

Rudolf Keller

## **Being Faithful to the Bible While Doing Scholarly Theology**

Werner Elert on the Liberal-Conservative Spectrum\*

There have been widely divergent opinions about Erlangen theologian Werner Elert, who was born in 1885 and died in 1954. Many have come to quick conclusions in their evaluation of him. Among those who have expressed themselves about Elert, and who themselves were his contemporaries, a veritable fist-fight--pro and con--has sometimes ensued.

In this lecture I propose to

1. review some of the data of Elert's life
2. examine the picture of the academic/scholarly character of his theology, and
3. articulate his approach to the Holy Scriptures in the historical context in which he lived.

### 1. Some data of Elert's biography.

Werner Elert was born on August 19, 1885 in Heldrungen on the Unstrut River in the Province of Saxony<sup>1</sup>. That's eastern Germany today, some fifty miles west of Leipzig. In this Prussian province of old Saxony the local territorial church - we call them "Landeskirchen" - belonged to the Church of the Prussian Union. Elert's family belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Prussia, separate from the Landeskirche of the Union, whose congregations were often called "Altlutheraner" (Old Lutheran Church) in common church parlance.

Elert's path into theological study did not exactly follow a straight line. During his early childhood the family moved to Lunden, a town in Schleswig-Holstein 200 miles north from his birthplace. Before he passed the exam required for entrance to university-level theological studies at the city of Husum, he attended the "nonclassical" high school in Harburg, a small town in the south of Hamburg, nowadays suburb of Hamburg and attended for two years the "practical seminary" -- "Predigerseminar" in Kropp, not far from the family home in Lunden. Students at this seminary were being trained for pastoral work in overseas missions. It was not until after all this that Elert, having decided to do university-level studies in theology, "backtracked" to get the required prep school credentials.

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\* I give my thanks to Edward H. and Marie *Schroeder*, who did the translation from German to English. They have also been very kind hosts to me, when I was in St. Louis.

<sup>1</sup> For the biographical material see Rudolf KELLER / Michael ROTH, Werner Elert: Person – Werk – Wirkung, in: Rudolf KELLER / Michael ROTH (Ed.), *Mit dem Menschen verhandeln über den Sachgehalt des Evangeliums. Die Bedeutung der Theologie Werner Elerts für die Gegenwart*, Erlangen 2006, pp. 9-26. – Matthew BECKER, Werner Elert in Retrospect, in: *Lutheran Quarterly* XX, Nr. 3, 2006, pp. 249-302.

Elert did not come from an academically-oriented family. His father, after a lengthy military career, worked in Heldrungen as bailiff in the judicial system, and when they moved to the village of Lunden, as the owner of a general store. With today's interest in social history, church historians are reexamining Elert's socioeconomic background. In an autobiographical note Elert aptly called his father a "Kaufmann," a merchant in the sense in which that term was used in those days. From this we know that he was not a "big" business man.

In the village of Lunden the Elert family lived in a region where the territorial church was Lutheran. His family was closely tied to the "practical seminary" of Pastor Johannes Paulsen a few miles to the east in the town of Kropp (Schleswig- Holstein). So Elert began his education in this direction. Both of his sisters married young pastors trained at that seminary for ministry overseas--initially in Brazil. Sister Elisabeth, married to Pastor Philipp *Peter*, moved later with her husband to the United States, where Philipp then served as a pastor near Dubuque, Iowa, in what you American Lutherans call the "old" ALC, the denomination (mostly German-Americans) that preceded the 1960 merger that created THE American Lutheran Church. His sister Maria, married to Pastor Heinrich *Wrede*, came back to Germany in 1939 when her husband assumed a pastorate in the territorial church of Hannover.

