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## False Principia Cognoscendi in Theology

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grateful ought we to be for the firm and sure hope that the inspired Word of God, Holy Scripture, offers to us so freely!

Maranatha. The Lord cometh! 1 Cor. 16:22. "And the Spirit and the bride says, Come! And let him that heareth say, Come!" "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly! Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" Rev. 22:17, 21.

L. FUERBRINGER

## False Principia Cognoscendi in Theology

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It is a fact, admitted also by scientists, that all theological knowledge, in the very nature of the case, must be derived from God Himself. It is a fact, furthermore, that God holds all who venture to speak for Him strictly to His Word when He declares: "To the Law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Is. 8:20. Lastly, it is a fact that God has issued a solemn warning by the first and the last writers of our Bible that no man shall dare either to add to or take away aught from the Scriptures, Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18, 19. This being so, we are amazed at the audacity of men who have tried to substitute for the Word of God, either in part or whole, a different source of knowledge for theology, to the incalculable damage of true theology.

Foremost among false *principia cognoscendi* in theology is human reason, not only that of outsiders to the Christian religion, but also that of the Christian himself. Attacks from this quarter upon theology come partly in the form of open defiance to, and absolute rejection of, the teachings of theology, which are denounced not only as supranatural, beyond reason, but also as unreasonable, contrary to common intelligence; as attempts to hypnotize the thinking faculty in man and to deprive him of his judgment. Partly these attacks come in the form of subtle insinuations to the theologian himself, who imagines that he must make the deep truths of God's revelation acceptable to the reason of men and that he is able to do so, because he has become enlightened by the Holy Spirit through his study of the divine Word and therefore can produce reasonable explanations of matters which on first blush appear inexplicable.

Now, evidently the theologian must employ his ordinary intelligence in his study of the Scriptures as of any other writing. To begin with, he must be able to read, to understand the meaning of words, to perceive the right connection of words to one another, and the structure of sentences and groups of sentences. When-

ever he meets with similar utterances, he must convince himself whether they are actually identical or whether there are essential dissimilarities between the statements. He must store the results of his observation in his memory. In all these actions the intellect serves the theologian like a faithful servant or maid in a household. This is called the ministerial, or ancillary, use of reason. Because of this service the theologian grasps the plain literal meaning of what he is reading in his Bible.

But reason may assert: "These things cannot be so. True, the text is plain, but what it says runs counter to correct thinking. Therefore it must be given a different interpretation from what its language imports, or it must be rejected as false." In that case human reason would no longer be content with repeating what God has said, but would set itself up as superior to God and assume the authority of deciding whether God could have said this or that and whether He meant what He said. Reason would no longer be the humble servant, but the sovereign master of the household. This is called the magisterial use of reason in theology.

There is no room in genuine theology for this use of reason. Wherever it thrusts itself forward, something must take place similar to the expulsion of Agar from the household of Abraham, when God commanded him: "Cast out this bondwoman!" Gen. 21:10, because she had dared to lord it over her mistress Sarah. The theologian gladly accepts the service of human reason for determining the literal meaning of Scripture, but he refuses the arbitration, the dictatorship of reason over the contents, the deep meaning of God's own mind in His utterances. If such a dominant role were accorded to reason in theology, theology would lose its God-given character: it would cease to be "the wisdom from above," and become an hodgepodge of supposedly divine teaching and human learning, a mixture of theology and philosophy. These two simply do not mix. The intrusion of human philosophy into theology works out as when the camel pushes its nose into the Arab's tent and gradually forces its whole bulk into the tent. In the end the foolish Arab, who permitted the camel's nose to come in, has to move out of the tent. God has declared the uselessness of human reason for apprehending the saving truths of Christianity, saying: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 1 Cor. 1:19. Accordingly, He has warned the theologians of His Church to "cast down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God and to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." 2 Cor. 10:5. Only Scripture itself can interpret Scripture. God must be His own

expositor. The clear passages of our Bible must light up the dark and difficult ones.

Therefore the old rule applies here: *Principiis obsta* that is: Resist an evil at the start! The dominant influence of reason on the teaching of divine matters has been the ruin and downfall of unnumbered Christian churches from the age of the apostles to our own time. It is the plain evidence of decay in the nominal Christianity of today.

