of the "third use" as the law's "primary use" reveals his conflict with Luther on both law and gospel.

47. Prayer

- Prayer is the cry of need, weakness and despair, prime evidence of the invisible struggle. A cry for help both for one's self (supplication) or for another (intercession).
- Christian prayer is grounded in faith in God's promise, not faith on God's providence.
- Distinctively Christian prayer is prayer as a plea for grace: Prayer "in Jesus' name" is not invoking a magic formula, but expressing the faith that Christ is our connection with God as Father. Thus the petition for the gift of the Spirit (who keeps our Christ-connection alive) is the most urgent of all.

48. The Beauty of the World[Probably no other book on Christian ethics has a chapter on the beauty of the world.]

- There is a "worldly" way and a "faith" way to enjoy the beauty of the world. Faith see Christ as reconciliation for the whole cosmos. That is the world God "so loved." So does the Christian.
- As long as sinners live under the wrath of God, every creature frightens them for it preached their own mortality to them. Faith knows this too, but dares against them to believe in God's promise for this cosmos and God's presence in that world.
- Thus creation is illuminated by the glory of God.

Christian hope for surviving death also applies to the creation.

- Hope has disappeared from today's scientific analysis of the cosmos. Yet Christians can rejoice in this cosmos because of their future grounded in Christ's promise. They hear and see vicariously for the whole cosmos and articulate God's promise for it too..

49. The Total Personality

- The invisible struggle as a split within the human person has been addressed since time immemorial. Though that line of struggle fluctuates, it always goes straight through us.
- Plato's solution was to see it as a body-spirit split was "spiritualization," the non-material self (soul) survives. It is immortal, the bodily passed away. Plato's immortality of the soul is not grounded in law/promise theology.
- The "harmonization" of the conflicting parts proposed by idealism is not grounded in law/promise either.
- Nor is the "despiritualization"—the biological is supreme—proposed by Nietzsche, by the Nazis.
- The dualism of body/spirit is an unfortunate heritage which Christianity received from Greece. The Christian notion of reintegration is rooted in a very different notion of the conflict. It is the conflict between two "whole" persons within our one self. "Old Adam" and "new human." This old and new are NOT body and spirit.
- Two God-relationships are in conflict. This conflict is our dilemma. When the image of God is restored, wholeness is restored. "As if" existence ceases. In forgiveness the new human acknowledges the sin of

the old one. He knows his identity with that old one, for he knows that, though once condemned to eternal extinction, the miracle of mercy has granted him a new life.

Part III

OBJECTIVE ETHOS

Chapter 9. THE CHRISTIAN TOTALITY

50. Localization (German: Ortsbestimmung: "Just what are we talking about")

- The first 8 chapters have examined the theological ethos of individual subjects, thus "subjective" ethos. But there is more data of Christian ethos, namely, the ethos of the new human community, the church, created by Christ's word of forgiveness. The body of Christ—Christ the head and we the member—is more than the sum of the parts. That body has a "corporate" ethos of God's approval—worth, value, quality—of its own. It is "objectively" there even when individual members of the body have personally, "subjectively," deserted Christ's promise. E.g., The sacrament of baptism is valid even if the one baptizing the candidate is an unbeliever.
- Objective ethos as additional anthropological data within the corporate church occurring in a non-nomological order.

51. The Church As a Corporate Community

- The church functions as a corporate community, operating as a single entity, though of many members. It acts externally and internally as a whole..
- The corporate character of the church is explicit only in its relationship to Christ in his continuing

incarnation. What keeps the body of Christ united and functioning as a whole is its relationship to Christ, namely, Christ's continuing incarnation in the church's life.

52. Use and Limitation of Ethical "We" Formulas

- The language of the church is not "I" language, but "we" language. Distinguishing between the cumulative and the collective "we." The original Nicene Creed begins "WE believe in one God." That is the body as a whole confessing its faith, not just one "I." The difference between cumulative and collective "We" statements is that cumulative "we" designate what all of us are doing together. "We are all in church today." Even "each one of here is confessing the Nicene Creed." But the WE of that creed is collective "we," the confession of the entire body of Christ throughout history, and not just the folks at church this morning. Christians engage in cumulative "we" because each of them has the same Christ-connection. Christ has forgiven each one of them.
- But when word and sacrament are administered the "collective we," the body of Christ as a corporate entity is on the scene. Here is objective ethos—the whole body doing something that God calls "good"—expressing itself in corporiety. Objective ethos is concrete public action.