Between the years 1890 and 1930 some 400 pastors were trained for service in the USA and Canada. This Lutheran seminary stood in close connection with free-church Lutheranism. Why Elert decided to switch from this free-church seminary program to university-level study of theology, backtracking to the college-prep high school to get his "admission card" for university studies, is something about which we have no information. In any case, the seminary in Kropp nudged or intensified for Elert the worldwide horizon of the Lutheran church which accompanied him his whole life long.<sup>2</sup>

University-level study of theology brought him in 1906 to the University of Breslau, where the "Old Lutherans" had their seminary and church headquarters. He then studied in Erlangen and Leipzig, two universities known for their Lutheran theological faculties. Ludwig Ihmels was one of his teachers in Leipzig. In addition to theology he took courses in philosophy, world history, German literary history, psychology and jurisprudence. His dissertation for the first doctorate was presented to the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Erlangen in 1910. One year later (1911) he presented his theological dissertation for the degree of "Lic. theol.," later called "Dr. theol.,". In both of these studies he worked on issues of the philosophy of

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<sup>2</sup> Most strikingly formulated in Elert's forward to "Die Lehre des Luthertums im Abriss," Leipzig 1924, cited from the reprint of the second edition, Erlangen 1978, p. IX: "German Lutheranism with its narrow-minded and wilted notions of "edification" is on the verge of landing in the wider horizons of gallant churchianity. After having been misled by the dominance of provincial perspectives, having lost the vision of its own mission in world history and having let itself be "nourished" by alien interests, bringing it to the very edge of self-annihilation, it now finds itself almost overnight linked to a worldwide context, a faith-fellowship confined by no territorial boundaries. With this a perspective opens for our church previously obstructed by the rise of territorial church governments, a perspective to make the work of the reformers fruitful for all of Christendom...."

history, focusing on the work of Rudolf *Rocholl* (who died in 1906), an "Old Lutheran" church leader who was fascinated with the philosophy of history.

In 1912 Elert became a pastor for the "Old Lutheran" congregation in the town of Seefeld in Pomerania. He was a military chaplain in the first World War. In 1919 he became director of the theological seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Prussia, located in Breslau. In 1923 he was called to be professor of church history, history of doctrine, and symbolics at the University of Erlangen. Upon the death of Philipp *Bachmann*, Elert moved over in 1932 to the chair for systematic and historical theology, a chair he held until his retirement in 1953. On November 21, 1954, in his 70th year, still actively at work, he suddenly died in Erlangen.

Elert and Paul Althaus became the drawing cards that brought a major influx of theology students to Erlangen - 661 of them in the winter semester of 1933-34.<sup>3</sup> At the time of his death Elert stood in high regard by many and enjoyed widespread recognition. For us in Germany it is very interesting to know that Elert has a following in America. I learned that from Lowell *Green* and Edward *Schroeder* as I was preparing the manuscript in 2004 for the publication of collected essays on the 50th anniversary of Elert's death.<sup>4</sup>

It is significant that Elert was actively involved in international contacts with Lutheran churches, especially with those gathered in the Lutheran World Convention the predecessor of the Lutheran World Federation. Students from all over the world came to Erlangen to study. Elert regularly called attention to the fact that in those years Erlangen had become a special center for world Lutheranism. He himself was actively involved in making Erlangen such a place, and he readily acknowledged the cooperation and participation of his colleagues in the same endeavor.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The academic/scholarly character of Elert's theology

Elert's own scholarly method has been investigated and evaluated over and over again in recent research. Karlmann *Beyschlag* emphasizes that Elert was "among all Lutherans of his time . . . doubtless the most non-traditional. A totally non-clerical man, whose appearance suggested a general in civil attire rather than a theologian, he was an 'original,' not only in terms of his scholarly ability, but also in his 'drive for original research,' a born scholar of the first order."<sup>6</sup> In his work as a scholar of

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<sup>3</sup> See: Martin HEIN, Erlangen, in: TRE 10, 1982, p. 159-164, here p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> See the article mentioned in footnote 1 above, p. 21, footnote 65. (Unfortunately misprinted in the first edition. It should read (as it does in the second edition) : "... Not primarily to honor Elert, but to honor the evangelischer Ansatz...")

