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## The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

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exalting the authority of Christ, they go straightly against His teaching and directly renounce His authority.

They lose everything, the Bible as the sure authority for doctrine, and Christ, as the sure foundation of faith. And as to their sneering question: Are you willing to base your faith on a mere book? we answer: We are not ashamed to go to a book, when that book brings us Christ. Luther was not ashamed of his book-religion. He thought highly of the despised "letter." "Today, too, roving spirits are clinging to the illusion and demanding that God must do something special in their case and deal with them through a special light and secret revelation in the heart and thus give the Holy Spirit, as though they needed *no letter, Scripture*, or external preaching. Therefore we must know that God has established this order: No one shall come to the knowledge of Christ nor obtain the forgiveness gained by Him or the Holy Ghost except through external means." (XI, p. 1735.) Pay no attention to their cry that this insistence on the letter and this reliance on the promise as written in Scripture can produce only a mere intellectual conviction, devoid of life, fervor, and Spirit. You know better. "When I am without the Word, do not think of it nor deal with it, no Christ is there and no zest, no spirit. But as soon as I take up a psalm or passage of Scripture, it shines and burns into the heart and puts me into a different mind and mood." (*Luther*, VIII, 749.)

TH. ENGELDER

## 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)

The assumption of a successive origin of dogmas through so-called decisions of the Church, by which some men seek to uphold the modern theory of open questions, militates, in the second place, against the relationship existing between Scripture and Christian faith. Besides its clarity, which should enable every one to comprehend its articles of faith, and, furthermore, its power to generate faith in those articles, Scripture possesses 1) perfection or sufficiency, i. e., the attribute of containing and presenting in clear and convincing words all the dogmas which one must know and believe in order to be saved; and 2) canonical, normative authority, according to which it alone decides whether a certain dogma is truly Christian or not. Scripture, in short, is the only criterion for de-



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termining the Christian religion and theology, the only source of Christian truth from which we can actually draw reliable facts, the only rule and norm of all faith and life, and the supreme judge, rendering the final decision in all controversies on any points of faith.

No special proof is necessary for these statements among those who want to be true Protestants. But the Scriptural principle mentioned above is unequivocally rejected by all those modern theologians who claim that dogmas are gradually formulated and finally established by the unanimous consent and decisions of the Church. Their opinion is that, as long as the Church has not yet definitely spoken, certain dogmas cannot be considered as conclusively settled, because they are "still pending and unfinished," "still in a nascent stage," "not yet fundamental doctrines," "for the time being only private and individual points of view which in themselves may be well-founded Christian convictions and the current results of conscientious and faithful Bible-study," and consequently "differing opinions and convictions are not only unavoidable but also justified and permissible, since the question regarding their Scripturalness is still undecided." Therefore, they say, since these dogmas are still "open questions," every one must have the privilege of exercising his "permissible ecclesiastical freedom" therein, or "perhaps it would be better to exclude altogether from the Christian pulpit those points which are most in dispute."

From their point of view, then, any one has the liberty to accept or reject what God has revealed and decided in His Word as long as the Church has not yet spoken and rendered her decision; but as soon as the Church has spoken, all liberty has come to an end!

This hypothesis fills every Christian with consternation, because he not only believes that the Bible contains the Word of God, but that the Bible is the Word of God and because he clearly discerns the destructive consequences which accompany the theory under consideration. This hypothesis is also diametrically opposed to the perspicuity, power, perfection, canonicity, and authority of Holy Writ. Scripture calls itself a light, a lamp, the sure testimony of the Lord, making wise the simple, 2 Pet. 1:19; Ps. 119:105; 19:8. It declares itself to be quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, Heb. 4:12. The apostle testifies that the Holy Scriptures make one wise unto salvation and thoroughly furnish the man of God unto all good works, 2 Tim. 3:15-17. Scripture lays a curse upon those who add or detract anything from it, Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18, 19. God through the prophet calls to those who consult the dead: "To the Law and the Testimony! If they speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them," Is. 8:20. Christ causes Abraham to answer the petition of the rich



