

7-1-1939

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Recommended Citation

Walther, C. F. and Arndt, W. (1939) "The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 10 , Article 51.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol10/iss1/51>

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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)

[In support of our rejection of the theory sponsored in the quotations submitted, we point to the following:]

In the first place, it is not true that our dogmas come into existence gradually and that hence there are articles of faith "which are still in the process of formation, and others which as yet have either not at all or merely by way of beginning been drawn into the stream of events in which dogmas take shape." It is not true that some articles of faith have come down to us "as undecided, unfinished questions, incomplete structures, as open questions," because concerning these things one does not yet find unanimous agreement in the Lutheran Church. This theory, held and advocated with more or less emphasis by almost all modern theologians, though entirely unknown to the old orthodox theologians of our Church, we consider the *πρώτον ψεύδος* of modern theology; as we view it, it is merely a daughter of Rationalism appearing in Christian dress, a sister of Romanism hiding behind a Protestant mask, and a fruitful mother of large families of heresies. With respect to the Rationalists it is well known that they were the first to describe dogmas not as the unchangeable, divine, fundamental truths of Christianity but as doctrinal opinions which had arisen in a scientific process or which had been elevated by the various denominations to the position of ecclesiastical teaching and were considered authoritative in the respective age. For this reason they strictly distinguished between doctrines of the Church and of the Bible; the former they looked upon as a presentation of beliefs of the Church which come and go and are subject to constant change, the latter as a presentation of the eternal Christian doctrine, having validity for all time, although, of course, they identified these eternal doctrines with the thin, watery soup cooked in the kitchen of their own common sense. One of the chief representatives of this crass Rationalism, Bretschneider, writes, for instance: "We must distinguish between Christian theology" (which in the mind of Bretschneider is Rationalism) "and dogmatic, a distinction based on the name itself, for *δόγμα* means *placitum*, opinion, and that correctly describes dogmatic. It represents the subjective view of individual parties or teachers. As soon as these subjective views were fixed by some public authority, public dogmatic arose, which, using the word

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in the wider sense, might be called a presentation of the teachings submitted in the various confessions. This process started in the third century and was carried on through the Christian councils and the confessions, or symbols, which they sanctioned. Dogmatic was enlarged when various churches and parties arose which publicly stated their opinion concerning Christian teaching." In the following Bretschneider, however, admits that after the Reformation dogmatic was regarded in our Church as identical with Christian or Biblical theology. (*Handbuch der Dogm. der ev.-luth. K. von Bretschneider*. Reutlingen, 1823. I:24 f.) Essentially Schleiermacher did not change this rationalistic view when he began his dogmatic with these words: "Dogmatic theology is the science pertaining to the relation of the various doctrines obtaining at a certain time in a Christian denomination." He then proceeds: "Every presentation of doctrine, regardless of its comprehensiveness and perfection, in the course of time loses its original significance and retains merely a historical importance. For unnoticeable changes take place all the time wherever there is a lively exchange of thought; changes depend on various factors making for development." (*Der christl. Glaube*. Reutlingen, 1828. I:11, 12.) In calling the theory of a successive development of doctrine as taught by modern theologians a daughter of Rationalism coming in a Christian dress, we, of course, do not intend to impute to these men the view that the dogmas of the Church are nothing but temporary opinions having the sanction of church-bodies. What we wish to maintain is merely that the view prevailing at present, holding doctrines to be merely the results of historical movements, is of rationalistic origin. No proof is needed to show that Roman Catholics also teach the gradual rise of dogma; but a few years ago we beheld the spectacle of the present Pope's declaring the teaching of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception, which before had been considered an open question, to be a dogma and now binding for all "believers," and just now, according to reports, the alleged heir of Peter's episcopal throne is preparing to enrich his Church again through a new dogma by decreeing his own infallibility. While modern Lutheran theologians are far removed from the position which would vindicate the right of the Roman Church or even the Pope to create new articles of faith, their theory that dogmas come into existence gradually, that on certain points a "unanimous consensus" arises, or that the Church has finally "pronounced" and "decided" with respect to such matters, is nothing but a sister of Romanism, having put on a Protestant mask.

There are especially two reasons why an orthodox Christian cannot adopt but must decidedly reject this theory. In the first