<sup>5</sup> Werner ELERT, Erlangen und die Lutherische Kirche, in: Lutherische Kirche in Bewegung. Festschrift für Friedrich Ulmer zum 60. Geburtstag, ed. Gottfried WERNER, Erlangen 1937, pp. 184-193, reprinted in: Lutherische Kirche in der Welt. JMLB 41, 1994, pp. 102-112.

<sup>6</sup> Karlmann BEYSLAG, Die Erlanger Theologie (=EKGB 67), Erlangen 1993, p. 151. Beyschlag himself is a church historian, and as such a grateful student of Werner Elert, even though he did his

history, treating widely diverse historical epochs as he does, Elert's achievements are consistently impressive. So far as I can tell this impressive image of Elert has not diminished, even though at many places further research has gone beyond the research standards of his own time.<sup>7</sup>

In his dogmatics Elert spelled out clearly his view of scholarly work. He began from the notion that "all theological work, when rightly understood--and dogmatics especially--is oriented to offer indirect service to the kerygma, to gospelpreaching." Elert's "unattainable standard" for such theology-in-service-to-the kerygma is Luther's own theology.

"Constantly remembering this indirect purpose of theology -- to be in service to the kerygma -- offers the best self-protection for theology to avoid the temptation of playing with some notion of 'double truth [one theology for the academy and a different theology for the parish]'. That does not mean, however, that theology has to speak with a pulpit tone. Theology fulfills its specific task all the better, the more carefully it digs into new problems that always arise, even if it runs the risk of not being understood by every onlooker. Theology is governed by the rubrics that apply to all scholarly work. Distinctive for theology is that at any moment it can supply insight, a 'look-see' into its work-methods. But it is also a requirement of a scholarly discipline to be able to wait until the fruit has ripened."<sup>8</sup>

Beginning here Elert unfolds his concept of dogmatics as a scholarly enterprise. He proposes an explicitly churchly theology, but warns of the danger of a "scholasticism" which gets stuck on methodology. For him the subject matter of dogmatics is what he calls the "Sollgehalt des kirchlichen Kerygmas," the required content of the church's proclamation. "Dogmatics then asks the question of the 'zureichender Grund' --the sufficient reason, the sufficient basis--for that proclamation. But the relationship of the researcher to this subject matter is of a special sort. The kerygma is understood only by those who let it address them. The relationship of dogmaticians to the subject matter of their work is at least in this respect always the same. They themselves are supported by what the kerygma says to them."<sup>9</sup>

Against this background let us listen carefully to some of the objections raised about his theology. Even someone so "friendly" to Elert's confessional Lutheranism as Wolfgang Trillhaas in writing a forward to a new edition of Elert's dogmatics has critical comments for his treatment of "law and gospel." Even more pointed is his critique of Elert's teaching on the sacraments. Here, Trillhaas says, he simply cannot follow Elert's proposed exegetical basis for the doctrine. Elert didn't acknowledge "that reason sets limits to what he can say on this topic." Consequently Elert burdens

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doctoral work with Walther von Loewenich and not until Elert's death did he do his second doctorate in Erlangen.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Kaufmann, Werner Elert als Kirchenhistoriker, in: ZThK 93, 1996, pp. 193-242.

<sup>8</sup> Werner ELERT, *Der christliche Glaube. Grundlinien der Lutherischen Dogmatik*, 6th ed., Erlangen 1988 (=reprint of the 5th edition), § 3, pp. 41f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, § 4, pp. 46f.

his readers by "saying too much."<sup>10</sup> Just what Trillhaas was actually critiquing here, he never said. Would that we could discuss this with him, but that is no longer possible.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside such critique from his own ranks we have more recent scholars evaluating Elert from farther away. I shall not survey all that has been written about Elert here, but today just that which pertains to our subject--Elert's theological method, his use of the Bible.