man in hell with the words "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them. If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead," Luke 16:29, 31. The apostle writes at the close of his doctrinal discussion: "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them and mercy, and upon the Israel of God," Gal. 6:16. Scripture speaks of itself as the river of the city of God which is full of water. Ps. 46:4; 65:9. — Against all these powerful divine testimonies the theory according to which dogmas are built up gradually through decisions of the Church rises in opposition. It substitutes the Church for Scripture, man and his decision for God and the divine decision. And this substitution surrenders the foremost principle of true Protestantism and adopts the principle of the antichristian Papacy, with all its errors and abominations, as the foundation of our Church.

But thanks be to God! Our Church has definitely rejected that theory thetically and antithetically both in its public Confessions and in the private writings of its faithful servants.

Our Church, accordingly, begins her confession in the Formula of Concord with the following words: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with (all) teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written, Ps. 119:105: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.' And St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,' Gal. 1:8. Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this (pure) doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved." (*Trigl.*, p. 777.) — The Thorough Declaration calls Scripture "the pure, clear fountain of Israel" (*Trigl.*, p. 851). — In the Smalcald Articles the confession of our Church reads as follows: "For it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers. . . . The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel." (*Trigl.*, p. 467.) These pronouncements of our Church openly and solemnly reject the theory that in addition to Scripture the Church also is a source of Christian dogmas, i. e., that certain doctrines are open questions as long as the Church has not uttered her decisive voice, but become dogmas binding upon heart and conscience when the Church has rendered her decision. If this supposition and procedure were correct, then



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articles of faith would be established not only by the Word of God but also by the Church.

In the following words Luther gives expression to the voice of our Church on the right of establishing articles of faith through councils or otherwise: "The Christian Church has no power to set up any article of faith; she has never done so and will never attempt it. All articles of faith are revealed in Holy Scripture, making it unnecessary for man to add some supplements. The Christian Church has no power to decree articles of faith like a judge or a supreme authority; she has never yet done so and will never attempt it." (Article on the Power of the Christian Church, A. D. 1530, beginning with the following introductory sentence: "Dr. M. Luther, pastor of the holy church in Wittenberg, is ready to defend the following points against the whole satanic brood and all the gates of hell," XIX: 958.) On the power of the Church assembled in councils Luther furthermore wrote: "In the first place, a church council has no power to set up new articles of faith, in spite of the fact that the Holy Spirit is present in the sessions. Even the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:11) established no new article of faith; St. Peter merely pointed out the fact that all their forefathers had also believed this same article — salvation alone through the grace of Christ without the works of the Law. In the second place, a Church council has the power and the duty to suppress and condemn new articles of faith according to the will of God in Holy Writ and the example of the faithful fathers." (Essay on Councils and Churches, A. D. 1539, XVI: 2250.) All true servants of our Church follow Luther in this judgment. Thus Baier, one of the later servants of our Church, says: "It is manifest that the work of councils does not consist in establishing new dogmas, but in expounding, confirming, and defending the revealed dogmas in clear, idiomatic speech." (*Com. Th. Posit.*, III, 13, 31.)

Ancient councils, indeed, at times adopted the phraseology of the Apostolic Council: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us" (Acts 15:28), but J. Dan. Arcularius has written correctly: "Although the words 'The Holy Spirit has passed judgment in this question,' etc., have been used repeatedly in many councils and confessions of faith, yet our Church has never used these words, neither in the Augsburg Confession nor in the Thorough Declaration; she has always cited the words of Scripture, because they are the foundation upon which her doctrine rests." (*The Unbiased Confession of Faith*, etc., 1692, p. 131 f.) Therefore Dannhauer, who refers to Arcularius on this question, expressed himself in the following manner: "Athanasius says: 'In the question concerning the celebration of Easter the Nicene Fathers did not hesitate to



add: "We have decided [*visum est*], that all ought to submit themselves"; but in regard to faith they did not write: "We have decided"; but: "The Catholic Church believes." And therefore the deciding authority of councils is not that of a judge but that of a servant in points of faith which can be contradicted by a single Paphnutius if he teaches something on the basis of Scripture which is more correct." (*Christeis. Proth.*, p. 94.)

