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The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

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assured himself by prayerful consideration that his proposal will not cause dissatisfaction, strife, bitterness, schisms, within the congregation. Undue hastiness, insistence on his own personal preference, an inordinate hankering for innovations, the itch to change merely for the sake of changing, is certainly not compatible with the office of a servant of that God who is not the author of confusion but of peace, nor with his position as the minister of Christ's congregation, to whom, after all, the administration of the Sacraments is primarily entrusted and whose is the right to decide what customs are to be adopted, or changed, or retained, as long as such action does not conflict with God's will and Word. TH. LAETSCH



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)

(Continued)

A further argument for this theory is the view that evidently for ecclesiastical unity not more is required than agreement in the teachings laid down in the public confession of the Church; that these are the only ones fixed by the Church itself; that on these only the Church has made pronouncements and decisions; and that everything else has to be considered as belonging to the category of open questions.

This view was voiced, for instance, by the pastors of the Iowa Synod when they in 1859 published the following "Declaration" in their synodical organ: "We treat the teaching pertaining to the 'last things' as an open question, that is, as a question in which there may be a difference of opinion without disturbance of church-fellowship and concerning which in the symbols of our Church no confessional decision has been laid down, *for which reason* both views may exist in the Church alongside each other."

In its synodical report of 1858 the same synod had made this declaration: "Accordingly we dare not deny that beside the teachings which are symbolically fixed there is found a sphere of theological knowledge containing open questions which have not as yet been answered by the Church and symbolically defined because the Church cannot symbolically fix anything unless it has passed through controversy and hence become a vital question for the Church" (pp. 14, 15). Asking German theologians for their opinion, the Iowa Synod stated in 1866: "Since concerning these

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matters" (the questions pertaining to the ministerial office and the last things) "until now no universal agreement has come about in the Lutheran Church, we are of the opinion that these things, or at least those that are most controverted, had best be entirely eliminated from the public proclamation of the Church. . . . Briefly stated, we consider the teachings mentioned as open questions." (Quoted from Guericke's *Journal* in *L. & W.*, Vol. XIII, 363.)

Pastor Loehe, in listing the points in which there is a difference between the Saxon pastors in Missouri and Pastor Grabau, mentions as the fifth class the following: "matters which, as open questions, might be reserved for future more complete understanding." Among these matters he places the doctrine of ordination (whether or not ordination rests on divine institution) and of the relation between the ministerial office and the validity of the Sacrament, and these alleged open questions he terms something "that has come down to us as not yet fully determined," points which "rather belong to the *dubia*, the unfinished matters," "on which the Lutheran Church for three hundred years did not face the necessity of making a decision," "questions which have not yet been concluded and which the Church for three centuries has been satisfied to regard as unfinished business and almost, as it were, to ignore." (*Unsere kirchliche Lage*. By W. Loehe. Noerdlingen, 1850, pp. 91, 114, 118, 119.) In the same way Pastor Loehe writes furthermore: "I do not say *a priori* that the ministerial office is really a necessary condition for the validity and power of the Sacrament. I will leave that matter in abeyance. But because the Lutheran practise does not agree with the usual view and, at any rate for the practical minister, it is essential to have a definite theory, it seems to me that, since the confessional writings are silent on this question, the matter is still undecided although urgently requiring a decision, and I consider it best to look at it in this light." (*Ib.*, p. 117.)

A similar declaration was given by all the members of the theological faculty in Dorpat who were present at the time, Professors and Doctors Harnack, Kurtz, v. Oettingen, v. Engelhardt, and Volck, in a theological opinion on agreement in matters of doctrine, written and published at the request of the Iowa Synod. In this opinion we read among other things: "The Confessions are, as it were, the mile-stones indicating the development of the Church. . . . Accordingly our Confessions contain, in addition to those articles and doctrines of faith that have been symbolically discussed and fixed, such elements also of the universal Christian and ecclesiastical creed (we refer to the Apostolic Creed) as partly are still in the process of development, partly are not yet at all or merely by way of beginning affected by the historical evolution of doctrine, because the Church has had occasion to

