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The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

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Konferenz mit einem brünstigen Gebet. Er wird gebetet haben für die Pastoren und ihre Gemeinden, für sich und für die ganze Kirche. Zu einer rechten Konferenz gehört demnach auch das gemeinsame Gebet. Wir eröffnen und schließen unsere Sitzungen mit Gebet und halten auch Konferenzgottesdienste ab. Die Pastoren sollten es sich daher zur Pflicht machen, bei der Eröffnung der Sitzungen zugegen zu sein und nicht zu spät zu kommen, auch die Konferenz nicht ohne Not vor Schluß verlassen.

Überblicken wir die Konferenz zu Milet, so erkennen wir, daß Paulus nur große Dinge zur Verhandlung vorlegte, Dinge, die die Führung des Predigtamts betrafen, so daß die Pastoren erbaut und gestärkt nach Ephesus zurückkehrten. Machen wir nach dem Vorbild der Konferenz zu Milet unsere Konferenzen immer segensreicher und fruchtbringender, indem wir sie fleißig besuchen und auf ihnen nicht zu viel Zeit verwenden auf geringfügige Dinge, sondern uns konzentrieren auf die großen Hauptsachen. F. P f o t e n h a u e r

The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

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

(Continued)

Johann Gerhard, whose authority is adduced against us, is of the same well-founded opinion [that, while in this life not a higher unity than a fundamental one is possible, errors that arise in a church-body should not be treated with indifference, even if they are of a non-fundamental character]. He writes against the papists, who place unity among the marks of the Church: "It must be added that unity of faith and doctrine in the Church is not a perfect and absolute one in this life; for at times controversies occur between members of the true Church through which this holy unity is torn. We therefore have to distinguish between that absolute, perfect unity, free from every form of disharmony, which is found nowhere except in the Church Triumphant, and that fundamental unity, which consists in agreement concerning the principal articles of doctrine, while with respect to a few less important points of faith (*fidei capitibus*) or to ceremonies which are a matter of indifference or to the interpretation of some Scripture-passages controversies will arise. And this is the unity obtaining in the Church Militant; for in this Church there is never found such a definite harmony that no disagreements arise in it. 'For we know in part, and we prophesy in part,' 1 Cor. 13:9."

852 False Arguments for Modern Theory of Open Questions

Having next quoted a beautiful passage from the works of Augustine, Gerhard continues thus: "Here Augustine discloses the cause of disagreements in the Church. The truly pious are not yet perfectly renewed but retain remnants of the flesh. Hence they do not arrive at an accurate and perfect knowledge of the mysteries of faith but err and waver with respect to some of them. The flesh in the regenerate still strives against the spirit, for which reason it can easily happen, especially if the temptation of the devil also enters, that, giving way to wrong, carnal ideas, they create dissensions in the Church; however, if they do not become guilty of stubbornness and if the foundation is not shaken, they are not at once cut off from the body of the Church on this account. This is proved by the examples given in Acts 11:2; Gal. 2:11; Acts 15:39. In the Corinthian church divisions had arisen, profanations of the Eucharist had crept in, there were acrimonious debates about adiaphora, some persons doubted the article of the resurrection, etc.; in spite of all this, however, Paul does not refuse to call the assembly a church, but in addressing it, he terms it still a church of God, 1 Cor. 1:2. In the church of the Galatians the article of justification had been corrupted through the adulterations of false apostles; but since the members were still open to instruction and some of them still retained the true faith, Paul still calls the Galatian congregations, churches, Gal. 1:2. This is acknowledged even by Bellarmine." Having finally adduced several instances of dissension in the ancient Church, Gerhard concludes: "Hence it is certain that a total and real absolute unity cannot be hoped for in this life. And therefore not every disagreement at once dissolves union and unity in the Church." (*Loc. de Eccles.*, § 231.) It is clear that Gerhard in this passage does not intend to call those non-fundamental teachings which are clearly revealed in the Word of God open questions; he merely wishes to show that on account of doctrinal differences which arise in such points the essential unity of the Church is not at once destroyed, and the body is thereby not at once deprived of its status as a Church, and those individual members who in such points through their false teaching "dissolve unity" must not "at once be cut off," "unless stubbornness enters in and the foundation is shaken." How little Gerhard is of the opinion that those errors on account of which real unity in a Church is not at once nullified must be regarded as open questions we see from the fact that in his enumeration he includes even fundamental errors. His position is that all erring members must be tolerated as long as they are not stubborn and, though clinging to an error, are willing to remain on the proper foundation. That also is the only thing which we maintain, namely, that the time for separating from brethren on account of an error