In like manner our Church has always consistently refused to consider the demand that it should wait for the "decision" of a council or of the Church before it accepts or rejects any point in an article of faith. Therefore Luther wrote: "This is a strong argument which disconcerts many. They know our doctrine is right and are unable to advance anything against it. Yet they stand before us like an old horse and say nothing more than: 'The holy Christian Church has not yet passed judgment upon it and approved it.' With the words 'Christian Church' they arrest the attention of both the simple-minded and the conceited. . . . 'How is this?' they say; 'the Christian Church has not yet passed her decision; Christendom has not yet spoken'; and then they wait for councils and diets, where the doctors assemble, deliberate, and draw their conclusions. As long as this procedure is not followed, they remain neutral. Now both the foolish and the 'wise' determine to wait until the Christian Church has come to some conclusion; for one man is speaking this way, another otherwise; the Christian Church is still undecided; we want to continue in the faith of our fathers until a conclusion is reached as to what is right; and then they turn up their noses at the simple-minded. We do not deny, for instance, that Jesus was to come out of Bethlehem, but for that reason we do not say that He was not to come out of Galilee, John 7:40-43. Furthermore, this also is true: Whoever is not in the Christian Church and teaches doctrines not acceptable to the Church is a false preacher through and through. . . . But when they say they desire to wait until the Church has uttered her voice, let the devil do the waiting; I shall not tarry that long. For the Christian Church has already decided everything. . . . This deciding is not accomplished through some outward assembly. There is a spiritual council, and no convention of men is necessary for that. We may hold a council to decide how we should fast and pray, how we should clothe ourselves, how articles of faith are correctly confirmed and confessed, or how other questions should be judged, as was done in the Council of Nicaea. But no council is necessary to decide whether the Christian doctrine is right. I say I accept Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar and believe that the Gospel is true and holy. Should some one reply: Well, your faith is wrong, then trouble begins. There-



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fore a spiritual council is necessary that my brother may believe as I believe and preach, that all Christians everywhere may have the same faith and be united. . . . The Christian Church is not an assemblage of bishops' and cardinals' hats. Such a concourse may be or may grow into a council, but it is not the Christian Church. For the Church cannot be gathered into one locality; she is scattered throughout the whole world. She believes as I believe; and I believe as she believes. There is nothing conflicting or dissimilar in our belief. . . . Let this be your attitude: If you want to be the true Church and bear her precious name, give this proper proof thereof: teach doctrine correctly, as the holy Christian Church teaches it; live as she lives; give evidence of your faith and the fruit of faith; prove that you are the Christian Church." Luther accordingly says that a doctrine does not become certain through the decision of the Church; but when the Church passes a correct decision, then it becomes certain that she is the true Church. Christians indeed believe the Church as a ministering judge, but only as a judge that examines and confirms, not as one that hands down decrees by virtue of his office or authority. (On John 7: 40-44, VIII: 97-102.)

The following words are also from Luther's pen: "A saying is the Word of God not because it is proclaimed by the Church, but because the Word of God is proclaimed, therefore there exists the Church. The Church does not create the Word, but is made through the Word. The presence of the Word of God in any locality is a sure sign of the existence of the Church in that place. So St. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 14: 24, 25: . . . 'just as an unbeliever prostrates himself and confesses that God is truly present because he hears them prophesying.' Not the Church but the Word of God has moved him, whereby he has been overcome and judged." (On the Abuse of the Mass, A. D. 1521. XIX: 1081.) Again, in regard to waiting for the decision of the Church Luther wrote as follows: "Who in the mean time is preaching to the Christians, while the schism is being adjusted and settled? Yes, it is easy to juggle with councils and the Fathers when one fools around with letters of the alphabet or constantly postpones a council, as has been done for the past twenty years, and has no thought for the souls that should be fed with reliable doctrine, as Christ says in John 21: 6: *Pasce oves meas.*" (Article on Councils and Churches, A. D. 1539, XVI: 2178.) Some indeed answer that the controverted doctrines, or "at least those points which are most in dispute, had better be excluded altogether from proclamation in the Christian pulpit." What prudent advice! What, then, "happens to the souls that one should feed with reliable doctrine?" Or has God perhaps revealed unnecessary things? Indeed, is certainty on any point



