

Werner Elert on Truth, and Why It Matters

Colleagues,

Ed Schroeder enriches us all this week with a timely gem from [Werner Elert](#), the great 20th century Lutheran theologian with whom he studied at the University of Erlangen, and who he later introduced to a phalanx of his own students, the undersigned among them. I continue to wish that Elert's books were more accessible than they are to American seminarians. If nothing else, they'd discover what deep, careful thinking looks and sounds like. They might also succumb to a taste of Gospel at its best. Thanks indeed to Ed for today's snippet.

Speaking of Gospel, consider joining us in Belleville, Illinois at the end of January for a seminar exploring its implications for today's fractured America. I've tacked some information about that to the end of this post.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Werner Elert on the Importance of Truth

by Edward H. Schroeder

"What is truth?" the Roman governor asks Jesus during the early Good Friday morning trial as St. John's Gospel portrays it. Jesus doesn't answer. Nor does John tell us what Pilate's own answer might have been. But you don't have to be a cynic to guess something like this: "Truth is whatever I say it is." Whether or not those words were in Pilate's mind, they have been

the mantra of leaders since then.

And if they were in Pilate's mind, here's why that is not necessarily cynical. Pilate is Rome's top agent in the Roman army's occupation of Palestine. Though there is armistice at the moment, the context is war. And as someone has said: "In war we have propaganda, so the first thing sacrificed is truth." Is the reverse also true: "When truth is sacrificed we have war"?

That is not a hypothetical question these days in these United States. What is truth? When the new US president takes the oath of office in January, will he be telling the truth? How important is it if he is or if he isn't? How important is truth for human existence?

These ruminations reminded me of this: My teacher Werner Elert devotes a separate unit of his ethics textbook to just that question. He calls truth an *Ordnung*, the German word for configurations God has "ordained" in creation to preserve human society, to guard it from destruction, to keep the human race going in a now-fractured world. This *Ordnung* of truth is treated at the very end of his long chapter on all the other *Ordnungen*: family, marriage, society, government, citizenship, economic order, work. And it comes at the end of his chapter because, he says, all those fundamental *Ordnungen* depend on truth being "in order" between people for these *Ordnungen* to function at all.

And when truth is not in order, they all crumble.

Here is my translation of that section from *Das Christliche Ethos*, p 182ff.

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Truth, Oath and Honor (W. Elert)

According to the eighth commandment, "thou shalt not bear false

witness against thy neighbor." Here too, as is the case in other commandments, a protective wall is established. What is to be protected here? "Protect your neighbor's honor?" That is as inadequate as to say that the seventh commandment protects private property, as if my neighbor's honor were his private property. The protection called for here is protection of an inter-human relationship, which is destroyed by false witness. If false witness is destruction, then the opposite is what needs protection here. The opposite of false witness is the truth.

In what sense is truth an inter-human relationship? Truth is existence without false appearances. God himself is truth, for his appearance—Greek: God's *doxa*—always reflects who God really is. With God's opponent, who lies, speaking from his own self, the lie is therefore the expression of his essence, who he really is. The devil, since there is no truth in him, is a primordial "murderer from the beginning" ["and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).] The lie is murder, for it destroys creaturely reality by robbing it of truth, rendering it un-true. Whoever lies falsifies God's creation. Liars, says Christ, are children of the devil. In the Apocalypse of St. John, they show up as neighbors of idolaters (21:3) And according to St. Paul the vices of the wicked arise from their "exchanging the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25).

Yes, every human relationship is "in order" only when it is in truth, i.e., when each person in relation to the other presents himself as what he really is. What he is, he is as God's created human being. If he presents himself as other than that, he is destroying God's creation. That is why truth is a human-to-human relationship ordained by the creator. Truth is a divine institution wherein each of us is linked to others as who we in truth really are.

Granted, that first becomes totally visible in Christ, who make us in truth what in reality we actually are. Christ himself is truth in person, and therefore the foe of all hypocrisy. But even apart from Christ, where God's law undergirds all reality, it is clear that all of the structures of creation are only so far "in order" when they are true, not untrue, not hypocrisy, not deception, not pretense, i.e., that neither formally nor materially they communicate contradiction, deception, or self-deception.

A marriage is only so far "in order" when each spouse is truthful to the other. So a broken marriage is no true marriage any longer. It can at most be restored when truth is reestablished in the relationship between the two. So also a state is in order only when its procedures truly promote justice and not injustice, when obedience to its laws is not pretense, but is rendered in truth.

An economic order is "in order" only when wages do not simply "buy" labor at the cheapest price, but give truthful value to the laborer for the work performed.

Truth as an inter-human relationship is therefore not a separate entity on its own, but is itself something essential permeating all the structures of human life. For all the other orders truth is what holds them together as well as the criterion for what they are. For every such *Ordnung* is only what its name implies if it is clear of inner untruth and in this sense is truthfully "in order." Parallel to this the lie, the contradiction of truth, perverts the *Ordnungen*, damages and finally destroys them.

In this sense the order of truth is similar to the state in its connection to the other *Ordnungen*. On the one hand the state, political government, is a distinct order of its own—like

family, marriage, economy. However, as the one *Ordnung* possessing coercive power the government engages all the other *Ordnungen* by protecting them from the forces of disintegration which threaten them.

Truth and the state, one might say, serve as watchmen on behalf of all the other *Ordnungen*. Truth guards the interior space of every human relationship; the state's power guards the outside boundaries.

For this reason they are also linked to each other. For the state is a God-given *Ordnung* that internally can become un-true, counterfeit and finally destroyed. So the state itself needs truth's *Ordnung* in order for its function as watchman and protector to be in order. In a similar way truth too, as prerequisite for all the other orders to be "in order," needs the government's protection so that it can carry out its watchman's role for the other *Ordnungen*. So long as the lie lives only in a human heart it is thereby inaccessible to the state's monitoring, just as evil desires are. But as soon as the lie goes public, destroying the other *Ordnungen*, government must intervene. That happens, for example, when under "false presentation of the facts" I finesse a deal in business, or when I "put up the banns" [German legal practice for marriage] and falsify the data in the document. This also occurs above all when I "bear false witness against my neighbor."

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Elert concludes this section linking truth-telling to the oath called for in court—"telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"—and to personal honor, "a treasure," he says, quoting Luther, "which is indispensable for human life."

EHS

December 8, 2016

About the Belleville seminar, January 22-24, 2017:

An election happened in the U.S. on November 8. Some people rejoiced at the outcome. Others mourned. This mixed reaction surfaced also among Christians who read the same Bible and wear the name of the same Christ to whom the Bible bears witness.

Whether mourning or rejoicing, these Christians have been asking the same question. "Where is God in all this?" Or to put that more sharply, "What is God up to in this current American moment?" More sharply still, "What is God asking of me right now?"

We're going to wrestle with these questions at next month's Crossings Seminar in Belleville, Illinois (Jan. 22-24, at the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows). Steve Kuhl will lead a classic Crossings workshop that 1) "grounds" our thinking in the Epiphany texts from the Sermon on the Mount, 2) "tracks" the present set of issues these texts are driving us to face, and 3) "crosses" these issues with the word and promise of Christ crucified.

We think you'll find this of tremendous help as you continue in coming months to respond to the election and its aftermath. Respond we must, and will. This is as true for Christians thrilled by the outcome as it is for the ones who are still in shock. Again the question: "How do we respond faithfully, in a way that is true to the God-in-Christ we happen to trust?"

We hope we'll see you in Belleville, where we'll be glad for your insights. Spread the word. Bring a friend.

For all the details, and to register, [click here](#). Be sure to

note the discounts for first-time attendees.