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The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

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sehr wenig, während, wenn der Pastor begeistert ist, seine Gemeinde in der Regel auch begeistert wird.

4. Um auf ein anderes Kapitel zu kommen. Der Pastor als Synodalglied muß auch im rechten Verhältnis zu seinen Amtsbrüdern stehen. Luther sagt: Ich weiß von keinem größeren donum, das wir haben, denn concordiam docentium. Wie durch Uneinigkeit unter den Pastoren Synoden zerrissen worden sind, so hilft gerade Einigkeit unter den Pastoren, das Band der Synode zu halten. Pastoren sollten daher fleißig Konferenzen und Synoden besuchen, amtsbrüderlichen Verkehr pflegen, Fehler und Gebrechen tragen und sich gegenseitig zurecht helfen mit sanftmütigem Geist. Zur Ehre Gottes darf gesagt werden, daß bis auf den heutigen Tag das Verhältnis unserer Pastoren zueinander ein feines ist und daß unter den Pastoren der Missouri synode ein gewisser Korpsgeist besteht.

5. Endlich ist noch zu erwähnen, daß der Pastor als Synodalglied im rechten Verhältnis zu den Synodalbeamten stehen muß, vornehmlich zu seinem Distriktspräsidenten und Visitator und dann zu den verschiedenen Behörden und Kommissionen. Alle diese Beamten haben keine gesetzgebende Gewalt, aber wir haben sie erwählt, um uns und unsern Gemeinden zu dienen, sie zu beraten und ihnen zu helfen. Ein Pastor sollte daher sich davor hüten, über seine Beamten lieblos zu urteilen, oder sie in seinem Herzen zu verachten, sondern sich ihres Rats fleißig bedienen, wenn er Schwierigkeiten in seiner Gemeinde hat, wenn er persönlichen Rat bedarf, zumal in Berufssachen. Die Präsidenten und auch die Visitatoren werden in der Regel mit großer Vorsicht gewählt, sind Männer voll Weisheit und Erfahrung und sollten daher eine Art väterlicher Stellung den Pastoren gegenüber einnehmen.

Sei I u ß. Wolle der Herr helfen, daß alle unsere Pastoren treu zu unserer Synode stehen! Dann kann der Segen nicht ausbleiben.

F. Potenhauer

The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

A translation of Dr. C. F. W. Walther's article entitled
 "Die falschen Stuetzen der modernen Theorie von den offenen Fragen,"
Lehre und Wehre, XIV (1868)

In the foreword of the present volume of this journal we stated in which sense one may without hesitation speak of open questions. At the same time we declared that we reject the modern theory of open questions. It appears necessary, however, that we point out how untenable the arguments are which are advanced in support and justification of this theory. Those that are radical

say: "The Bible is no law codex. To deduce a teaching which must be believed from every incidental utterance of it is a mechanical use of the Bible. What is important is to penetrate into its spirit, to lay hold of its system; everything else is merely framework, unessential, unimportant." It is not necessary to refute this argumentation. It is that of the rationalist. Whoever really accepts the Holy Scriptures as God's Book and Word, that is, whoever is a Christian, will not speak thus. For the Christian the Bible is indeed "a law codex," but not only that. The Son of God Himself declared: "The Scripture cannot be broken," John 10:35. How much more should a Christian consider every word in the Scriptures as binding for himself! For him Holy Scripture is indeed "the Law of the Lord." Whoever thinks that he can find one error in Holy Scripture does not believe in Holy Scripture but in himself; for even if he accepted everything else as true, he would believe it not because Scripture says so but because it agrees with his reason or with his sentiments. Luther writes: "Dear friend, God's Word is God's Word. No one dare tinker with it. Whoever blasphemously gives the lie to God in one word and says that such blaspheming and criticizing is a little matter blasphemes God in His totality and considers *all* blaspheming of God a light matter. God is One who cannot be divided and here be praised and there be reprehended, here be honored and there despised. . . . Consider this: The circumcision of Abraham is an old, dead matter and no longer either necessary or profitable. Yet if I say that God at the time did not command it, my avowal of belief in the Gospel would not help me. That is what St. James means when he says (chap. 2:10), 'For whosoever shall keep the whole Law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.'" (Walch, XX, 965.)