which doctrinally is non-fundamental has only then arrived when those who are erring stubbornly reject all instruction from the divine Word and thus become manifest as people who, though they apparently do not wish to violate the dogmatic foundation, the analogy of faith, nevertheless shake and subvert the organic foundation, Holy Scripture itself, as far as they are concerned. It is something altogether unheard of to say that everything which does not belong to the fundamental articles must be put into the category of open questions. It may well happen that a simple-minded Christian will oppose some important secondary fundamental article and nevertheless possess true saving faith in his heart, while he who knowingly, contrary to Holy Scripture and the Confessions, would deny merely that the suffering of Christ took place *under Pontius Pilate* (a historical detail which certainly does not belong to the fundamental articles) would surely not be a true believer. Through nothing does an erring person manifest more clearly that his error is of a fundamental nature than by showing that in his error he rejects the Word of God, a thing which may take place in opposing non-fundamental as well as fundamental Bible-teachings; in fact, the fashion in which he handles mere problems may bring this to light. Accordingly, to name but one author, the Wittenberg theologian Carl Gottlob Hofmann (died 1774) writes: "Non-fundamental articles" (in which class he with Baier enumerates also the so-called theological problems) "often can assume the nature of fundamental articles if the reason on account of which they are unknown or denied is something that opposes the foundation of faith. For instance, the article of the propagation of the soul is not a fundamental article whether you maintain that it occurs *per traducem* or through a new creation; but if you hold that this propagation takes place *per traducem* in order to demonstrate that spirits are material beings, then you may become guilty of a fundamental error; for according to such a view the angels and God Himself are classed among beings that are corporeal. The article pertaining to the Copernican system likewise is not a fundamental one, but it can easily happen that a person denying the movement of the sun around the earth adds as his conclusion that the writers of the Old Testament were altogether uncultured and ignorant people (*admodum rudes*). In this way the infallibility of the holy writers and thereby the teaching of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture are attacked." (*Theol. Thet. Praecogn.*, c. 11., § 26, p. 112.)

We are far removed from the position which severs fraternal relations with an individual and stops having church-fellowship with a church-body if in their understanding of Bible-teaching they are not dogmatically correct. We by no means consider such