place, this theory opposes the clear teaching of the Word of God that the Church at all times is one, and one only. Clearly and definitely Christ says: "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold. Them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd," John 10:16. This *unitas ecclesiae* which all Christendom confesses in the Nicene Creed is before everything else a unity in the doctrine of faith. In this point substantially even the Church of the Old Testament is one with that of the New Testament. Peter says at the first apostolic council: "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved even as they," Acts 15:11, and Paul testifies before Agrippa: "I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come," Acts 26:22; cf. 13:32, 33. How otherwise could Christ and the apostles have justly appealed to the Old Testament with respect to all teachings they proclaimed and have asked their hearers to examine according to this norm everything that they preached (John 5:39, 45-47; Acts 17:11) if they had set forth a new doctrine of faith not yet revealed to the Jewish Church in the writings of the Old Covenant? If we accordingly have to believe that even the Old and New Testament churches in their teachings are one, how much more is this true of the Church of the New Testament in its various periods of existence! Paul states clearly that the Church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets," Eph. 2:20. This foundation of the apostles and prophets, however, is nothing else than the total number of articles of faith taught by the apostles and prophets. Clear, furthermore, is the expression of the apostle in which he terms the Church the mother of all believers, Gal. 4:26. This position, however, the Church holds because it possesses, preserves, and uses that doctrine through which men are brought to the knowledge of the true saving faith and are kept in it, and because in this manner the Church constantly perpetuates itself. Referring to the faith of the Church in general, the Scriptures speak of "one faith," Eph. 4:5; they furthermore do not point to it as something which the Church would have to seek, to discover, and to acquire through a struggle, but they refer to it as the faith which was once delivered unto the saints and for which the Church would have to contend, Jude 3. While in the Word of God the true disciples of Christ, or the true members of the Church, are represented as the people that know the truth, John 8:32, it is merely the hypocrites, outwardly joined to the Church, who are described as people that are "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth," 2 Tim. 3:7. The modern theory, however, which holds that dogmas are formed gradually,

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makes the Church a philosophical school, whose task it is eternally to be looking for the truth, while according to the Word of God the Church is the mistress ("Hausehre") to whom the truth has been entrusted as her most precious treasure, as the good thing which has been committed unto her to keep it by the Holy Ghost, 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 1 Tim. 6:20. Through this theory the Church is made to resemble the human being who after his birth is still unconscious, gradually, however, as the years progress, becomes conscious of his environments, gathers knowledge, and by and by arrives at the state of maturity, while according to the testimony of the apostle the Corinthian Church, for instance, was already in the apostolic age enriched "in all utterance and in all knowledge," so that the Corinthian Christians "did not come behind in any gift, waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," 1 Cor. 1:5, 7. It is true that the Word of God prophesies, and the history of the Church confirms, that the Church does not always stand before us in the same brilliant light of pure public preaching, that it rather, to use the figure of the ancients, in this respect decreases and increases like the moon, that it experiences times of special gracious visitation and then again declines. But it is an error to say that the Church from century to century accumulates an ever-growing fund of divine teachings and according to the law of historical development arrives at constantly enhanced depths and riches of knowledge. We admit that the Church all the time, through "men that arise in its midst and who speak perverse things to draw away disciples after them," Acts 20:30, is compelled to formulate with increasing precision the pure doctrine which it possesses in order that the fraudulent errorists may be unmasked and false teachings be kept from creeping into it through ambiguous phraseology; but this does not imply that the number of its dogmas grows; they are through this activity merely safeguarded ever more carefully against the danger of becoming perverted. That Christ is *ὁμοούσιος* with the Father, that the union of the divine and human nature in Christ took place *ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέκτως, ἀδιαιρέτως, ἀχωρίστως*, that Mary was *θεοτόκος*, that "in, with, and under" the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper Christ's body and blood are actually present, are given, and are orally received by worthy and unworthy communicants,—these are, it is true, dogmatic expressions which were not found in the orthodox Church till the days of Arius, Nestorius, Eutyches, and Zwingli; but they are not new dogmas. Furthermore, we do not deny that through continued searching of the Scriptures by the Church some things are by and by cleared up which before, through imperfect acquaintance with the languages and history, had been unknown; we admit that in this manner the content of the various doctrines

of faith at times is set forth and unfolded in a higher degree than before and that from this point of view we may indeed speak of a progress in knowledge. But this by no means implies the gradual origin and increase of dogmas which modern theology teaches; we must rather say that through this course that which already is known receives new confirmation, or the Church becomes aware of certain inferences and corollaries of its dogmas which it had not noticed before. It must not be forgotten that it is by agreement with the Church of all ages in matters of doctrine, that is, by the so-called *successio doctrinalis*, that the Church of any given period must prove itself not to be a new, a false Church, but a part of the Church universal.

That our Church never entertained the idea of a gradual formation of dogmas but that this notion arose in the period of decay, hardly requires any proof. At the conclusion of the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession our Church expressly appeals not only to its agreement with Holy Scripture, but with "the Church catholic" (*ecclesia catholica*), yes, even with the old "Roman" Church "as known from its writers." Hence the authors declare [in the German version] they hold their "opponents cannot be at variance with them in these articles." How emphatically Luther stresses his agreement with the old Church and how he again and again asserts that all dogmas which he teaches are not new but that the Church of the Reformation has remained loyal to the old Church and its teachings, that contrariwise the papistic Church has defected from the old Church and its teachings and has become a new and therefore a false Church, is well known. Let the reader compare the elaborate proof which Luther submits in his essay against Duke Heinrich von Braunschweig, in which he among other things, to quote merely a few brief sentences, writes: "We invent nothing new but stay with, and adhere to, the old Word of God as the Church possessed it; for this reason we with it constitute the true old Church, as one body, which teaches and believes one divine Word. Hence the papists again blaspheme Christ Himself, the apostles, and all Christianity by calling us innovators and heretics. For they do not find anything with us except the old treasure of the ancient Church, true likeness and complete unity with the latter." (XVII, 1659.) In another passage Luther writes: "The Christian Church is dispersed throughout the whole world; it believes as I believe, and I believe as it believes; we have no collision or discrepancy in our faith." (*Comments on John 7:40*; VII, 2347.) For this reason Luther says expressly: "We on our part have never asked for a council to reform our churches." (XVII, 1693.) Hence, while modern theologians consider the history of dogma at best as the