Closely related — we might call it its brother or first cousin — to the deceptive *principium cognoscendi* in theology which we have just reviewed is another: the emotions, men's likes and dislikes, their loves and aversions, hopes and fears.

Scripture contains passages of great charm, which attract the natural affections of the human heart. Such are all the Gospel passages that speak of God's condescending love to the lost and straying; of His redemptive arrangements for the salvation of condemned sinners; of His succoring help to the weak, the puny, the erring; of His ready relief to those in distress; stricken sufferers, the poor and needy, the forsaken; of His willingness to hear prayer; of the inward consolations of His Holy Spirit to the restless and despondent. Any heart in trouble feels drawn to these calming, soothing assurances of God's Word.

However, there are also terrifying utterances in the Scriptures: stern commands and prohibitions of God's holy and righteous Law, awful descriptions of sin and its consequences in time and eternity, of God's just retributions to wrongdoers, of His avenging zeal, and of everlasting perdition in hell. These make men shudder with fright and turn away from them. Then there are the incessant urgings to those who would be Christians to walk worthily of their heavenly calling; to sanctify their lives and work out their salvation with fear and trembling; to shun every evil way in thought, word, or deed; to resist both the blandishments and the threatenings of a hostile world; to thwart the wiles of Satan; and to fight against your own flesh and blood. All this seems irksome. When men hear these Scriptures, they are not at all inclined to embrace them, but, like the Israelites at the foot of the quaking mount, they run away from the God, who speaks to them in thunders and lightnings, and cry out: "Let not God speak with us, lest we die." Exod. 20:19. This flight from the Law is an inborn trait of sinful man and a standing obstacle to the saving grace of God.

For while it is a blessed truth of Scripture that God receives sinners, it is equally true that the only sinners whom God welcomes are repentant sinners. They are men who have been put through the crushing experiences of remorse; they have felt the

smittings of their accusing conscience and have trembled before the indictments of God's holy Law and its curses. But that has been their necessary schooling for their faith, for their reception of God's pardon from the forgiving mercy of God. The Law has been their "schoolmaster to bring them unto Christ," Gal. 3:24. They have learned by bitter experience that Christ is a physician only for them that are sick and that the entrance into Christianity and ultimately into the life everlasting is by a strait gate and a narrow path, Matt. 7:14, and that there is no other way, Luke 13:24. There is no saving grace and no forgiveness for sinners who still want to cling to their sins.

Nor can a person remain a Christian without a penitent attitude and a humble spirit. True, the incoming of divine grace into a believing heart brings with it an inward "peace that passeth all understanding," Phil. 4:7, but it brings no other peace. In this world Christians must suffer constant tribulation, Acts 14:22. They are "troubled on every side, without are fightings, within are fears." 2 Cor. 7:5. They have to wage a ceaseless warfare against the wiles of Satan, the blandishments and frownings of a hostile world, and their own treacherous and truant heart. Thus their life is anything but a round of holiday excursions through flowery beds of ease, and their path to glory is a rough and thorny road. John 16:23. In all these conflicts they are trained to "endure hardness, as good soldiers of Christ," 2 Tim. 2:3, and to "fight the good fight of faith and lay hold on eternal life." 1 Tim. 6:12.

A theologian who is swayed by his natural emotions is inclined to offer to his clients the delightful aspects of Christianity and soft-pedal its sterner demands. That will put them on a spiritual sugar diet and raise a type of namby-pamby, good-weather Christians that wilt in the heat of trials and perish in the cold blasts of popular disfavor. It is the bounden duty of every theologian, as it was the duty of St. Paul, "not to shun to declare all the counsel of God" unto men's salvation, Acts 20:27, both the Law and the Gospel, without intermingling the one with the other. To be "approved of God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed," he must "rightly divide the Word of Truth," 2 Tim. 2:15, and as "a faithful and wise steward of the manifold grace of God," 1 Pet. 4:10, he must give to each member of "the household of God," Eph. 2:19, "his portion of meat in due season," Luke 12:42.

There is a literary gem from the pen of the first President of Concordia, Dr. Walther's *Law and Gospel*, which is a splendid guide, tried and true, to the budding young theologian. It should be the crowning study in pastoral theology and thorough acquaintance with it the indispensable requisite for graduation. For it is a daily mentor to the practicing theologian, warning him to keep

a checkrein on his natural emotions and curbs his antinomian leanings and tendencies. For these have inflicted in the past, and are still inflicting today, untold damage on the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Without fear or favor the theologian — to speak with William Chillingworth — must set forth “the Word of God, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word.”