express itself on them hitherto merely from one point of view or because they have not as yet become the subject of more thorough explanation and definition. In both cases, it is true, that which has been symbolically gained and fixed is presupposed as the norm and basis for further study and confessional pronouncements of the Church; however, in this period different opinions and convictions are not only unavoidable but justified and permissible. This presupposes, of course, that such matters, in the first place, are subject to the conditions which underlie the confessional activity of the Church itself, that is, that they do not contradict the Word of God and the ecclesiastical *consensus doctrinae* and that furthermore the claim be not made that they possess the dignity of publicly accepted dogmas, whose rejection would be divisive of church-fellowship. On the contrary, they must be regarded merely as what they are, Christian convictions and exegetical conclusions, which, though made conscientiously and agreeing with the analogy of faith, nevertheless have a private and individual character. Yes, even relative errors which at this stage of affairs are unavoidable can be borne by the Church without endangering its doctrinal unity. It will have to take this course, if for no other reason than that it is not yet in a position to point to the error as one condemned by the Church. . . . It is only after this exposition of the difference between a confession and confessional writings and, furthermore, the exposition of the historical nature of our Confessions, which constantly grow and develop (a characteristic on which rests the contrast, on the one hand, between fixed and developing, that is, not yet finished, dogmas in the Confessions themselves and, on the other hand, the distinction between ecclesiastical dogmas and Christian theological convictions), that we are able definitely to dispose of our question. . . . For the Church and its existence (and that is the vital issue in the consideration of this question) at present merely that is fundamental, as we have shown, which the Church has obtained from the Scriptures as saving knowledge and has laid down in its Symbolical Books as its confession. . . . An articulate and explicit unity in those teachings that have not yet become ecclesiastical dogmas but which at the same time do not contradict the *consensus fidei* of the dogmas that have been accepted, can by no means be demanded, and the reason is simply this, that there exists as yet no acknowledged norm for their ecclesiastical status, and the question as to their agreement with Scripture is still a matter of undecided controversy. Accordingly these truths, viewed from the position of consensus in doctrine, are for the Church still open questions, left to the Christian and denominational conscience of the individual and to his investigation of Scripture-teaching. It

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may be that different convictions will arise, but these may exist alongside each other without endangering the doctrinal unity in the Church. For it is dissension only in the fundamental truths taught by the Church that is incompatible with the '*consentire de doctrina*' which the Augsburg Confession terms 'indispensable for the *unitas ecclesiae*.'

"If we now survey our whole exposition, our answer to your first question must be to the effect: 1. that it not only is not contrary to the spirit and character of the Church and its strict confessional unity required for church-fellowship but altogether in keeping with it if we distinguish between fundamental doctrines, that is, in this case, doctrines that have been defined in the confessional writings, and doctrines that are *not yet* fundamental, that is, such as have up to this time become subject to a decision of the Church either only in part or not at all." Finally, in keeping with the foregoing, the faculty speaks of "justified freedom in the Church with reference to doctrinal questions that are still open." (*Opinion of the Theological Faculty of Dorpat, etc., pp. 12-16, 31.*)

In these declarations a distinction is made between those teachings which have been laid down in the Symbolical Books and those which have not been thus defined; between the teachings which have passed through controversies, have been publicly and frequently proved to be Scriptural, been shown to be of high importance for faith and life and to have an indissoluble connection with the totality of doctrine, and have been thoroughly expounded and presented in their richness and fulness, and those doctrines concerning which such statements cannot be made. We, too, admit that there is a great difference between these two classes. Without doubt errors, for instance, in the doctrine pertaining to the person of Christ after the Arian, Nestorian, and Eutychian controversies have an altogether different significance from what they had before. The same must be said of errors in the doctrine of original sin, of free will, of nature and grace, after the Pelagian controversies, of errors in the teaching of justification after the Reformation, of errors in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper after the so-called Sacramentarian controversy, and errors of a Lutheran minister pertaining to any doctrine found in the Symbolical Books after the latter had been written and accepted by our Church. To deny this difference would be equivalent to denying the blessing which God always has in store for His Church when He permits errorists to attack its treasure, Is. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:19.