53. The Order of Love and Forgiveness

- The new order in the church can be seen and heard, first off as a new jig-saw puzzle network (Seinsgefüge) of love and forgiveness.
- Objective ethos is Christian not merely by virtue of the motivation for the action, but because actual help occurs.

- The new order of love is purely voluntary. No coercion. It is the love-one-another generated by the gospel.
- The newness of the new order is that Christ stands not only in our relationship to God, but also in our relationship to one another.
- Church discipline as part of the order of love and forgiveness, loving care for an apostate former Christian

54. The "We" of the Apologists, Martyrs, and Confessions

- Individual Christians on the witness stand for the faith (apologists), those who die for the faith (martyrs) and the "we" in the Confessions is collective we. Though individuals are making the statements, they are speaking for the entire church, even more, they are speaking for Christ, the church's head.

55. The Liturgical "We"

- In the liturgical "we" the collective "we" concretizes itself purposely before its Lord to worship him.
- Liturgical ethos is a fourfold collective event: 1) Communal confession of guilt; 2) Public proclamation of God's law and gospel 3) Corporate absolution in the eucharist; and 4) Collective adoration as the individual member surrenders his isolation in collective concentration on the Lord.
- In using music in worship the church conquers a new realm of creation (music = an "order" from the old creation) for the kingdom of grace.

56. Ecclesiastical Law and the Levels of the "We"

- Who is really authorized to speak for the collective "we"? With all the denominations and divisions in the church, which human voices speak for the "whole

church,” even more speak for the head of the church?

- The Roman Catholic answer to the dilemma is the Bishop of Rome, understood to have been appointed by Christ the head, and then canon law whereby it preserves unity at all levels.
- Since the church is an order of the gospel and not an order of law (not even “divine law”), canon law cannot perform the unifying function the Roman church assigns to it.

57. Anti-Communality and Unity

- The modern ecumenical movement offers both valid and invalid aspects of the move to conquer disunity.
- What creates the church’s unity is what links sinners to Christ. It is the “pure” Gospel that does that alongside sacraments administered “according to that Gospel.” The Gospel’s verdict “your sins are forgiven” is the creator of church unity. Elert concludes with a Luther citation: “Wherever you find baptism, the Lord’s supper, and the Gospel proclaimed, there kneel and pray, for the church is a house of prayer, and Christ has made that house as wide as the whole world.” And then he adds this comment: “That is, so it seems to me, a truly ecumenical and catholic statement. It just might be that this alleged chief culprit in splitting the church has actually shown the right way to overcome it.”

Chapter 10. THE CHURCH AND FORCES OF HISTORY

58. Orders and Powers

- The church is an historical and social institution, a new “order” planted among all the other orders of old creation. [See the laundry list in chapter 3 above.]

- Orders and powers must be distinguished. Orders are the given “playing” fields on which we live our lives. It is on these playing fields that people with power—parents, workers, citizens, “the powers that be”—exercise the power they have. The “order” of the church does not run alongside the other orders (as parallel railroad tracks), but intersects with all the orders when some one member of the body of Christ is also in that “old” order.

59. Church and State[I will simply list here the segments of this long excursus on church and state. Elert’s vast collection of data and his depth analysis is more than I can reduce to thesis sentences.

- The institutions of church and state as they intersect as a relationship of differing orders.
- The institutions of church and state as they intersect in a relationship based on power.
- The history of church-state identification in eastern Christendom.
- History of church-state relations in western Christendom.
- The Reformation understanding of the church-state relationship.
- The return of the church-state relationship the 20th century to the historical conditions of the first century. The conclusion (written in 1948!): “All the world powers today are engaged in an actual war of political ideas. Ideological warfare is now the state’s agenda.” An ideology is an “other” gospels. Thus the state is no longer simply God’s agent for protection and just recompense of its citizens. It now also proclaims an other gospel. “Thus the long history of church-state relationships returns to its beginning in the first century.”

60. Nonviolence as Possibility [German: The anarchist possibility.]

- Is it possible, as Tolstoy proposed, to have human society with no governing agents at all? Can evil be restrained by non-resistance, as he thought? Not really.
- Tolstoy's teaching of non-resistance understands evil to arise from human ignorance, and thus to be rectified by insight and education. But that vastly underestimates evil. Evil is a perverse "order" with "power" in opposition to God in God's world. Removing human ignorance does not remove evil. God has ordained secular power to restrain evil and protect us from evil's destruction.

61. Lutheran "Dichotomy"? [German is "Doppel-Geleisigkeit"]

- The German term was Troeltsch's negative term for Lutheran ethics. Running on a double track. Love as the ethical mandate for the individual, coercive power as the mandate for the state. This section is a long argument with Troeltsch [and his followers, such as the two Niebuhr brothers in the USA] and can't easily be reduced to thesis sentences. Elert concludes by contrasting the "law of love"—God's mandate for humankind in all the orders of nomological existence—with Christ's "new" love-commandment. He articulates his own case for Luther's two-kingdoms. The corporate ethos of Christ's agape-fellowship cannot be merged into God's legally structured world. "These two cannot be reconciled because they are fundamentally different—not only different orders, but different historical forces. These opposites cannot be transformed into parallels running side by side and never intersecting."

62. The Growth of Brotherhood in the World

- Elert takes the term “brotherhood” from the frequent references in the NT to “the brothers,” another corporate designation for the church as a whole, a community. This brotherhood is a mission term with the assignment to be intent on adding brothers/sisters to the fellowship. The fellowship as a community impacts “secular” history. It is constantly intent on expansion. The very mandate of one-another-love (always in the plural in the NT) calls for outreach to the other, not only in word, but in deed.
- Disappearance of the conditions of brotherhood in the church came when Constantine designated Christian faith the religion of the empire. The brotherhood no longer was a “subversive” movement in society to gain new brothers, but society was officially Christian. Mission accomplished. Clergy did the church’s work and “brotherhood” went into the monasteries.
- The brotherhood active in the world is essential to the life of the church. Luther called the brotherhood out of the monasteries and back into the world and also organized “brotherhood” actions in social ministry. But the secularization of society in the West has made it more difficult to carry out.
- Elert concludes articulating a mission theology for brotherhood-growth in the fractured modern world. It unfolds within the orders of nomological existence, initially supporting them, while at the same time undermining the nomological ethos. “In these (seemingly low-key, un-glorious) ways Christian brotherhood expands out into the world, even though the statisticians don’t notice it. That’s what makes

it powerful in human history.”

63. Teleology and Eschatology

- These two terms are two different ways of understanding human history—and church history—moving to its conclusion. At root one is a law-term, the other a Gospel-term.
- What has been said above about the church as brotherhood in history and changing history is hard to document from the data at hand. It is marked by a “not yet.” “The “telos” end has not yet arrived. But “teleology” entails designating a goal, moving toward it, and (eventually) saying you have “arrived.”
- But the power of the Christian brotherhood lies not in what has been achieved but in its ongoing exercise of Christ’s mission.
- All proposals of chiliasm in church history are attempts to fix the “telos” of the kingdom of God in history..
- All modern international ideologies have grown in this soil initially prepared by the church. Stalin, Hitler were chiliasts. Western democracies are not far removed “fully convinced that they are the political representatives of a Christian, universalistic, progressive reform movement” even modern democracies are chiliastic.
- Christian eschatology centers on God’s new verdict about the world in Christ, which leads to this final paragraph in the book. “The final day of reckoning will recapitulate the entire history of the world and render God’s conclusive verdict. World history gravitates toward this goal, but not of itself. The world powers do not aim toward it because they do not know it exists. The Christian brotherhood

believes that goal, but does not know the when or how. The One who is himself beginning and end, alpha and omega, moves history to this goal. Eschatology includes teleology, a goal, but only the teleology of God. For that reason the entire Christian ethos—subjective ethos under law and grace, objective ethos as well— is teleological. It yearns for the end of all things that God has in store for us, when finally the data of history, things past, things forgotten—and above all, the eternal— will be revealed. The judge of the living and the dead will then reveal the final verdict, showing everyone who we finally are.”