

Werner Elert's Law/Gospel Textbook on Christian Ethics

Colleagues,

Cathy Lessmann, Crossings Conference organizer, asks me to invite Crossings folks from the St. Louis area to the eucharist scheduled for the final evening of the conference, January 26 at 7 p.m. The place is the Chapel at the conference site, Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois. Homilist for the liturgy is ELCA Bishop Marcus Lohrmann, formerly pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran congregation in the St. Louis suburb of Hazelwood.

One of my assignments at that Crossings conference on Monday Jan. 25 is to show and tell the group what Werner Elert is doing in his book on Christian ethics. Here's a trial run for today's ThTh post. [I got through only one-half of the text by this Wednesday evening, so that's what you get here. Wanna hear the rest? Well then, sign up for the conference—even at this eleventh hour!]

Elert didn't title his book "Christian Ethics," but "Christian Ethos." And that for a very specific reason. He saw the subject matter of Christian ethics not to be Christian morality, or Christian claims for what is right and wrong behavior, but what it is that makes anything—better, any person—"right or wrong," "sinful or righteous." Just as the task of dogmatics, he claimed, is to study the church's "dogma," so the job in Christian ethics is to study Christian "ethos." For ethos Elert uses the ancient definition. Ethos is the value, the worth, the "quality" predicated to persons and actions.

Simple illustration. At the end of the first day of creation in Genesis 1, God looks at the light just created and says "good."

It's no longer just light, but "good" light. When such verdicts are made about people, that's ethos. Ethics is the study of human ethos, what all is going on with ethos labels—good or bad, right or wrong, sinful or righteous. Theological ethics studies human ethos according to God's evaluations. "Christian" ethics studies human ethos when Christ is in the mix.

Now to Elert's own text. Here is the table of contents from the front of the book. I will add under each of the 63 sub-sections in the ten chapters the basic thesis sentences that come in each sub-section.

THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS by Werner Elert

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

1. The Task

- [Basically what is written above in my introduction]

2. Ethics Within the Framework of Theology

- Studying dogma (in dogmatics) and ethos (in ethics) means looking for the "sufficient grounds, the adequate support" for the Christian dogma, and for Christian ethos. Basically answering the Why? question. Why, for what reason, is this claim—of dogma, of ethos—true? In ethics: why, for what reason, is someone/some action given the value/quality called "sinful" or "righteous," wrong or right? The ethicist keeps on asking until he finds "reason enough" for the claim.
- Dogmatics and ethics are often covered by the term "systematic theology," but they are two different projects, looking for the sufficient groundings of

two different things—dogma and ethos.

- Nevertheless the two are connected. Not in the fashion often proposed: (dogma) what you should believe and (ethos) how you should act. But dogma is “what has to be proclaimed in order that people hear the Gospel,” and ethos is the quality/value change in people when they trust that Gospel.

3. The Arrangement of the Subject Matter

- Since God’s verdict on people is twofold—law and gospel—this ethics book will have two major parts: ethos under law, ethos under grace. We’ll start with ethos under law because that is the ethos of all human beings from birth. That ethos doesn’t change unless/until Christ enters their lives.
- When Christ does enter their lives, that brings a new ethos, but the conflict between old ethos and new ethos then marks their lives. In simple terms: sinner and saint at the same time.
- We’ll have a final third part in the book after Part 1 and Part 2, law ethos and grace ethos. Elert calls that “objective” ethos, in distinction to the “subjective” ethos of parts one and two. “Subjective” is used here to discuss the ethos of individual human subjects. Part 3 looks at the ethos (value, quality factors) in the new community of Christ the head now linked to these Christian “subjects” of his body. This is the ethos of the church, the body of Christ, as a whole. It has ethos elements that are more than just adding up the ethos of the individual members.