354 False Arguments for Modern Theory of Open Questions

correctness a condition of fellowship. If that were our position, we should have to contend against ourselves; for while we notice incorrect views, that is, errors, in others, other people may notice such imperfections in one or the other of us. No; as soon as an individual or a whole church-body manifests the attitude of willingness to submit unconditionally to the whole Word of God and not to teach anything that opposes the foundation of Christian faith, be it the real or the dogmatic or the organic foundation, we extend in every case with joy the hand of fellowship to such an individual, and we are altogether willing and ready to cultivate church-fellowship with such an organization. This, however, is our position and practise, not because we consider any teaching clearly revealed in the Word of God an open question which one may either affirm or deny and concerning which there is liberty of opinion, but because we know that there are errors which proceed from weakness, just as there are sins that are caused by weakness, and that a Christian may intellectually err even with respect to a fundamental matter without subverting the foundation in his heart, not to mention how wrong it would be to assume that a person necessarily destroys the foundation of faith if he errs in a non-fundamental point. Nevertheless we consider it our duty to criticize, refute, oppose, contend against, and reprove whatever error becomes manifest in the teaching of those who wish to be our brethren, whether this error pertains to a fundamental or a non-fundamental teaching of the Word of God. By taking this course, we merely follow all faithful servants of God, from the prophets and apostles down to the most recent recognized faithful ministers of our Church. The result, of course, is that the Church never for a long time enjoys peace and that precisely the orthodox Church usually presents the appearance of a body torn by internal dissensions. But this, far from being an indictment of a servant of God and of the Church, is rather an indication and seal that the servant of God is faithful, and it gives the Church the assurance that it belongs to the *ecclesia militans*. For this reason Gerhard writes: "From the zealous warfare which pious and faithful teachers conduct against false doctrine one may not unjustly conclude that they are instruments of the Holy Spirit and that their teaching undoubtedly is true. It is an attribute of faithful teachers that they endeavor to purge the Church completely of all creations of Satan regardless of who the persons may be that have introduced or are introducing them. Therefore, even when very insignificant adulterations occur and they observe them, they will not for one hour close their eyes indulgently (*connivent*). When there is bright light, you see even little specks of dust; if there is darkness, the largest stumps obstructing your path are not noticed." (*Loc. Th., De Eccles., § 247.*)

Now, what is to be done if a person teaches an error which indeed is non-fundamental but opposes a clear Word of God and if he has been convicted by the clear word so that he is not able to reply? What is to be done if such an erring person stubbornly insists on maintaining his error, refuses to be instructed, and it becomes evident that he clings to his error not through weakness of intellect, but because he is unwilling to yield to the Word of God? What is to be done if he by clinging to his error does indeed not subvert the real or dogmatic but the organic foundation of faith, the authority of Holy Scripture? Are we, after he has been made conscious of his error and all admonitions have been in vain, to drop the controversy and tolerate the error? Are we to bring about peace in this manner, that we declare the point in debate an open question because it does not pertain to a fundamental article of faith? What human being, what angel, has the right to excuse us from obedience to the Word of God? Who can destroy and dissolve the Word of God even in one small tittle? Is not the only one who does that the Antichrist, the man of sin and son of perdition, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God? And, we repeat, can there be a clearer proof that a body is not a true Church of God than if it will not unconditionally submit to the divine Word? Can it in this case, in true faith, hold the other teachings which it claims to accept and believe? Never! Whoever demands that a matter taught clearly in the Holy Scriptures be made an open question for him believes nothing on account of its being in the Word of God; otherwise he would believe and accept everything. Luther therefore is right when he says: "The Church, as St. Paul says, is subject and obedient to Christ, in fear and esteem. How could a person distinguish between the true Church of Christ and the church of the devil except through obedience and disobedience toward Christ, especially if disobedience, although people have become conscious of it and know it, excuses itself flagrantly and impudently and insists on being right? The holy Church, it is true, sins and stumbles or errs, as the Lord's Prayer teaches, but it does not defend or excuse its error; on the contrary, it humbly asks for forgiveness and makes amends wherever it can. Its sin then is forgiven and no longer placed to its account. If I cannot distinguish the true from the false Church through obedience, on the one hand, and stubborn disobedience, on the other, I no longer can have any opinion about the character of a Church." (Luther pertaining to his *Buch von der Winkelmesse*, 1534; XIX, 1579.)