of faith an unnecessary thing when a controversy has arisen and consciences are disturbed over those points? "Good consciences," says the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "are crying out for the truth and sound instruction from the Word of God; and for them death is not so bitter as doubt in some point of faith." (Of Confession and Satisfaction, *Trigl.*, p. 290, 32.) "But it is likely that there are many in many places who waver concerning matters of no light importance and yet do not hear such teachers as are able to heal their consciences." (*Trigl.*, p. 291, 33.) God preserve us from such a perpetual "interim" which some men would bring upon our Church today through such principles!

Just one more testimony from our beloved Luther. In the introduction to a sermon by Guettel, in 1541, he wrote as follows: "Guettel is writing against the *expectantes*, i. e., those who are waiting for a council. They may be wise and prudent people who thus wait and stake their salvation upon some human ordinance, but they are fulfilling the proverb: A wise man will not commit a small folly; or they must be entirely ignorant and inexperienced concerning the Christian faith, not being able to discern the wide difference between the Word of God and the word of man. I would, however, not fault them for this, because up to the present time the world, deceived by the Pope, was forced to believe that decrees of councils were just as valid as, yes, even more valid than, the Word of God, which (thank God) at the present time not even the ducks and the geese, the mice and the lice, among us would believe if it were possible for them to believe something. But he who does not hear anything cannot learn anything, and he who cannot or will not hear cannot or will not learn and know. Such *expectantes* we commend to the mercy of God." (XIV:392.)

Dannhauer therefore classifies the practise of the Roman Catholic Church as conservative syncretism because it permits freedom in *non decisis*, i. e., freedom in points not yet decided by the Church. Gerhard declares this practise to be skepticism. The statement of the Jesuit Dillinger "Just as in the days of the most ancient Fathers, so today in the interest of unity of faith and peace differing opinions are permissible in those points of religion which the Church has not yet defined as long as every one is ready to submit himself to the judgment of the Church" is answered by Gerhard as follows: "What absurdity! Since the Pope can establish new articles of faith, the papists can never be certain about dogmas, but must always remain skeptics. . . . According to Bellarmin's admission the Church cannot make any book canonical, but only declare it to be canonical. In like manner an opinion is heretical even when no 'decision' has confirmed it. . . . The certainty of dogmas does not depend on the judgment of the Church, but on



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the divine revelation in Holy Writ, a fact which Christ and the apostles ever hold before our eyes. . . . The certainty of Holy Writ disappears if its statements must first be confirmed by the decrees of the Church. Then also all means of sound Bible interpretation which have been employed with great success by the entire Church are surrendered and cast overboard." (*Consideratio Quarund. Quaestt.*, etc. Jenae, 1631, p. 1.)