Others appeal to the fact that in this life there can be no absolute unity but merely a fundamental one. They refer to the apostle's statement that in the Church many using the right Foundation build on it wood, hay, and stubble by teaching erroneous human ideas, which indeed do not stand the testing fire, but which do not rob one of eternal salvation because they do not overthrow the one true Foundation, 1 Cor. 3:10-15. (Cp. article "On the Church" in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.) For this reason, so they assert, the old orthodox dogmaticians taught with respect to doctrines that are non-fundamental one may without jeopardy to one's salvation argue for or against their acceptance. — We reply as follows: This justification of open questions rests on a gross misunderstanding and confusion. In considering the question, What belongs to the fundamental articles which a man must know or which one may not deny? the point

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at issue is not what a Christian may accept or reject in matters of faith, but rather how much of divine truth is required in order that a person may arrive at, and be preserved in, saving faith and how much of saving truth a person may be ignorant of or deny and oppose without making the existence and continuance of true, justifying, and saving faith in his heart an impossibility.

We admit that a discussion of this matter is of great importance. In the first place, since the great majority of church-bodies are polluted with many errors, it is important to know in which of them, in spite of the existence of fundamental errors, one may still find true believers and hence members of the true invisible Church. Furthermore, even in orthodox churches in which the Word of God is taught in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to the Lord's institution, there are many that are weak in Christian understanding and still entertain erroneous views. Therefore it is highly important to know whether such members may nevertheless be regarded as possessing true faith and, in spite of their weakness in spiritual understanding, be saved or whether all such weak Christians must be classed with the lost and condemned. Now, let it be observed that Paul in 1 Cor. 3 by no means wishes to say that a Christian merely has to accept the articles that are fundamental, that everything else belongs to the category of open questions where there is liberty and that nobody should look upon a person askance or censure him when in dealing with matters of this category he either accepts or rejects what the Scriptures clearly teach. On the contrary, St. Paul and all other writers of Holy Scripture testify that a little leaven of false teaching leavens the whole lump, that no man has the liberty to add or subtract anything with respect to the Word of God, and that God looks upon him only as His child who trembleth at His Word, Is. 66:2. It is very evident, too, that our old dogmaticians, in pointing out that in respect to non-fundamental articles there may be a difference of opinion, do not wish to say that among the teachings clearly revealed in God's Word there are open questions concerning which a person may *under all circumstances* take any view at all. This is evident from the fact that among these articles they, for instance, place the following: the everlasting rejection of a number of angels, the immortality of man before the Fall, the irremissibility of the sin against the Holy Ghost, the burial of Christ, the proceeding of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, the creation of the world in six days, the visibility or invisibility of the Church and its marks. Will anybody, be his acquaintance with our fathers ever so slight, hold that they meant to say the Church might tolerate the teaching that the devil will ultimately be saved,

that man originally was subject to death, that Christ was not buried, that the sin against the Holy Ghost can be forgiven, that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, that the world was created in six millennia, etc? Everybody must say that the old dogmatians looked upon these points as belonging to the non-fundamental articles merely because ignorance as to Scripture-teaching on these matters and the resulting errors do not preclude the possibility of the existence of true, justifying faith.