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history of the formation of dogma and treat it as such, the old orthodox theologians treating this subject rather manifest the tendency to furnish the proof that the true doctrine always was to be found in the Church and that we Lutherans therefore, on the basis of the *successio doctrinalis*, may well make the claim that our congregations are orthodox. Hence Heinrich Eckhart, for instance, in the title of his patristic compendium, characterizes this work as one "in which the agreement of pious antiquity with the confession of our churches is demonstrated in every article of theological instruction, and the clamor of the opponents alleging newness of doctrine on our part is proved false." (*Compendium Theol. Patrum*, etc. Jenae, 1606.) To give another example, J. W. Baier, in the foreword of his excellent *History of Dogma*, defines this branch of theological study thus: "It is historical theology which reports the doctrine of religion and the treatment accorded it in the various generations and periods in order that a person may thereby convince himself of the unbroken preservation of the true doctrine and of the succession of the true Church." (*Compend. Theol. Historicae*. Vinariae, 1699.)

The attitude of our Church toward the modern theory of dogmatic evolution may furthermore be gathered from the attributes with which our Church invests articles of faith. H. Kromayer, for instance, writes: "We promise, 1. that the articles which one must know to be saved are articles belonging to all times, that is, that they are found in both the Old and the New Testament, just as the apostle says Eph. 4:5, 'one Lord, one faith' (that is, the faith which is believed, not by which one believes, faith in the objective sense, that is, the doctrine which is to be accepted by faith, is meant, and not subjective faith, which apprehends the merits of Christ and is differentiated from the objects to which it is directed)". (*Theol. Positivo-Polem*. Lips., 1677, p. 1.) Calovius ascribes seven attributes to the articles of faith: 1. truth and certainty; 2. sublimity, the quality of transcending the powers of apprehension of human reason; 3. incapability of being proved scientifically [*Inevidenz*]; 4. necessity; 5. connection with the way of salvation; 6. mutual relationship; 7. harmony. With respect to number 4 he states: "The articles of faith have to be believed, and hence they are unchangeable and always have the same quality, as far as that which is to be believed is concerned. . . . This necessity, however, is of various kinds." (*System*. I, 771 sq.)

Again, our orthodox theologians definitely reject the view that there is a gradual formation of articles of faith. With respect to the argument that no one can say that the articles of faith increase, Musaeus, for instance, states: "It does not matter that the view is expressed that the fundamental articles of faith in the

Church cannot increase. This we by no means deny; on the contrary, we all confess with one mouth that everything that one must believe to be saved was already taught orally by the apostles and that it was received into the Holy Scriptures and thus handed down in written form to posterity and that nothing deserves to be placed among the necessary articles of faith excepting that which is contained in Holy Scripture and on that basis was always taught in the catholic Church and always believed. This is true, even if an angel from heaven should teach something new and different, Gal. 1:8. But it is one thing to say that the fundamental articles cannot grow and another thing that the heresies which oppose the foundation of faith cannot grow. . . . The truth contained in each article of faith is one and simple. The error, however, through which it may, directly or indirectly, be shaken or subverted is of various kinds and complex. The primitive Church merely taught and expounded the truth in words that were sufficiently clear, without regard to foreign and subtle, at that time neither existent nor known, interpretations, which in the course of time the impiety of men has invented for the perversion of the true sense of Scripture. But after these perversions of Scripture had begun to invade the Church and thereby heresies had taken their rise, the teachers of the Church began to explain the truth of faith more distinctly and to guard the true sense of the Scriptures against the fictitious interpretations of the human mind." (*Tractatus de Ecclesia*. Jenae, 1671. II, 317 sq.) J. Adam Scherzer, a Leipzig theologian, writes thus: "The schoolmen say that the articles of faith grew with respect to conscious apprehension (*quoad cognitionem explicitam*); this is the secret and arcanum for the progress of scholastic theology." (*System. Theol.* Lips., 1704, p. 8.) This applies likewise to modern theology in the Lutheran Church. The assumption that dogmas are formed only gradually is its moving principle. As long as this assumption is granted, it is impossible to stop the bringing in of innovations and the process of dissolution, and the return to the one old, immutable, everlasting truth of the Church universal is effectually blocked.

A.

(To be continued)