Part 1 ETHOS UNDER LAW

Chapter 1. THE CREATURE

4. The Image of God

- the first “value word” in the Genesis creation story about humans is “image of God.”
- That term means that humans “mirror” God. How so? God “speaks” the creation into existence. Adam mirrors God in being gifted to hear God talk to him and being able to respond, a response-able message-receiver and message-sender. Not an object or thing, but a subject, a person.
- So it was in “paradise,” but the mirror shattered. The fractured image of God still responds to God, but that human self is now a rebel. Human history is the history of these fractured mirrors.

5. Fear and Conscience

- In Genesis 3—after the fall—we see the fractured image of God in action. Three new realities are in the humans: Fear of what’s coming (they hide), a conscience at work evaluating what they’ve done (it wasn’t me; she did it), and the law of retribution. Conscience tells them that they have done wrong, so they fear the future because they perceive a law at work saying that in the future they shall have to pay for what they did. They no longer control their own destiny. These three realities now shape all human history.

6. Biographical Limitations and Qualifications

- The totality of my biography is everything predicated to my name.
- My life is limited to the time between my birth and death, to a specific place in human history.
- I am placed in a number of specific relationships and given a vast number of specifics for my own life that I did not choose. When value-judgments, quality-labels, come upon me (=my personal ethos),

these are the spaces and places, the “givens” of my own creaturehood, where all that takes place. Luther’s term for these givens of my personal creaturely life was “Ordnungen,” the “specs,” the interwoven networks, of my personal existence where God has “ordained” my life to unfold.

7. The Contingent Encounter

- Another item that limits and puts “specs” into my life is “chance” encounters with all sorts of other people—parents, teachers, neighbors, enemies, etc.
- The Good Samaritan parable is a good illustration. None of the three travellers in the story expected to run into the victim half-dead at the roadside. It happened by chance. But when they did encounter him, it was a moment that impacted the ethos of each of them.
- Every such chance encounter reminds me of my status as image of God, now confronting another image of God who mirrors to me God in this neighbor. The three in the parable were not only compelled to respond TO this victim-neighbor, but also responsible FOR him. Two responded irresponsibly, one responsibly. But all did respond. Yet if I were responsible FOR everybody I meet “by chance,” I could never manage that overwhelming responsibility. We seemingly HAVE TO do what the priest and Levite did, pass by the victim. We are “stuck” in a fallen world, and are not left off the hook.

Chapter 2. THE LAW OF GOD

8. Security and Retribution

- Biblical term for law (nomos) encompasses everything in God’s creation. It also describes mankind’s initial, call it “natural,” relationship to God.

- God's Law does two things. It provides security in the now-fallen creation. It carries out retribution.
- Our "law" linkage to God puts us into three networks (Elert's term is Gefüge) with God: God as our creator (that we exist at all), as our legislator (thou shalt, shalt not), as our judge (you failed in your image-of-God assignment). From our conception onward it's nomological existence. Law's three networks permeate everything.

9. The Decalogue

- Why Christians still make use of the decalogue is first of all because Jesus did.
- Jesus and the apostles after him re-interpret the decalogue in the New Testament: Love fulfills the law.
- Yet the decalogue remains a law of retribution in the NT.

10. The Twofold Use of the Law (back to the security and retribution above)

- There is fundamental disagreement in Christian history about God's law. Calvin's catechism, e.g., completely ignores God as judge in the law's third network, focusing only on God the legislator (law-giver).
- In his own use of God's law Jesus intensifies, internalizes and universalizes the law's accusing function. No one escapes.
- In inter-personal relationships and in society at large, God's law protects the "orders," and also protects us within those orders.

11. Natural Law

- "Natural law" is discussed throughout human history and in Christian theology. It too carries out the two tasks for which God uses law—in classical Latin

terms: *usus proprius* (unique use as critic) and *usus politicus* (use to preserve the “polis,” human society). Natural law too critiques us, and it also preserves human society. In the now-fallen “natural” world, evil is present. It too now functions as an “order” within God’s creation, an order of destruction.