For this reason Quenstedt also, having, like Hunnius, mentioned among other things the first three points enumerated above, adds: "If these matters are unknown and denied, such a course does not *by itself* inflict injury, since no cause of faith or any fundamental dogma is made invalid through such denial." (*Theol. did.-pol.* I, 352.) By introducing the restriction *by itself*, Quenstedt himself indicates that, if a Christian should come to know or be shown that those non-fundamental articles are clear Scripture-teaching and if he should nevertheless deny or oppose them, such a course would indeed bring him injury, since thereby he would overthrow not indeed the real and dogmatic [the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and of justification by grace through faith] but the organic foundation, Holy Scripture, and thus lose in his heart the essential foundation, Christ. For this reason Aegidius Hunnius confronted the Jesuits Gretser and Tanner at the colloquium of Regensburg in 1601 with the following: "The story of the incest of Judah and Tamar need not become known to all Christians; for there are innumerable believers who are not acquainted with this story; hence this account is not an article of faith, although those people that hear it read from the Bible or read it themselves must believe it as a matter of faith (*licet de fide*) and an account of the Holy Spirit Himself. . . . Indeed, he is a heretic who denies an article of faith; however, not only he but that person also who denies a historical narrative of the Holy Spirit. . . . There are minor errors which are contrary to articles that are less important, which errors the apostle compares to stubble that is burned in the fire of tribulation, in such a way, however, that the erring person himself is saved, since he clings to the foundation of salvation, the Rock, Christ. His work, of course, though built on the right foundation, suffers injury. It is something different if somebody should say contemptuously: 'For me the foundation of salvation is sufficient, and I am satisfied if I fully accept this article,' and if such a person should refuse to receive fuller instruction in the remaining doctrines. It is true that such a person would err with regard to minor articles; however, his error would not be insignificant but be connected with

contempt of the divine Word." (*Colloq. Ratisbonae*, hab. Lauingae, p. 351 sqq.)

Buddeus also, after dwelling on the articles without which the generation and preservation of true, justifying faith in the heart, and hence salvation, is not possible, finally adds: "It will be observed that we do not speak of that which must be believed because it has been revealed by God but of that which a person must believe in order to be saved; for in Holy Scripture many things are contained which we must in true faith accept since they have been revealed to us by God" (even if they do not belong to the articles of faith), "which, however, are not necessarily required for obtaining salvation. Besides, many things are required and therefore necessary if a person is to be a member of a particular Church, and still more, if one is to be a pastor in that Church, even though such matters are not at once required for salvation; and hence we do not speak of them here." (*Institut. th. dogm.* Lips., 1724, p. 41.) Here Buddeus expressly declares that in the doctrine concerning articles of faith the question is not considered what a person who has Holy Scripture and knows it and has been shown what its teachings are must on account of its authority believe. When the question is asked, Which doctrines contained in the Scriptures must be accepted? then it no longer is proper to distinguish between the various doctrines [as to their importance], a distinction which is justified when articles of faith are dwelt on. If a man has become convinced that a certain matter is taught in the Holy Scriptures, then his attempt to destroy or remove the smallest letter, even a title, of such teaching excludes [him] from the kingdom of heaven, while otherwise a person may entertain even a serious error which involves acceptance of a heresy without losing faith, grace, and salvation.

Nikolaus Hunnius, as is known, was the first one of our theologians who treated the doctrine concerning fundamental articles in a comprehensive and systematic manner. He did this in a writing entitled *Diaskepsis Theologica de Fundamentali Dissensu Doctrinae Evangelicae-Lutheranae et Calvinianae seu Reformatae*. Wittebergae, 1626. He strictly adheres to the position that the "dogmatic foundation is that part of divine doctrine which alone, when it is preached to a person, generates in him justifying and saving faith and without the teaching of which saving faith cannot be begotten" (par. 95), and he removes all those Biblical doctrines from the fundamental articles which are not inseparably connected with the creation of true faith. Hence he writes: "Whatever dogma is not necessary is not a part of the foundation of faith. No dogma is a necessary one if faith can exist without it or has ever existed without it. Such a dogma therefore is not

a part of the foundation of faith. A person may be ignorant of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, of His teaching in the Temple when He was twelve years old, and of many other historical matters; he may be ignorant of the fact that the evangelists and apostles wrote and of what they wrote; he may deny that the prophesied Antichrist has appeared or that the world in its substance will be destroyed. All this does not jeopardize eternal life, and if one is ignorant of these doctrines or denies them, saving faith can nevertheless continue. However, what belongs to the foundation not only cannot be denied, but must not be unknown, that is, faith must not be ignorant of it (*a fide abesse*)." (Par. 237.)