That brings us to another false *principium cognoscendi* in theology.

The Scriptures are a perfect means of grace; for they are “the power of God,” Rom. 1:16, “able to make men wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,” 2 Tim. 3:15. But that is where they stop. They do not satisfy men’s curiosity on many points. There are lacunae, hiatus, gaps, where the Bible leaves the desire for more knowledge unfulfilled. Paul writes: “We know in part, and we prophesy,” that is, preach, “in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. . . . Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; then shall I know even as also I am known.” 1 Cor. 13:9, 10, 12. “It does not yet appear,” says John, “what we shall be; but we know that when He,” namely, Jesus, “shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is,” 1 John 3:2. Jesus forbore telling His disciples more things than He did “because,” said He, “ye cannot bear them now.” John 16:12. God has not poured out in His present revelation all that may be known about Him and divine affairs, because our present powers of comprehension could not encompass them. It is really an act of divine mercy that God has not told us all that we should like to know. It requires a transformation of our present vile body and mind into the new body and mind of glory, and the light of glory, to grasp them. Phil. 3:21.

But at this point the impatience of men has tried to fill up the gaps in Scripture and even to furnish information where there are no gaps, by means of dreams, visions, a so-called “inner light,” which are claimed to have given them new revelations. It is the human fantasy, or imagination, that is behind these phenomena. Men are known to have assumed that all the thoughts which flit through their minds, while they sit poring over their Bible, came out of the Holy Book, while they were merely longings to know more than the Book reveals, wishful thinking that produces a specious conviction. It is likewise known that men have told a fiction so often that in the end they believed it themselves. This is not at all an unusual occurrence in the history of religion, and there are numerous points where the imaginative faculty in men has contacted Christianity also and has produced a swarm of

enthusiasts, fanatics — Luther calls them *Schwaermer* — who became frenzied, rabid advocates of their special revelations.

There is no warrant for this in Scripture, no promise that God would in this manner expand or revise "the faith once delivered unto the saints," for which He has commanded them to "contend earnestly," Jude 3. God has forever built up His Church "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief Cornerstone," Eph. 2:20, and has declared: "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11. Men may build on this foundation "wood, hay, stubble," but these shall not stand the test, vv. 12, 13, and only the "word of the Lord shall endure for ever," Peter assures his readers and adds: "This is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you." 1 Pet. 1:25.

Furthermore, God has instructed His people how to deal with "dreamers of dreams," Deut. 13:1-13, and has warned them against "false prophets," Matt. 8:15, and their "signs and lying wonders," 2 Thess. 2:9, who shall make their appearance especially at the end.

The wise theologian, therefore, puts a curb on his fancies.

Worse than these hallucinations of ecstatic minds are the plain intentional perversions of Scripture by Mohammed in the Koran, by Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon, by Swedenborg in his *Divina Arcana* (Divine Secrets) and other writings, and by Mary Baker Eddy in her *Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures*. Garbling portions and thoughts of the Bible, these people have woven their grotesque and absurd vaporings around them or have invented impossible, fantastic meanings for current Bible terms, so that, while apparently speaking Scripture, they utter nothing but contradictions and denials of Scripture. These products are not new revelations but barefaced falsifications and impostures, not worth the notice of an honest searcher after God's truth.

There is time left for only brief references to a few more false *principia cognoscendi* in theology. Such an one is the claim advanced chiefly by the Anglican Church in support of their dogma of the "apostolic succession," namely, that the consentient teaching of the early Christian Church of the first five centuries is important for finding out Christian truth. For — so runs the argument — what the first Christians harmoniously believed and taught, must be a source of knowledge to the theologian.

However, in the first place, the earliest teachers of the Christian Church either wrote very little or their writings were lost, possibly consumed in the conflagration of the library of Alexandria in 391. Secondly, what has come down to us of such Christian writings does not at all present a picture of perfect unity. There are differences among the early Christian teachers. Lastly, what unity there exists, must be measured against the standard of

doctrine, the Holy Scriptures, so that even their assumed harmony cannot be an *independent* source of theological information, apart from Scripture, but is at best only a welcome testimony to the authority of the Sacred Writings, which the early Christians faithfully accepted.