Chapter 3. THE NATURAL ORDERS

- 12. Order, Community, Offices
- 13. The Family
- 14. Marriage
- 15. “The People” as an Order
- 16. State and Law as Orders
- 17. The Ethos of the State
- 18. The Ethos of Citizenship
- 19. Economic Interdependence
- 20. Vocation
- 21. Truth, Oath, and Honor

Before God addresses us with “thou shalt and thou shalt not” (=law as network [Gefüge] #2), we are already linked to God in law as network #1, the manifold “givens,” the specs of our own life. The German word “Gefüge” carries the notion of being joined as jig-saw puzzle pieces are. Elert’s long list of “natural orders” are those many jig-saw puzzles wherein each of us lives as a distinct piece interlocked with other people and the manifold other realities of daily life. Elert here is proposing the proper understanding of the Lutheran term “orders of creation.” Not orders as commands (how to behave), but orders as the specs of the playing field where God has ordered (=ordained) me to live out my life. It is first of all when I am already IN these orders that God’s thou shalt/ shalt not’s are addressed to me. E.g., I couldn’t possibly “honor my father and

mother” if I were not already in an “order” called family.

It is within these orders that I live my nomological (law-permeated) existence.

- it is “pressured” (coercive) existence.
- retributive
- response-able
- linked to God in the three jig-saw puzzles wherein God is:
1) creator/controller, 2) legislator, and 3) judge and (finally) executioner.
- it is accused (guilty) existence, yet it is
- preserved existence.

In all of the #13 to #21 sub-sections of God’s manifold ordainings Elert traces these themes of nomological existence. He gives hints now and then that you will have to come into contact with “ethos under grace” before you can fully understand this particular order. He also points out the distortions that threaten each of these orders when the person in that order is not “graced” with the new ethos Christ brings. But before we get to that new ethos, there is jigsaw puzzle #3, God as evaluator, judge and executioner

Chapter 4. SIN AND GUILT

22. The Bondage of the Will

- Why do injustice and wicked action persist in human history? Human will after the fall is “bound” to operate as sinner.
- The foundations of the doctrine of the bondage of the will are given in our nomological existence.
- In the debate over human will—Erasmus and Luther, Kant and Luther—Luther claims: Yes, God says “Thou shalt,” but the reality is that we are unable to do it. Erasmus and Kant: If God says, Thou shalt, then

we must be able to do it; if Luther is right, we will go mad. Luther can cope with such madness because he sees Christ in the picture to resolve the dilemma of God's impossible demand. Erasmus and Kant seek to solve it without Christ.

23. Sin as Original Sin

- Augustine led western theologians to adopt a biological interpretation of original sin. The corrupted nature of parents is reproduced in their children. Not a good idea. Biblically, o.s. is grounded in the divine judgment that is pronounced upon us. There is no point in our biography where we are not sinners. O.s. is not a deed, but the shape of the person of the doer, the constant "inclination" to live "without fear of God, without faith in God, and curved into ourselves" (AC II).
- "Original" means that since birth (our personal origin) we are in opposition to God and also that this opposition is the origin of the "sins" we commit.
- Everyone is personally responsible (guilty) for his own original sin.

24. The Fear of Truth

- Sin is a theological concept, not sociological or psychological. It pertains only to the God-human relationship.
- Law exposes sin by showing us that we are already "outside of the law's boundaries."
- Law reveals not only that we oppose the law, but also that this is personal opposition to God. It is finally an attack upon God's being our judge.
- We cannot grasp what sin really is, but only experience it. It is the incomprehensibility of our nomological existence. It is the primal "as if" of

our life. We live as if we were righteous. This constant "as if" is our dread of truth. We do not wish to be sinners, but that refusal says No to what God says. It is enmity against God, opposition to his judgship.

25. Sins

- Civil courts can adjudicate crimes and misdemeanors, but not sins. Only in God's courtroom is sin adjudicated.
- The N.T. speaks of a "sin unto death." That is the refusal to believe in Christ. If one has no desire for forgiveness, one cannot obtain it. "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" occurs when one has experienced the power of Christ's spirit and declares it to be the spirit of Satan. That perverts truth into a lie. Such mortal sin cannot be rectified.