In a later paragraph Hunnius writes: "Whatever dogma may be unknown to a person without injury to his faith is not fundamental either in the sense of constituting the foundation or of being an essential part of it. The doctrine of the Sacraments is such a dogma. Hence the doctrine of the Sacraments is not fundamental." (Par. 311.) We adduce these statements of our Hunnius not to prove that he denies that the doctrine of the Sacraments belongs to the fundamental articles in the sense in which the later theologians regard it as such; we rather wish to prove that it is a gross misunderstanding to assume that our old theologians, in distinguishing between fundamental and non-fundamental articles, intended to say that all non-fundamental doctrines are open questions in the modern sense of the term. Hunnius himself feared that careless readers might thus misunderstand him and in advance guarded against such an interpretation of his words. Among other things he writes: "Salutary doctrine is of two kinds. The one is that which is the direct cause of faith or brings about that a man believes in God and Christ; on this doctrine is based his firm confidence of receiving forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. The other is that which indeed does not engender this confidence but nevertheless is placed by God before men either to explain faith or to teach other matters necessary for being a Christian. Whoever errs in the first kind of doctrine errs not only perilously but with respect to faith itself (*circa fidem*); he that errs in the second kind of doctrine errs perilously but not with respect to the doctrine of faith, but from the moral point of view. In the latter case the confidence which constitutes faith is not directly destroyed, that is, there is no direct rejection of the teaching through which confidence is begotten, but the wrath of God is provoked by an error in this sphere. He who denies the stories of Samson, of David, etc., or who denies that circumcision was a divine institution, etc., thereby does not detract anything from the foundation of faith or fundamental doctrine, but he nevertheless errs with peril to his salvation, because by attacking the majestic truth-

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fulness of God, he offends Him through a mortal sin and thereby provokes His wrath, a course which means loss of faith and of salvation unless repentance follows. To this category belong the virgin birth of Christ and many other dogmas, whose denial does not overthrow or adulterate (*depravat*) the fundamental articles of faith but arouses the divine wrath, so that faith ceases because the Originator of faith [God] has withdrawn, although the foundation of it still stands. . . . If in the following the expression occurs: "This or that dogma may without injury to the foundation of faith remain unknown or be denied," the sense of the expression is by no means that such denial or ignorance may occur without injury to faith itself, since such a denial may destroy faith even though it does not subvert its [doctrinal] foundation." (§§ 351, 353.) To declare everything that is non-fundamental an open question even if it is clearly revealed in the Word of God is nothing less than saying that the commission of mortal sins is a matter of indifference.

But the question will be asked, Does it not happen frequently, yes, is it not the universal lot of men, that they err in *weakness*, and are we not to receive those that are weak in the faith, and must therefore not their error, caused by weakness, especially if it does not subvert the foundation, be excluded from the category of divisive errors and hence in reality be enumerated among open questions? We reply: An error due to lack of understanding or overhasty decision, hence to weakness, must indeed never be treated as a heresy and may never be looked upon as divisive of church-fellowship, be it ever so gross. Accordingly we see that in the apostolic times even those people were not excluded from the Church who owing to weakness in their understanding of divine truth even taught the fundamental error mentioned Acts 15:1: "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." But although in the case of an error caused by weakness the erring brother must be tolerated, we have to say, in the first place, that the error itself must never be tolerated by the Church even if it appears insignificant and not dangerous, provided it opposes a clear word of God. Such an error hence may never be treated as an open question. Neither the Church nor its servants are masters of the Word. On the contrary, to the Church are committed for faithful administration the oracles of God, Rom. 3:2; and its ministers are at the same time ministers of the Word, Luke 1:2, who have been given the command, "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of," 2 Tim. 3:14; "That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost," 2 Tim. 1:14. Hence Musaeus writes: "God has committed to His Church, as to the spiritual

mother of all believing children of God, not only the chief articles of Christian truth which every simple Christian must believe and without the knowledge and acceptance of which true faith cannot be engendered or preserved, but the whole Christian doctrine pertaining to faith and life, likewise the holy Sacraments, and He expects the Church to keep these treasures pure and unadulterated, to preserve them, defend them against all seducing spirits, to use them, thereby to beget spiritual children for God and bring them up that they may grow in saving knowledge from day to day. It is thereby to strengthen the weak, to cheer those that are troubled, to comfort the timid, to arouse the wicked and the secure sinners, to bring back those that are erring, to seek the lost, and thus to perform most carefully everything that pertains to the duties of a spiritual mother toward God's true children here upon earth, and it has no authority to eliminate any part of Christian doctrine which for this purpose has been committed to it and without whose use it cannot fully perform its function for the edification of its members and the true children of God. What Paul says to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:15; 6:3 ff.; 2 Tim. 3:14; 1:13, 14) he says to the whole Christian Church, and what he demands of bishops in general, namely, to hold fast the faithful Word as they have been taught, that they may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers (Titus 1:9), that he demands from all godly, faithful teachers. This is the public function of the Church and of its faithful teachers, that they immovably, rigidly, and firmly adhere not only to the articles and sections of Christian doctrine which every simple Christian must know but to those also which faithful teachers and pastors need to make others wise unto salvation and which are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, as Paul says 2 Tim. 3:15 f. Of these matters it must not permit any part to be adulterated or removed." (*Bedenken vom Consensu Repetito*; cf. *Hist. Syncret.*, p. 1073.) Hence it is certain that, since all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, the Church may not adulterate or eliminate anything contained in Holy Scripture but must earnestly hold every Biblical truth, even if it should appear insignificant, oppose every unscriptural error, should it seem ever so unimportant.

How is that? we are asked. Do you really wish to excommunicate everybody at once as a heretic who errs in nothing but a non-fundamental article, and do you intend at once to sever fellowship with an organization which is guilty of such a non-fundamental error? That we are far removed from entertaining such a thought we have stated above. What we maintain is this: On the one hand, a non-fundamental error, even if it is contrary

to the clear Word of God, must not be treated as a heresy, but in patient instruction it must be shown to be untenable, be refuted, opposed, and criticized. On the other hand, however, if a church has exhausted all means of bringing such an erring brother to the acknowledgment of the truth and his adherence to the respective error evidently is not due to insufficient intellectual understanding of Scripture-teaching, and hence through this non-fundamental error it becomes manifest that he consciously, stubbornly, and obstinately contradicts the divine Word and that accordingly through his error he subverts the organic foundation of faith [the Scriptures], then such an erring person, like all others that persevere in mortal sins, must no longer be borne with, but fraternal relations with him must be terminated. The same thing applies to a whole church-body which errs in a non-fundamental doctrine. It is very true that in this life absolute unity in faith and doctrine is not possible, and no higher unity than a fundamental one can be attained. This, however, by no means implies that in a church-body errors of a non-fundamental nature which become manifest and which contradict the clear Word of God must not be attacked and that a Church can be regarded as a true church and be treated as such if it either makes such non-fundamental errors a part of its confession and, with injury to the organic foundation, in spite of all admonition, stubbornly clings to these errors or in a unionistic fashion and in a spirit of indifference insists that a deviation from God's clear Word in such points need be of no concern to us.

(To be continued)

A.

Sermon Study on 1 Cor. 10:16, 17

Eisenach Epistle for Maundy Thursday

In v. 14 of 1 Cor. 10 Paul had warned against idolatry, particularly against that form of idolatry which seems to have been quite the vogue with some of the Corinthian Christians, participation in idol feasts. Already in chap. 8:8-13 he had called their attention to the offense given by this custom. While the eating of any meat at home was permitted, even if that meat came from animals offered to the idols, 8:1-7; cp. 10:25-30, it was quite a different matter to sit in the temple of the idol and take part in the sacrificial meal served there. That was actually participating in the idol feast, therefore participating in idolatry. In order to warn his readers against this sin, he points out the incompatibility of partaking of the Lord's Table and that of the devil. Participation in the worship is fellowshiping with the deity worshiped at that ser-