In 1970 Catholic theologian Leo *Langemeyer* published a book with the title: "Law and Gospel. The Fundamental Concern in Elert's Theology."<sup>12</sup> He claims "Elert's theology is at the core not Biblical. That is not to say that his theology ignores essential elements in the biblical message. Rather that Elert's method, his way of working with scripture--and there is no shortage of scriptural references in his work--no longer conforms to today's exegetical rubrics." Langemeyer documents this at three points, which may signal that Elert's theology is passé and no longer up-to-date. 1) His insistence on the facticity of Christ's redeeming work--his forgiving sinners, his miracles, his death and resurrection. 2) Linked to that Elert's objectifying our relationship with God and in addition being too casual about Biblical historical criticism, together with a conservative stance about church dogma and the Lutheran Confessions. 3) Finally, his decidedly religious temperament and religious angle of vision for all of human life."<sup>13</sup>

I will not go into Langemeyer's conclusions and evaluation, but I do acknowledge that he has raised and focused on an important issue, which needs attention in further study of Elert's work.

Elert felt no obligation to take every discovery of historical-critical scholarship and record it as final wisdom. For example, he opposed the action of the General Synod of German Lutheran churches in 1952 when they condemned Rudolf Bultmann for his program of demythologizing the New Testament, without ever speaking to Bultmann. But he could also purposefully ignore recent research results for theological reasons.

Langemeyer makes a point that Elert did not face up to the "discoveries" of recent Biblical exegesis with his concept of God's law. But, of course, one must also pay attention to the theological presuppositions of the exegetes. The research results of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. [3f].

<sup>11</sup> See also Wolfgang TRILLHAAS, *Konservative Theologie und moderne Welt. Erinnerung an Werner Elert*, in: *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt. JMLB 33*, 1986, pp. 35-46.

<sup>12</sup> Leo LANGEMEYER, *Gesetz und Evangelium. Das Grundanliegen der Theologie Werner Elerts* (=Konfessionskundliche und kontroverstheologische Studien 24), Paderborn 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-16. This work was Langemeyer's doctoral dissertation under Josef *Ratzinger* at the University of Münster in 1966-68. The author, born in 1931 and since 1977 professor in Paderborn -- regularly speaks of being introduced to Elert by Lutheran theologian Ernst *Kinder* at Münster, who was himself a prominent student of Elert.

exegetes are themselves not "free" from the law-gospel controversy that evolved between Elert and Karl Barth.

So it is inadequate simply to ask whether Elert's statements about God's law "measure up" to the "research-results" of recent Old Testament scholarship. In this context it is simply not valid to keep asking over and over whether his statements can pass muster before the critical eyes of Biblical interpreters.

Elert's statements about the law arise from his fundamental starting-point for all theology, namely, the person of the historical Christ. All theology is to be oriented to Christ, to move toward him. That is the essence of Elert's key term "Evangelischer Ansatz."<sup>14</sup>

It may well be that in the OT understanding of law there are facets that Elert ignored. But since he made "gospel-grounding" his own starting point for theological reflection, we today may surely draw from the scriptures thoughts that Elert left at the sidelines.

The Ansatz, the cornerstone, so it seems to me, will not be shaken.

In similar fashion we must address the question whether Elert paid enough attention to the problem of the difference between the so-called "historical Jesus" and the "kerygmatic Christ." That was a hot-button issue in the last century, especially in German theology. Namely, that the biographical data about Jesus which historians investigated gave a different picture of him from the Christ at the center of Christian proclamation already in the time of the New Testament. Elert speaks explicitly and not by accident about the "historic CHRIST," using 2 Cor. 5:19. Elert does not speak of a "historical Jesus" to be distinguished from a "kerygmatic Christ." Perhaps for us today, accustomed as we are to the language of contemporary theology, that sounds strange, but for him it was essential. You start with the "historic Christ." This is the point of reference for Elert's "evangelischer Ansatz," his gospel-grounding. Who this Christ is, he will not only explain, but through his own scholarly historical research, also clarify. For Elert the last criterion for the purity of a theological concept is "God's word spoken to us in the person of Christ, not only in what he taught but also in what he did and what was done to him."<sup>15</sup>

We make it too easy for ourselves if we say that Elert had not yet arrived at the heights of NT scholarship. We must remember that Elert wrote his Dogmatics in 1940. Since that time, as anyone can tell, a lot of scholarly work has been done in exegesis. After Bultmann's famous book about Jesus there came many more, and even more after Elert's death in 1954. In addressing this question we must first of all keep in mind Elert's method of working. He belonged to a generation of theologians who did not footnote every sentence they wrote in order to demonstrate what all they had read and analyzed. And of course he was a systematician, not an exegete. As a

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<sup>14</sup> Difficult to render into English. Literally it is "the gospel as point of departure," or "it all starts with the gospel." Possibly "gospel-grounding" is a workable noun for what entails a verb of motion in the word "Ansatz."

<sup>15</sup> Glaube § 51, p. 293.

systematician he always started at what he considered the center of the scriptures, and then moved into conversation with the church fathers and with historically available studies, which he then would interpret, evaluate, interrogate, or even critique. Throughout Elert's entire work he presupposed and unfolded the Christological dogma: Christ is true God and true man. He did not debate with the same intensity individual hermeneutical issues which became theology's agenda in the 50s and 60s of the 20th century. But in no way was he unaware of hermeneutical issues. His thinking started -- perhaps I should say more precisely, his line of argument began -- in that solid consensus secured in the church's teaching. Elert might well have smiled to say that Langemeyer had rightly identified his theological center. But then he would have added that he, Elert, had come to his decision on this consciously and intentionally. It was not a matter of narrow focus or lack of attention. He purposely chose the way of gospel-grounding as his path to follow.<sup>16</sup>

I want to document this with a telling quotation. When he once was speaking about the "program" of Erlangen theology, he emphasized the close connection of the Erlangen theology of his day with that of the so-called "Erlangen school" of the 19th century. The old Erlangen teachers were attacked for their commitment to the Lutheran confessions, and that was also true of the Erlangen theologians of his day. "If today's Erlangen theologians are on this essential point identical with those of the past, then we may remember the answer given then for our critics today. I am thinking of what Frank said in the forward to his Dogmatics, citing Lessing's word to his enemy Klotz: 'Consider for a moment, dear sir, that you are simply putting into my hand things that I long ago placed in the closet.'"<sup>17</sup>

This is an excellent example of Elert's style, which Hans Lilje once described as follows: "The specific character of his theological publications was the masterful way he would link extraordinary precision with transparent clarity of style. His line of argument and his power of description were masterful. In nearly all of his writings, line for line, one can detect a subtle polemic undertone. But this only advanced the clarity of what he was saying. There were very few who were his equal in this regard."<sup>18</sup>

It is significant that at the end of Elert's life he once more moved into historical research on the Christological dogma of the ancient church. For him that was a

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<sup>16</sup> In the essay "Die Kirche und ihre Dogmengeschichte" reprinted in: Werner ELERT, *Der Ausgang der altkirchlichen Christologie. Eine Untersuchung über Theodor von Pharan und seine Zeit als Einführung in die alte Dogmengeschichte*. Edited from Elert's literary papers by Wilhelm MAURER and Elisabeth BERGSTRÄBER, Berlin 1957, pp. 313-333, here p. 315, Elert clearly critiques the scholarship both of the historians of dogma as well as the biblicists. He takes an alternate position: "By contrast we believe (along with Gottfried Thomasius) in what Elert calls 'die dialektische Folgerichtigkeit' -- namely, the inner consistency within classical Christian dogma -- because we also acknowledge in the history of dogma a continuing dependence on the Word of God, a word not arising from our own selves, but a Word spoken to us.." (p. 333).

<sup>17</sup> Erlangen und die Luth. Kirche (as in footnote 5 above), p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> Hanns LILJE, In memoriam, in: *Gedenkschrift für D. Werner Elert. Beiträge zur historischen und systematischen Theologie*, ed. Friedrich HÜBNER together with Wilhelm MAURER and Ernst KINDER, Berlin 1955, p. [7].

previously untypical path. Elert had had in mind to check once more the sources of his proposed program of studying the “historic Christ.” On the topic of communion fellowship in the early church, a major project for Elert, he was able to finish his study of the sources and hand over the results for theological discussion.<sup>19</sup> That topic, fellowship at the Lord’s Table, was of existential interest at the time in the theology and church life of the German church federation called “Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland”<sup>20</sup> the protestant church in Germany. As for Elert’s work on the Christological dogma, however, he never finished his studies. He died suddenly in the very midst of working on this theme. His interest was to emphasize that “because we believe the inner unity of God’s word, we also believe the inner unity and continuity of the history of dogma, because and insofar as it proceeds in dependence on the word of God. To be sure, that is a pure statement of faith which, contrary to the appearance of all errors and divisions, must be believed.”<sup>21</sup>

What we see here is Elert’s stark emphasis on the word of God as criterion and, following from that, wide-ranging independence from interpreters and their dogmatic presuppositions. And this theme he derives in multiple variations from his historical studies. For Elert the question “Who is Christ?” is at the center, and here for Elert is the decisive fork in the road. He rejects any “scholasticism” which merely rewrites ossified doctrinal citations, and for him it is not sufficient to add a Biblical proof text. The Biblical word intends to exercise an “enlivening, nourishing, and correcting function.” Theology ought not become irrelevant along with its selfchosen authorities. The picture of Christ in the four gospels alone has the potential to prevent that, as Elert documented in his study of “The Christ Picture and the Christ Dogma in Theodore of Pharan.”<sup>22</sup>

What impresses me in these “old-age” reflections in Elert’s last major work is the subtle critical tones against “scholarship” and “academic theology.” Even if those criticized keep citing the Bible, Elert does not relent. What does that tell us about his understanding of God’s word in terms of his own historical context?

### 3. Elert’s approach to the Holy Scriptures in the historical context in which he lived

I will not attempt to describe Elert’s doctrine of scripture or analyze it. I have consciously labeled this section as “Elert’s approach to the holy scriptures in the historical context in which he lived.”

Over and over again Elert emphasizes the power of the “verbum efficax” the word that works on its own, the power of the “viva vox evangelii” the living voice of the gospel. Yet for him it is significant that the Lutheran confessions have no dogma on the holy scriptures. The Roman church too, up until the Council of Trent, lived without such a dogma. In contrast to the confessions of the Reformed churches. who

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. KELLER/ROTH (as in footnote 1 above), p. 20 with footnote 61.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Der Ausgang (as in footnote 16 above), p. 333.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 25.



articulate a theory of scriptural authority, Elert points to the de facto authority exercised by scripture before and after any such doctrine.

Scripture has authority, and demonstrates its authority, without any assistance from a humanly-crafted doctrine on the topic. With this in mind he begins his chapter on the holy scriptures in his *Dogmatics*.<sup>23</sup>

He emphasizes that the eye- and ear-witnesses [in the scriptures] urge us to a faith decision not because they were inspired, but because they witness Christ to us in the very way that they themselves heard and saw him. The writings of these witnesses, in the same way as their original oral proclamation, are the medium, not the substantive grounds, to call us to faith. The meaning of the New Testament kerygma for Elert is this, “that here we have before us the original reprint of the event of God’s incarnation and thereby God’s own word of reconciliation in human speech.”<sup>24</sup> For this reason, says Elert, it is God’s self-revelation.