26. Guilt and Death

- Sin entails both liability and indebtedness, which brings with it guilt, our guilt for our "having been disloyal to God."
- We are totally guilty before God, and there is no "insofar as." When God pronounces his judgment of "guilty" upon us, it represents the maximum penalty. The enmity of the creature against the Creator is not only a formal violation of the law but a denial of the real source of our existence. The guilt arising from our opposition to the Creator calls for expiation. Atonement for this guilt can be rendered by a total loss of existence, by replacing culpable existence with non-existence.
- That is the door by which death enters the field of ethics. Death, though also a biological process, is theologically an "ethos" event, God's verdict that a

sinner is not “worthy” of survival. Death is the only event in human life which cannot be treated as if it were not true.

27. Total Guilt

- [Here Elert treats a new problem that arose after World War II. He completed the manuscript in the summer of 1948, just three years after Germany’s defeat in WWII. He confronts the question whether every individual German was responsible and collectively guilty for the actions of Hitler. His discussion here is deep and difficult to summarize in a few sentences. He links it to the larger Biblical understanding of collective guilt. The guilt of a father affects the children, the guilt of a Führer affects a whole nation, the guilt of one people affects other peoples. The chain of guilt is endless. He concludes with a quote from Luther: “He who wants to be a part of the community must suffer and share the burdens, dangers, and losses of the community, though not he but his neighbor has caused them.” To which Elert adds: “There is no way any one of us can emigrate from God’s judgment,” and concludes with the Psalmist: “If I ascend to heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there.”]

Part II

ETHOS UNDER GRACE

Chapter 5. THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

28. Christ’s Place in History [Better translation: The Place of Christ in Christian Ethics]

- The encounter with Christ changes a person’s theological ethos.

- The quest for the “historical Jesus” testifies to the importance of his having been present and active in human history. For our initial theological ethos (sinner) would not be changed if he had never existed.
- The encounter with Christ exposes the falsehood of the sinner’s “as if” existence, for the truth Christ brings is the truth about me.

29. The Friend of Sinners

- Christ befriended sinners. Yet everyone agrees (his enemies too) that Jesus was not a sinner.
- The encounter with Christ produces the recognition that a) he is not a sinner; b) I am far removed from him.
- In the encounter with Christ the “sinner in reality” becomes a “sinner in truth” (no more “as if” deception) but the conclusion to the encounter is “grace,” for God pardons the sinner. The question still remains: Is Christ’s verdict, “You are no longer a sinner,” God’s verdict?

30. The Atonement

- The answer to that question is, of course, yes. Here’s how:
- Confronting Christ today means answering the question with these words: he is the “Word of grace” for ME.
- Christ’s death is God’s judgment on us, in two ways. He dies because he befriended us sinners, and his death is God’s judgment upon every one of us.
- The curse of nomological existence puts Christ on the cross—AND his cross brings life-under-the-law to an end. “Christ is the end of the law [=nomological existence], so that everyone who has faith may be justified” (=given the new ethos of a righteous non-

sinner). The risen Christ is God's verification, ratification, that Christ's new ethos-offer to sinners is God's own. Without Easter the old ethos persists.

31. Lord and Master

- The new ethos is real, not imaginary, grounded in a forgiveness verdict, and thus we live IN grace by continuous connection with Christ. Lord and Master are two NT terms for this connection. There are more.
- Christ's lordship is not "legalistic lordship" (Latin: imperium), to rule as emperor.
- His lordship is a "gracious lordship," (Latin: dominium). He rules as servant.
- As "master" (teacher) Jesus does not "teach" us what we are to do. He IS what we are to do.
- Christ's teaching task (Christ as master) continues throughout history after his ascension.

Coming at the Crossings conference—and probably as next week's ThTh —will be similar basic theses for the last five chapters of the book.

Chapter 6. THE NEW CREATURE

Chapter 7. THE NEW OBEDIENCE

Chapter 8. THE INVISIBLE STRUGGLE

Part III OBJECTIVE ETHOS

Chapter 9. THE CHRISTIAN TOTALITY

Chapter 10. THE CHURCH AND FORCES OF HISTORY

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder