

11-1-1939

The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions

C. F. Walther

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Alex Wm. Guebert

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walther, C. F. and Guebert, Alex Wm. (1939) "The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 10 , Article 83.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol10/iss1/83>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Gläubigen aus den Heiden zu denken. Freilich nicht alle Heiden werden gerettet werden, sondern nur die übrigen, der Rest; aber diese werden auch gewiß gerettet werden. Denn mit den Worten „welche Jehovah ruft“ wird die erste Stufe ihrer schließlich Errettung angegeben: Jehovah beruft sie. Das Wort $\kappa\rho\upsilon$ bezeichnet, gerade wie das neutestamentliche $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ in den apostolischen Briefen, die wirksame Berufung, die Bekehrung. Vgl. Röm. 8, 30; 1 Thess. 2, 12; 2 Thess. 2, 14; 1 Tim. 6, 12; 2 Tim. 1, 9; 1 Petr. 2, 9 usw. Jehovah beruft sie, lehrt sie seinen Namen anrufen, und so errettet er sie. Daß diese Beziehung auf die Heiden richtig ist, zeigt Apost. 2, 39, wo sich St. Petrus ohne Zweifel auf unsere Stelle bezieht, wenn er sagt: „Euer und eurer Kinder ist diese Verheißung und aller, die ferne sind, welche Gott, unser Herr, herzurufen wird.“ Implicite liegt die Rettung der gläubigen Heiden schon in der ersten Vershälfte, wo die Rettung an das Anrufen des Namens des Herrn geknüpft wird. Deshalb beweist auch St. Paulus aus diesem Vers die Teilnahme der Heiden am Heil, Röm. 10, 12. 13.

So ist es eine große, reiche messianische Verheißung, die wir diesem kleinen, aber tatsächlich großen Propheten Joel verdanken und die deutlich die beiden Perioden des Neuen Testaments anzeigt, einmal die Zeit des Messias und die Zeit des Geistes — das ist die Zeit der Sammlung der Kirche, die Gnadenzeit — und sodann die Zeit, die mit dem letzten Tag beginnt, da die Gläubigen ewig gerettet sind, die Zeit der Herrlichkeit.

L. Fürbringer

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)

(Conclusion)

Finally, the proponents of the modern theory of open questions advance the argument that there are doctrines of faith in the Bible which God did not reveal in clear-cut, unmistakable terms. . . .

Every one, with the exception of the papist perhaps, will admit the Biblical attributes of perspicuity and clarity (*perspicuitas et claritas*). Holy Writ lays claim to these attributes in almost countless passages. Since the Bible is the revelation of God to men who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path on the way to life everlasting, it must be clear; and every one who believes in Holy Writ gladly confesses the reality of this clearness. Who of us will deny that God, the Creator of human speech, is able to speak clearly? Who will

828 False Arguments for Modern Theory of Open Questions

deny that God, the eternal Truth, Wisdom, and Love, intended to speak clearly? Who will deny that God actually did speak clearly, yea, was obligated to speak clearly, in that Scripture which He inspired for just one purpose—to tell man what he must know in order to be saved? These denials can be made only by one who either does not believe in God or at least not in the divine origin and purpose of the Bible.

It is indeed true that some passages in Holy Writ are more or less obscure, *e. g.*, passages with historical, archeological, geographical, chronological, ethnological, genealogical, and onomastic difficulties or prophecies whose correct solution will be necessary and possible only when they have been fulfilled. Linguistic difficulties in certain chapters also prevent us from fully comprehending the sense intended by the sacred writers. On these points the readers and exegetes of the Bible cannot arrive at an apodictic interpretation but can reach only a probable one. In the first place, this lack of absolute certainty cannot be attributed to the fact that the Bible itself is obscure in this or that passage; it merely seems to be obscure because the teacher or exegete is not able to verify all the recorded historical data, is puzzled by grammatical or lexical questions, etc. The obscurity is not objective, but subjective. In the second place, this whole question of subjective obscurity is irrelevant to the point which we are considering in this series of articles, namely, Does the Bible actually contain articles of faith—the doctrine of Sunday, for instance—which are not clear and therefore can easily be misunderstood? Even though a person has no knowledge of, or only an imperfect knowledge of, historical data and related facts, yet he is able to find and walk the way of salvation under all circumstances without any hindrance. But in order to be saved, he must know and believe the articles of faith. Without the clear divine revelation and the knowledge of these articles it is impossible not only for the “man of God,” the theologian, to use the Scripture for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, in order to be made perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim. 3:16,17), but also for the layman to walk the way of salvation under all circumstances without any hindrance. Scripture is the complete revelation of the way of salvation; therefore it must be clear, exact, and unambiguous in all articles of faith. Whoever denies this fact denies the fundamental doctrine of the clarity of Scripture. Therefore, Aug. Pfeiffer began his book on Hermeneutics with the following words: “The papists and we have been earnestly debating the question whether Holy Scripture, especially in matters of faith and morals, is sufficiently clear or possibly obscure. The papists claim it is obscure; we maintain that it is clear, although we do