Again and again we see Elert distancing himself from the biblicists. He understands himself to be in common cause with others who oppose any attack on the Word of God. “But this common front,” he says, “dare not lead us to be indifferent about the proper relationship between law and gospel, or our church’s confession of faith. Nor dare we be misled into giving concrete issues of the moment a significance they do not deserve in the total fabric of church dogma. It is a mistake when many claim that today’s confession must be different, for example about church-state relations or forms of church government. Or, even worse, when one’s eternal salvation is made dependent on one’s agreeing with such statements. What is critical today, as it is in every era, is confessing faith in the creator of all things, in the person and work of his son, in the work of the Holy Spirit. We Erlangen theologians, we especially, believe we need to say that loud and clear, since no one can fault us for neglecting the relationship of state and church in our teaching.”<sup>25</sup>

These polemic statements - Elert often spoke and wrote in such polemic fashion -- were written in 1937 in the Hitler era. They need to be understood in the context of Elert’s critique of the Confessing Church at that time with its adherence to the Barmen Declaration of 1934, on the one side, and the so-called “positive Christianity” of the national-socialist Christians committed to the Nazi political program, on the other side.

As different as these two options were, Elert could never join forces with either -- and that for theological reasons.

To me it seems significant that Elert once noted that the old “Erlangen School” of the 19th century stood isolated with only the biblicists as their allies in their commitment to the scriptures. By contrast in Elert’s time a broad consensus had been identified

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<sup>23</sup> Glaube § 29, p. 169.

<sup>24</sup> Glaube § 31, p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> Erlangen und die Lutherische Kirche (as in footnote 5 above), pp. 192f. See also Paul ALTHAUS, Werner Elerts theologisches Werk, in: Gedenkschrift (as in footnote 18 above), p. 406 with footnote 9.

and acclaimed to defend the authority of God's Word and yet even that demanded for constant vigilance.

We look in vain to find any positive stance in Elert toward biblicism. That was not what he wanted. In his "Morphologie des Luthertums" (English translation "The Structure of Lutheranism") he was therefore critical of any doctrine of inspiration. He says: "It is inherent in the structure of the inspiration doctrine that it never comes to rest until every single word can be shown to be 'inspired.'" Elert wishes to stand with Luther. "For Luther the Word achieves authority because it judges, promises and bestows grace. Acknowledging this authority is nothing else than receiving for oneself that word of judgment and that word of grace."<sup>26</sup>

The scriptures testify to Christ. Here, together with Luther, he sees the pivot-point "that compels us to value scripture so highly."<sup>27</sup> Elert distances himself from "Biblical supernaturalism" and criticizes the biblicism that he claims to find in Calvinism. He says, "In place of free and simple faith in Christ which grounds Luther's 'scripture-principle' but also sets its limits, comes that petty biblicism which replaces faith with 'obedience to the scriptures.' This then would canonize the reference in Leviticus 11 that rabbits chew their cud, which is simply not the case. In the same way it would canonize the notion of a 'Biblical blueprint' for ordering the life of the church. It goes without saying that this biblicism was very attractive for all Protestants by virtue of its apparent logical consistency."<sup>28</sup>

We have herewith sampled Elert's critical comments from a variety of sources--his dogmatics, his smaller essays, his Christological studies. I finally want to refer to his major work early in his career, "Kampf um das Christentum" (The Battle for Christianity). It was this book that catapulted him to public prominence and led to his call to teach at Erlangen. It is a historical investigation of the theology of 19th century Germany. Here Elert seeks to track down the biblicism of the theologian *Hengstenberg* and others in the 19th century. He rejects Hengstenberg's principles for doing exegesis with an apologetic agenda to prove that doctrinal statements are valid. He labels it "Unbelehrbarkeit," an incorrigible fixation--to use an American idiom, "hopelessly stuck." In keeping with that conviction he says no to all others who follow that method.<sup>29</sup>

We saw previously that Elert does not assimilate every little discovery made by the exegetes, yet we must still acknowledge that he does not put up with having exegetes pass judgment on a position he holds along with other theologians. He is too much of an historian, and too much of an historically-conscious theologian to tolerate that. Simple-minded rejection of alternate positions he refuses to do. Conservative Lutheran that Elert is, he nevertheless distances himself clearly from conservative

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<sup>26</sup> Werner ELERT, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, Vol. 1, München 1965, § 15, p. 168-176.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>28</sup> *Morphologie* § 30, pp. 364f.