The Roman Church operates with two false *principia cognoscendi* in theology: first, the oral traditions, supposed to have been handed down in the Church from generation to generation. These traditions are fortuitous outcroppings of human minds, occupied with sacred matters. They have been elevated arbitrarily above the authority of the Scriptures and have been the source of teachings contrary to Scripture; they have served to fill the books of legends of saints with fabulous stories; they have been tyrannically enforced by hierarchs as binding on the consciences of Christians. Paul vigorously opposed the introduction into his teaching even of the Law of Moses, given by God, and of all human traditions, like those of the elders of the Jewish Church.

Traditions can be useful merely as testimonies to God's truth, if they are in harmony with Scripture; if they are contrary to it, it is plain that the Christian theologian must reject them.

The other false principle of the Roman Church is the infallibility of their Pope. If such a prerogative ever can be accorded a mere human being, the Popes themselves have destroyed it before Pio Nono by the bull "Pastor Aeternus" proclaimed it on July 18, 1870, while a fierce thunderstorm was passing over Rome. For from their seats of authority the Popes have not only sanctioned plain heresies, but have also in their pronouncements regarding the faith of the Church openly contradicted each other. While this dogma stands, consistent Romanists really must ask each other every morning: "What do we believe today?" It is a question whether thinking members of that Church sincerely believe this haughty dogma which exalts a puny and erring human being "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." 2 Thess. 2:4.

For mark you! the infallibility bull declares that the official decrees of the Roman pontiff possess that validity with which Christ clothed Peter and that they are *irreformabiles ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae*, that is: They are by their own innate dignity above being amended and do not derive their authority from the consent of the Church. The dogma, then, has been concocted in the papal councils simply as a final support for the fictitious claim, which neither sound exegesis nor history support, namely, that Christ conferred on Peter and his successors the primacy in His Church and therewith the *magisterium fidei*, the overlordship, or dictatorship, over men's faith.



There is not even the faintest vestige of such a claim being asserted by Peter himself or of being allowed by his brother apostles and fellow Christians. Therefore this preposterous claim must be rejected as a *principium cognoscendi* in theology. It is unscriptural, anti-Scriptural, and a tyrannical presumption in the Church of Jesus Christ.

We could make our investigation of false *principia cognoscendi* in theology more detailed, but the result would be the same: it would confirm over and over again our believing conviction that there can be neither supplement nor substitute for what God has had holy men of old, who spake as His Spirit moved them, write down for our guidance in religious matters and sealed as His final revelation by the messages of His Son on earth. That—the teaching of Jesus—puts the stamp of finality on, and concludes, our *principium cognoscendi* in theology.

Our Norwegian brethren very appropriately adopted for their synodical seal the inscription "It is written!" Our own Synod chose the device: *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum*, "the Word of God abideth forever." Concordia Seminary still sticks to its old motto *Anothen to phos*, "our light comes from above." And our young university venture at Valparaiso the late President Pieper of this school helped launch with a slogan from Ps. 36:9, *In luce tua videmus lucem*, "In Thy light shall we see light."

One of the early Protestant churches selected for its church seal the picture of a sturdy anvil, firmly anchored in the ground, around which lay scattered a multitude of broken hammers, big and small, with the inscription underneath: "The hammers are broken, the anvil still stands." The anvil represented the Word of God, the wrecked hammers the attempts to destroy it.

J. F. v. Meyer wrote, and Dr. Adolf Spaeth, of the former General Council, republished in his *Liederlust*, p. 119, this:

Es steht im Meer ein Felsen,  
Die Wellen kreisen herum;  
Die Wellen brausen am Felsen,  
Doch faellt der Fels nicht um.

(Again I appeal to Concordia's poets for a proper rendition.) The Scriptures are what England's Prime Minister William Gladstone called them, an "impregnable rock," like the Eddystone Lighthouse in the English Channel. In the mad onrush of the waves that hurl themselves against it with the whole force of the Atlantic behind them, with their deafening roar and thunder in the cavernous rock and the furious spray driven over its top, it stands unmovable and casts its light calmly on the hurly-burly of the unresting sea at its base. So stands the eternal Word of God, rugged and firm, amidst the turbulent sea of human unrest.

Berkeley, Calif.

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