make several, especially two, restrictions. In the first place, we distinguish between a total and a partial obscurity. We admit that there is a partial obscurity, *i. e.*, we take into account those passages of Holy Scripture that are obscure and present difficulties which we cannot satisfactorily solve. Onomastic (questions pertaining to proper names) and chronological difficulties and gaps in the genealogy of Christ cast a shadow over some portions of Scripture so that no Bible student is able to remove all those difficulties. 'For the Holy Ghost (as Augustine says in the twelfth book of his *De Doctrina Christiana*) has organized the books of the Bible in such a wonderful, salutary way that He wanted to satisfy the hunger of the soul through the passages which are clearer than others and to ward off satiety through those which are obscure.' (Ita magnifice et salubriter Spiritus Sanctus Scripturas Sanctas modificavit, ut locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret.) At the same time we deny that the Holy Scriptures are totally obscure and maintain especially that every dogma pertaining to faith and morals is set forth somewhere in Holy Writ in language so clear and unequivocal that any one who searches the Bible conscientiously can know and believe it. In the second place, we distinguish between subjective and objective obscurity and say that Holy Writ is not obscure *eo ipso* nor with respect to the object that must be known if faith in the true God is to be engendered. It is obscure only through certain circumstances (*per accidens*) in the subject who does not fully comprehend its meaning because of improper training or equipment, being handicapped either by lack of necessary knowledge or because of an evil disposition of soul." (*Thesaur. Hermeneut.*, p. 1 sq.)

Luther testifies repeatedly that the seeming obscurity of Scripture is due primarily to an imperfect knowledge of the language, and is subjective, not objective. To Erasmus he wrote: "If there is any obscurity in Scripture, it is due here and there to the words and idiomatic phrases of the language, or to use a Greek term, due to grammar. It is, in general, such an obscurity as does not prevent any one from grasping the sum and substance of Scripture—the dogmas." (Walch XVIII, 2068.) In another connection he wrote: "The Sophists have said that Scripture is obscure; they have supposed that it is a characteristic of the Word of God to use obscure, odd terms. But they fail to see that the difficulty lies in the languages themselves. If it were possible for us to understand the languages perfectly, nothing would be so easy to grasp as the Word of God. The Turkish language is jargon to me because I do not understand it; yet a Turkish child of seven years readily comprehends his own tongue." (*Letter to the Mayors and Alder-*

830 **False Arguments for Modern Theory of Open Questions**

men of All Cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools, St. L., X, 473.)

It is also true that there are passages in Holy Writ which contain no references to historical data, etc., but which speak of doctrines of faith and yet are not free from obscurity. Some indeed are so obscure that they seem to contradict other passages which are clear. But this fact does not furnish any ground for supposing that Scripture contains doctrines of faith which are not clearly and unmistakably revealed. The clarity and perspicuity of Scripture are vindicated by this particular point: all doctrines of faith, although some of them are referred to in a few obscure Scripture passages, are without exception expressed in clear, unambiguous words, which enable the conscientious Bible student to understand the obscure passages. A denial of this is a denial of the clarity of Scripture, a denial that we really have a sure prophetic apostolic Word, a light that shines in a dark place, a sun that comes out of his chamber like a bridegroom and rejoices like a strong man to run his course; a sure testimony of the Lord, making wise the simple; the commandments of the Lord, rejoicing the heart and enlightening the eyes. (2 Pet. 1; Ps. 19.) Sad to say, there is hardly a Christian doctrine in our day which has sunk into greater oblivion than this doctrine or has been so decisively eliminated as a piece of former narrow-mindedness. The whole present theological intelligentsia is searching the Scriptures eagerly, holding not only that there are many passages which need further clarification (a fact which we do not deny), but also that much material for important new dogmas will be discovered.