It is indeed true that our Church, together with the Roman Church, has always denied the validity of a private interpretation of Scripture, but each Church in an entirely different sense. In the Roman Church a private interpretation is that of an unofficial individual, and the correct interpretation is that which has been approved by the Church in her public decrees. But our Church considers that interpretation private which, according to 2 Pet. 1:20, rests on human reason and biased points of view; for when the apostle says "that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation" (ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως οὐ γίνεται; Vulgate: *propria interpretatione non fit*), he does not mean to say that the official interpretation of the Church is the correct one, but rather that an interpretation is acceptable only then when it corresponds with the intention of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the holy writers. Therefore Kromayer wrote as follows: "We must give a more ready ear to a plain layman when he adduces Scripture than to a whole council which takes a stand contrary to Scripture. We must be more ready to believe Mary, the eye-witness, than the deceitful crowd of Jews. For the fact that a multitude of persons errs does not make the error right. In Ex. 23:2 God gave the command "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" (i. e., when it has deviated from the straight path of truth). Hence, we must pay more attention to the principle upon which a man bases his support for a certain truth than to the person speaking and writing. Even though a whole council expounded Scripture contrary to the intention of one of the holy writers, we should look upon such an exposition as a private interpretation, 2 Pet. 1:20. Consequently, mere private opinion which offers biased Bible interpretation is rejected, not the exposition of a private individual who permits Scripture to interpret itself. In the Nicene Council the contention of one man, Bishop Paphnutius, prevailed, for he defended the right of the clergy to marry, although the sentiment of the council had been against it."

May God graciously prevent that modern theology, having originated in our old fatherland, gain ground among us! Let us be on our guard against it, because it makes the validity of a doctrine as a Christian dogma depend on the decree of the Church. In doing



so, this theology has placed itself on the same level with the Roman Catholic Church.

In our next article we shall refute the position of the Dorpat theologians, who claim that "even the most well-founded Christian conviction and current result of conscientious and faithful Bible-study" cannot be considered "dogmas of the Church" before the Church has given her authoritative voice. That this distinction between Biblical and ecclesiastical dogmas is untenable will be our topic next time.

Oak Glen, Ill.

ALEX. W. C. GUEBERT, translator

(To be continued)

### Kleine Prophetenstudien

In den letzten zwei Jahrgängen dieser Zeitschrift sind sechs kleine Geseftstudien und ebenso viele kleine Danielstudien erschienen. Die Absicht dieser durch den Raumzwang einer Zeitschrift naturgemäß beschränkten Artikel war besonders, die Leser zum Studium dieser in mancher Hinsicht schwierigen prophetischen Bücher zu veranlassen und ihnen dabei eine kleine Handreichung zu tun; denn dies ist doch die große Hauptsache bei unsern theologischen Studien, daß wir immer besser und tiefer eindringen in die wunderbaren Schätze des ewigen Gotteswortes. Zugleich aber hatten wir dabei die Absicht, den Trägern des Amtes etwas zu dienen, wenn sie das eine oder andere Buch auch ihrer Gemeinde entweder durch Predigten oder in Bibelfassen näherbringen möchten. Auch die Serie der kleinen Danielstudien hat uns ebenso wie früher diejenige über Geseft eine Anzahl Briefe eingetragen, aus denen hervorgeht, daß den Amtsbrüdern nicht nur für ihr Privatstudium der Heiligen Schrift, sondern gerade auch für die praktische Verwertung ein wenig gebient worden ist. So schreibt ein Pastor, der schon über vierzig Jahre im Amte steht: „Die kleinen Danielstudien sind mir den ganzen Sommer durch den Kopf gegangen. . . . Ich habe sie nicht nur gelesen, sondern durchstudiert [und] habe fünf deutsche und vier englische Predigten über Daniel ausgearbeitet und gehalten. Eine überaus freundliche und erkenntnisreiche Frau meiner Gemeinde sagte mir kürzlich, „Herr Pastor, warum machen Sie sich solche Mühe im heißen Sommer?“ Meine Antwort lautete: „Die Leute, die im heißen Sommer zum Gottesdienst kommen, sind es wert, daß ihnen das Beste geboten wird.“ Und ein anderer Pastor, der etwa zwanzig Jahre im Amte ist und regelmäßig mit einer Bibelfasse besondere biblische Studien treibt, schrieb darüber: "I like to do my own work on my Bible-class presentations, and this is just the sort of material that fits in with my plans. I am going to use this series in the fall."

Diese und ähnliche Zuschriften bewegen uns, wieder eine solche