We heartily subscribe to the words of Dannhauer: "Fundamental articles can, it is true, without injury to one's salvation

be both unknown and denied either before they have been revealed (for without injury to her salvation Eve did not know that the Messiah would be the Son of a virgin, for as yet the revelation pertaining to the Virgin Birth, found in Is. 7, had not been given; Nathanael is called a true Israelite even though he denied that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah) or before a clear and sufficient explanation of the revelation. For this reason the fundamental errors of the Church Fathers who were swept into not yet sufficiently unfolded (*evolutas*) controversies, before the ice was broken, are called spots or imperfections (*naevi*), not heresies. But after these matters have been revealed, they can neither remain unknown nor be denied without injury to one's salvation.* They cannot remain unknown because we owe God progress in that which is good, Matt. 25:14 ff.; Heb. 5:12; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 4:14. Everybody is obligated to *strive for perfection* though not to reach perfection. Hence the unbelief of a person becomes more or less excusable according to the degree of the light offered him. Unbelief which directly opposes the foundation of faith condemns a person; the degree of the punishment varies with the degree of unbelief and the latter again with the degree of the light that had been furnished. Thus the ignorance of barbarians is more excusable than that of Christians, that of the latter more than that of Lutherans; among the latter, again, the ignorance of the rank and file is more excusable than that of the men who possess golden opportunities for progress; the ignorance of laymen is more excusable than that of teachers, and among the latter the ignorance of those who have devoted themselves entirely to the study of theology is less excusable than that of the others. Nor dare these articles be denied, because whoever denies one article denies all, just as he who breaks one link in a chain breaks all." (*Christeis. Witenbergae, 1696, p. 45 s.*)

Dannhauer writes at another place: "An error which evidently opposes a fundamental article can more readily be pardoned when it has not yet been sufficiently revealed or explained than after such revelation and explanation have been given. Nathanael could err with respect to the person of Jesus of Nazareth without injury to his salvation; he could not do it, however, after the resurrection of Christ and the proclamation of the apostles through which it was made manifest to the whole world that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. According to this principle the initial error of Flacius could be regarded pardonable because in the heat of the controversy he at first did not see that by implication his

* We hold that Dannhauer is here speaking of normal situations obtaining in Christian countries, where everybody can be expected to come into some contact with the New Testament message. — A.

view made God the cause of sin. What could be pardoned in Flacius could not be pardoned in his followers. This is true likewise with respect to the inference drawn from an article and opposing faith or an article of faith if the inference has been thoroughly explained and it is of a nature which everybody can easily understand. People, as a rule, are not so dense as to let themselves be deceived where simple mathematical processes are involved. Now, whoever can handle figures can understand, and more easily at that, inferences drawn from doctrines of faith" (*Sigalion. Argentor., 1668, p. 201 s.*)

All this, as stated above, we heartily accept; but to construct on the basis of this difference the theory sponsored in the quotations submitted we have to oppose as both illogical and dangerous.

(To be continued)

A.

The Province of Human Reason in Religion

(A Conference Paper)

I

At the very outset it is necessary to define what I mean by human reason. By this term I mean the entire sum of natural knowledge and powers of the human mind, including intuition and conscience and the ability to reason correctly. This human reason is a very precious gift of God and is therefore also to be prized very highly. It is a sign of great folly, corruption, aye, of Satanic delusion, to despise and teach others to despise God's gifts in nature. "For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving," 1 Tim. 4:4.

It is true, Scripture tells us: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." It is true, Scripture also tells us: "If any man come to Me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." But in these passages of Scripture God does not tell us to despise His natural gifts. What He does teach is that we are to esteem His spiritual gifts higher than any gift of nature, for it is through His spiritual gifts only that our natural gifts will prove to be real and lasting blessings. If—remember, we say, if—it is necessary, *in order to retain the spiritual gifts of God*, especially eternal life and God's favor,—if for this purpose it is necessary to sacrifice any earthly gift, though it be our eyesight or our life, the Christian must be willing