Luther, who wrote many a precious word against this kind of Bible-study, expressed himself in the following manner in his exposition of Psalm 37: "But if any one of them attacks you and says, 'You must have the exegesis of the fathers; the Bible is obscure,' you must answer, 'This is not true.' No book on earth is so clear as the Holy Scriptures. It excels every other book just as the sun excels every other light. They employ the foregoing language because they wish to lead us away from Scripture and set themselves over us as our masters, so that we may believe their fantastic dreams. It is a shocking disgrace, blasphemy against the Holy Scriptures and all Christendom, to say that Holy Scripture is obscure and not clear enough to enable every one to understand it and then teach and prove what he believes. Take careful note of this fact: Would it not be a great shame for you or me to be called a Christian and at the same time not know what we believe? But if I know what I believe, I know what is in Scripture; for it contains nothing else than Christ and the Christian faith. Therefore, when the Christian hears Scripture, it is so

clear and plain to him that he says without any help from the commentaries of all the fathers and teachers: "That is right; that is what I also believe." . . . It is indeed true that some passages of Scripture are obscure, but in them the same truth must be sought which is found in clear, unmistakable passages. And then heretics arise who interpret obscure passages according to their own bias and on the basis of their interpretation contend against the clear passages and foundation of faith. So the fathers strove against them with the clear passages, shed light on those that are obscure, and proved that the obscure said nothing more than that which is expressed in the clear. This is the correct method of Bible-study. . . . Be assured, without doubt there is nothing brighter than the sun, which is Scripture; but if a cloud passes in front of the sun, the very same sun is behind it. Likewise, if there is an obscure passage in Scripture, do not doubt but that the same truth lies hidden in it that is very clear in another passage. Whoever, therefore, cannot understand the obscure ought to abide by the clear." (St. L., V, 334 ff.)

Finally, it is also true that doctrines of faith are not always so clear and evident in Scripture in this sense that every one may at once see and find them, even though he reads Scripture half asleep, with his eyes half closed, or his mind preoccupied with prejudices. In order to see and find all doctrines of faith in Scripture, it is necessary not only to read the sacred pages, but also to seek and search them, keeping the mind free from all prejudices and open to every ray of light emanating from them. Therefore Christ Himself does not only say: "Read the Scriptures," but: "Search the Scriptures" (*ἐρουνάτε τὰς γραφάς*), "for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me," John 5:39. This fact does not give any one any support for assuming that Scripture contains articles of faith which are not clearly and unmistakably revealed. The clarity and perspicuity of Scripture make it possible for any one to understand any book of the Bible; nevertheless, the Bible student must read carefully, search earnestly, be free from prejudice, be open-minded and receptive to the truth. Therefore the apostle wrote: "But if our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the Image of God, should shine unto them," 2 Cor. 4:3, 4. Is it not shocking when people ascribe to the alleged obscurity and ambiguity of the Scriptures what is merely the result of human blindness and malice or at any rate of human weakness?

Whatever is not "clearly and unmistakably" revealed in Scripture is not revealed at all. To maintain that certain doctrines of

832 **False Arguments for Modern Theory of Open Questions**

faith are indeed revealed in Scripture but not in clear, understandable words is nothing else than a denial of God's wisdom and goodness and blasphemy against God or a denial of the divine origin of Holy Writ. *Tertium non datur.*

When our opponents set up as an argument for the support of their theory of open questions the principle that some doctrines of faith, that of Sunday, for instance, are not clearly and unmistakably revealed in Scripture, they give evidence of an irreconcilable difference in their theology and that of our Evangelical Lutheran Church. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in her whole theology stands upon the principle that Scripture is clear and plain in all doctrines of faith. Therefore she lets Scripture speak for itself and judges doctrines by the clear Word of God. Our opponents, however, proceed from the principle that Scripture is obscure and easily misunderstood also in doctrines of faith and, consequently, let their own judgment decide one way or the other.

This is an error of far-reaching, ruinous consequences. We know with what detrimental effect the Papacy has insisted on the principle that Scripture is obscure and difficult to understand. We also know how the Reformed Church has applied this principle to the clear words of the institution of the Lord's Supper. The Reformed attitude demonstrates that our opponents gain nothing by maintaining that they do not count the doctrine of Baptism and the Lord's Supper among the open questions because they are clearly and unmistakably revealed in God's Word. For if we accept as true that Scripture contains doctrines of faith, e. g., the doctrine of Sunday, which are not clearly and unmistakably revealed, we have destroyed a pillar of revelation, whose ruin will eventually involve the collapse of the whole structure. If men do not want to bring about this ruin, — and certainly some of our opponents do not desire it, — there is only one course for them to pursue, i. e., to admit that Scripture is plain and clear in all doctrines of faith and to agree that everything which is clearly and unmistakably revealed in Scripture can be proved from its chapters either in a brief statement or in a more or less elaborate essay or after solving some existing difficulties. The Arminians are a further example of the ruin caused by this false principle. This is what Calvoer says of them: "They claim that no one is bound to believe anything outside of that which is plainly written in so many words in Scripture or that can be deduced and proved from the words of the Bible according to the laws of logic and so be grasped with the hands, as it were, as, for example, the sequence 'It runs; therefore it moves.' Consequently, according to their opinion, no one is bound to believe in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, in the