<sup>29</sup> Werner ELERT, *Der Kampf um das Christentum. Geschichte der Beziehungen zwischen dem evangelischen Christentum in Deutschland und dem allgemeinen Denken seit Schleiermacher und Hegel*, München 1921, pp. 90f.

apologetic attempts which will not grant the theological validity of his “evangelischer Ansatz,” his insistence on “gospel-grounding.”<sup>30</sup>

I am not inclined to subscribe uncritically to every segment of Elert’s line of argument. For example, he has appropriated some opinions from Otto Ritschl’s “Dogmengeschichte of Protestantism” which today are untenable. We could Kaffeeklatsch about this later. It is also not so simple to see the doctrine of inspiration only in the Calvinists, although it is indeed to be found there. It is also present among the other parties in the conflict between the confessions that includes Lutherans. What would Elert have said about Eugene F. *Klug* and Robert *Preus* and the way they make the case for developing a doctrine of holy scriptures?

It was Elert’s colleague and eventual successor in Erlangen, who later went to teach in the Lutheran Church in Australia, Hermann *Sasse*, who devoted himself extensively with the doctrine of the holy scriptures. He underscored the difference of opinion between Lutheranism in North America and that in Germany.<sup>31</sup>

An historically-documented understanding of the holy scriptures dare not simply be forbidden if we want to acknowledge that this ancient document is an historical document. I only mention that here even though I cannot spell that out in detail as I have sought to do with Elert’s writings.<sup>32</sup>

Sasse was attacked for being “soft” on biblical inspiration, especially from theologians of the Lutheran Free Churches in Germany. Elert too was under fire for this.

It is of considerable interest to me to see how Biblical authority, Biblical inspiration, is understood today in the USA and how it fares in conversation between the churches. In Germany people say: “Talk with a committed Roman Catholic about matters of faith and by the third sentence you’ll be talking about the mass.” In analogy to that we might say: “Talk with a committed fundamentalist about the Bible, and by the third sentence you’ll be talking about six-day creation.”<sup>33</sup>

These, however, are thought patterns in which Elert would not entangle himself. Consequently he was not simply one who would make a quick estimate as to whether or not he could agree with some opinion. Instead his point of departure was that “evangelischer Ansatz,” that gospel-grounding. He always started from that center of

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<sup>30</sup> For interpretation of this important work, see Gerhard MÜLLER, *Synthese oder Diastase? Historia magistra theologiae in Werner Elerts “Der Kampf um das Christentum”* in: KELLER/ROTH (Ed.) (as in footnote 1 above), pp. 119-154.

<sup>31</sup> Hermann SASSE, *Sacra Scriptura. Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm HOPF, Hermannsburg/Erlangen 1981.

<sup>32</sup> See also with a completely different concrete example: Rudolf KELLER, *Der Schlüssel zur Schrift. Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes bei Matthias Flacius Illyricus*, Hannover 1984 (= *Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums*. NF 5), pp. 11-24.

<sup>33</sup> As an example in a similar direction, Elert refers to Berlin pastor Gustav Knak, who would only acknowledge the Bible’s own world view to be valid. See Elert, *Der Kampf* (as in footnote 29 above), p. 231.

theology. He began with the God who was in Christ, who encounters us in “the historic Christ” and still today addresses us through him. Thus, although Elert was conservative, he was not “just” conservative. He was readily open to new insights if the fundamental issues of the faith were convincingly expressed there.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that Roman Catholic theology also investigates Elert. To understand the theological milieu in which Elert worked, we would naturally have to look at what was occurring during his lifetime in non-Lutheran protestantism and in Catholicism, what was being said and studied there. But that too would go beyond the scope of today’s presentation and the time available. With his theological cornerstone, the “evangelischer Ansatz,” Elert remains a fascinating figure. We find in his work many helpful treasures. We ourselves can transplant them into today’s theological context and make good use of them.