Luther writes furthermore: "Here you see what St. Paul thinks

856 False Arguments for Modern Theory of Open Questions

of a little error in doctrine which apparently is insignificant, or even seems to represent the truth. He considers it so grave and dangerous that he is justified in denouncing its sponsors as false prophets, even though they appear to be eminent people. Therefore it is not right for us to consider the leaven of false teaching a little matter. Let it be as little as it pleases; if it is not watched, it will result in the collapse of truth and salvation and in the denial of God. For if the Word is adulterated and God denied and blasphemed (a result which will necessarily follow), all hope of salvation is gone. But whether or not we are blasphemed, denounced, and killed is not of any moment; for He is still living who can again raise and rescue us from the curse, death, and hell. For this reason we should learn to accord great and high esteem to the majesty and glory of the Word; for it is not such a small and light matter as the false enthusiasts of our day imagine, but one single tittle of it is greater and of more weight than heaven and earth. Hence we in this instance do not concern ourselves with Christian unity or love, but we straightway express our judgment, that is, we condemn and denounce all those who even in the smallest particle adulterate and change the majesty of the Word; for 'a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.' (Comments on Gal. 5:12, VIII, 2669 f.) A little above this passage Luther had written, "Christian doctrine does not belong to us, but to God, who has made us merely its servants and ministers; hence we cannot drop or yield the smallest tittle or letter of it." (Comments on Gal. 5:9.)

On the other hand, that a point can become divisive only after the respective error has in vain been proved from the Holy Scriptures, after all repeated admonitions have been without fruit, and after it has become evident that the erring person is inwardly convinced of his error and that he therefore consciously contends against the foundation of faith, either the real or dogmatic or merely the organic foundation, Luther states emphatically in the well-known passage: "Augustine says with respect to himself: *Errare potero, haereticus non ero*; that is, I can err, but I do not want to become a heretic. The reason is this: Heretics not only err, but they refuse to be instructed; they defend their error as right and contend against the truth which they have come to know and against their own conscience. Of such people Paul says, Titus 3:10, 11: 'A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition reject, knowing that he that is such is subverted and sinneth,' being *autocatacritos*, that is, he deliberately and finally chooses to remain in the condemnation resulting from his error. But St. Augustine will gladly confess his error and accept instruction. Hence he cannot become a heretic even if he should err.

All other saints take the same course and willingly throw their hay, stubble, and wood into the fire in order that they may remain on the saving foundation. This very thing we also have done and are still doing." (*Concerning Councils and Churches*, A. D. 1539, XVI, 2663 f.) As long therefore as the erring person has not been convicted of subverting the organic foundation through his error, and as long as he has not become stubborn in his attitude, no error constitutes him a heretic. The same thing applies to a whole church-body. Yes, should the error pertain to less principal points clearly revealed in the Scriptures but of a non-fundamental character, then even a stubborn clinging to such points does not make a teacher a heretic but merely a schismatic, and his association does not get to be a sect, but a schismatic body. Accordingly in our Church, Flacius, who stubbornly defended the erroneous teaching that sin belongs to a man's essence, and Huber, who stubbornly taught that predestination is universal, did not become heretics but schismatics, whom orthodox churches could not admit to their pulpits, and if these men had founded church-bodies embodying the errors of their leaders in their doctrinal platform, these bodies, *caeteris paribus*, would not have been sects but schismatic associations. For this reason Quenstedt writes: "There are, furthermore, less principal articles of faith which Holy Scripture teaches us to believe but whose rejection does not necessarily involve loss of salvation. The denial of these articles does not by itself but merely through a more remote inference oppose a fundamental article of faith and destroy it. Such a denial makes a person a schismatic, for instance, the rejection of the teaching that sin does not belong to man's essence, that predestination is not universal, etc." (*Theol. Didactico-polem.*, I, 355.) Calov also, to mention one more instance, willingly admits with Gerhard that, for example, "the accusation of heresy must not be raised on account of a dissension in the question pertaining to the baptism of John, since in our time this question has nothing to do with salvation." But he at once adds: "By no means is it permitted to believe and argue for or against a matter where the Holy Spirit has given us a decision," which Calov held to be the case in this instance. (*Syst.*, I, 953.)

The following sections of this article are intended to show that the advocates of the modern theory of open questions try to support it by advancing the view that everything must belong to the category of open questions which has not been decided in the Symbolical Books or in which even recognized orthodox teachers have erred, or, finally, whatever, though contained in the Scriptures, has not been clearly revealed there. A.

(To be continued)