personal union in Christ, in the essential presence of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion, etc., especially not, if he has scruples in regard to any of these doctrines. The following must also be added to the things which one is not obligated to believe, namely, that the Holy Ghost must be worshiped; that Christ was born of the substance of Mary; that the fathers of the Old Testament died in the hope of eternal life; that faith in Christ is one; that men are justified through the merits of Christ; that Christ was not bound to be obedient; that faith is received through the merits of Christ; that children can be regenerated; that there is original sin; that sins flowing out of original sin are essentially sin; that the death which God pronounced upon Adam was at the same time eternal death; that God is omnipresent, omniscient; that concupiscence belongs to the sins for whose forgiveness we ask in the Lord's Prayer; that man cannot free himself from sin; that the government may shed blood; that the Decalog demands everything that is to be done, even self-denial, taking up one's cross, etc.; that it is necessary to believe in infant baptism; that Baptism is a seal of the forgiveness of sins; that the same bodies will rise from the dead. For, they believe, it is impossible to prove from Scripture that any one of these points is undeniably true and must necessarily be accepted." (*Fissuræ Zionis*. Lips. 1700. 4. p. 541 sq.)

What a long list of doctrines which they allege are not clearly and unmistakably revealed in Scripture! But the principle that Scripture contains doctrines of faith which are not clearly and unmistakably revealed and must therefore be counted as open questions inevitably leads not only to unionism and syncretism, but also to thoroughgoing skepticism and indifference in doctrine, even to the most shocking unbelief, and finally ends in the principle of the well-known scoffer who said: "Ein jeder kann nach seiner Façon selig werden." What is the language of the unionists, all the way down the line to the most rabid unbelievers, when they are confronted with the letter of God's Word? "Yes," they say, "those words are indeed written, but who will incontrovertibly prove to me that your or my exposition of this passage is the correct one? Does not all strife in Christendom arise out of human interpretation?"

The words that Luther wrote concerning the alloiosis with which Zwingli tried to support his doctrine of Holy Communion: "Beware, beware, I say, of the alloiosis; it is the devil's specter; for it finally gives us a Christ after whom I would not like to be called a Christian" must be applied to the principle that doctrines of faith are not clearly and unmistakably revealed in Scrip-

ture, for it takes the very heart out of the Bible and prevents us from believing its divine message.

We close with this prayer on our lips: May the Lord guard and defend the Church, the dearly bought communion of saints, in this new fatherland of ours against the inane theory which at the present time is a cancerous sore in the theology and the Church of our former fatherland and which, if it gained ground here, would gnaw at the root of the freshly budding tree of our American Church and cause it to wither away again! A general acceptance of this principle would indeed establish peace in the Church, but a syncretistic peace, of which the sainted Dannhauer said: *Foris eiq̄vñ, intus eiq̄vñvcs* (externally peace, internally discord).

Oak Glen, Ill.

ALEX WM. C. GUEBERT

Fighting Liberalism with Blunted Weapons

The Faith We Declare. By Edwin Lewis, Professor of Systematic Theology in Drew Theological Seminary (Methodist). Cokesbury Press, Nashville, Tenn. 236 pages, 5½×7¾. Price, \$2.00.

The Modernists will not like certain sections of this book. *The Christian Century* says: "This is a great book, greatly written,— and greatly needed. Liberal Christians will find it hard to believe this. They still have in their mouths the bad taste of *A Christian Manifesto*, which was hailed with glee by the foes of spiritual freedom. They are through with Lewis. But here Lewis goes Christian again, and with a will." The reviewer himself does not like certain things in the book. "There is still too generous an adherence to the shibboleths and slogans of Fundamentalism. . . . Lewis is all the while injecting phrases that seem to be concessions to the reactionaries. And his judgments on occasion are petulant. 'Is it that they (the Modernists) want the old terms dropped because they have ceased to believe what the old terms represent? (P. 111.)'" Indeed, Lewis deals roughly with the radical Modernists. He charges them with dishonesty. He goes on to say on page 111: "When they say that the old terms can no longer be made meaningful, is it that they do not want them to be made meaningful? Is it that, when they propose the creation of a new framework for Christianity, what they really have in mind is a radical change in what the framework is designed to support?" He tells them plainly that their new framework for Christianity covers the ruin of all Christianity. "There are numerous definitions of God current today which reduce Him to a condition of complete helplessness so far as any direct influence on either things or men is concerned. In such a philosophy there is no place for