

# Here There be Open Questions

by  
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[NOTE: This letter was written in to answer people who objected to an article in “Creed & Deed”, a newsletter for TAALC pastors.]

The ancient mapmakers, when they reached the limits of their geographical knowledge, identified the boundaries with these words: “Here there be dragons”. The term “open questions” is used in this way by Orthodox theologians. But it is taken in a much different sense by rationalists. The rationalist may, for example, decide any doctrine that they can’t figure out to be an “open question,” and thereby open to a variety of interpretations. The postmodern may take this even further by rejecting absolute truth, rejecting outside authority, and constructing their own theology, their own religion, their own Jacob’s ladder, for nearly everything outside themselves is an open question.

Nonetheless there are differences within the idea of open questions that should be explored. An influential statement on the subject was made in The Brief Statement of the Doctrine of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (1932), which contains the following passage.

## Of Open Questions

44. Those questions in the domain of Christian doctrine may be termed open questions which Scripture answers either not at all or not clearly. Since neither an individual nor the Church as a whole is permitted to develop or augment the Christian doctrine, but are rather ordered and commanded by God to continue in the doctrine of the apostles, 2 Thess. 2:15; Acts 2:42, open questions must remain open questions. -- Not to be included in the number of open questions are the following: the doctrine of the Church and the Ministry, of Sunday, of Chiliasm, and of Antichrist, these doctrines being clearly defined in Scripture.

This is a very limited and restrictive definition. Nevertheless, when it defines open questions as (in part) those questions which Scripture answers not clearly, it leaves open what “clearly” means. This is surprising, for nearly a century before the Brief Statement the Iowa Synod had decided that any question that was not explicit in Holy Scripture, but was only derived, was an open question. This was the original conceit of Johann Michael Reu and the Iowa Synod. Although Reu changed his tune, his original support for the idea of open questions---which was primarily defined rationalistically rather than exegetically or hermeneutically---continues to infect the Lutheran Church.

Paul I. Johnston, Johann Michael Reu and Inerrancy, CTQ, pp. 170-171 APRIL-JULY 1992

25. Meuser's assessment of the fundamental difference between the hermeneutical approaches of Iowa and Ohio is an excellent one. He notes: "The point above, that the inerrancy of the Scriptures must be deduced from its inspiration, is not a minor one for Iowa's case. In fact, behind it lies the whole argument of Reu, which is simply the application of Iowa's 'open question' concept. If it is true that inerrancy is only a deduction drawn from Scriptural claims to divinity and not a doctrine clearly revealed by Scripture itself, then according to Iowa's approach to doctrine, inerrancy can never be elevated to the position of a doctrine essential to church fellowship. It seemed to Reu's group that Ohioans were deciding for themselves which doctrines were fundamental and then proceeding to find evidence for them in the Scriptures. To the average delegate the difference between inerrancy based upon Scriptural proof and inerrancy deduced from Scripture's divinity was probably so subtle as to appear sophistic. . . . Iowa held that the Scripture's claim to divine inspiration **implied** inerrancy; Ohio believed that Scripture itself **asserted** inerrancy. Since inerrancy, to the followers of Reu, was only a deduction, they held that it could be believed but could not be made an article of faith or a prerequisite for fellowship." Meuser, **Formation of the American Lutheran Church**, 214-215.

We must be careful not define open questions too loosely, as did the early Reu and the Iowa Synod. Herman Sasse writes about the opposite danger, a too strict interpretation of the denial of open questions, in his [Letters to Lutheran Pastors, No. 25, Concerning the Unity of the Lutheran Church](#). In this article he posits the *satis est* as the defining principle concerning what is and what is not an open question. Then he says the *satis est* consists of the Lutheran Confessions, for "these confessions are, as they are collected in the Book of Concord, the only means of real ecclesiastical unification for the Lutherans of the world". Of course this definition would have been too strict for the early Reu and the Iowa Synod.

Because I confess the one church, the one baptism, the community of the saints, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ, and the resurrection of the dead, I confess Jesus Christ. Believing in the scripture as the inspired Word of God means, for him, believing in Jesus Christ, to Whom the scripture gives witness from the first sentence to the last. In this sense, Luther understands the article of faith as a unit, even in the famous passage from his last [formulation], the "Short Confession concerning the Holy Sacrament":

Therefore, the matter is believing everything entirely, completely, and purely - or having believed nothing! The Holy Spirit does not allow Himself to be divided or separated, that he should teach one thing truthfully, and another falsely, or allow it to be so believed ... for all heretics are of this manner, that they begin by rejecting only

one article, but after that, they must all, and all together, be rejected: just as when a ring, if it has a crack or a chink, is of no value to us any more, and when a bell has a fault on one side, it does not ring at all anymore, and is entirely worthless. (EA 32:415)

Luther does not want to say by this that faith is a system, the sum of many individual doctrinal propositions, which one takes from the Bible and brings into a systematic ordering, but rather it is a unit because it is always the faith in Jesus Christ, Who is the actual *objectum fidei* in an propositions of faith. The divine truth, which we believe in every individual Word of scripture, is not in each case identical with the intellectual content which grammar and logic transmit, but rather this truth can be buried deeply behind the text, which, e.g., everyone will agree is the case for the Song of Solomon. The clarity which we ascribe to the Holy Scripture does not mean, indeed, the same thing as the "clarity" of a philosophical book. It does not assert, that the full and exhaustive meaning of a biblical passage must be instantly grasped by every Christian reader of good will. It also does not assert that we can instantly find the harmony which exists between [various] statements which extremely diverge from each other. If the clarity and perspicuity of the Holy Scripture are to be understood in this way, then the history of the church and her doctrinal struggles would be an unintelligible riddle. For this history was not only the history of a fall from the once perfectly given truth and the struggle for the reproduction of the truth, but rather it was also the history of the wrestling by the true church of Christ toward an ever deeper and fuller understanding of the one eternal unchanging truth. Therefore, there are not only "**so-called** exegetical difficulties, theological problems, and open questions" in the understanding of the Scripture, as the "confession" of the "orthodox Lutherans" opines, but rather there is actually all of that, from the days of the apostles onward, who also did not all have the same theology and the same interpretation of the Old Testament, until that Day, of which it is said: "but then shall come completion, then shall the partial cease!"

This is the teaching which American Lutheranism, insofar as it still really takes the confession of the fathers seriously, must take from the tragic event of the most recent splitting. It must recognize that the consensus which binds the Lutheran church into a unit, can not be a system of exegetical and dogmatic discoveries, in which one thinks to have "the doctrine" of the scripture, which one theoretically identifies with the confession of the Lutheran church, but practically expresses in new confessions. The message, which we must send to these churches today, is the warning, not to consider the Lutheran confession as an obvious possession, which one could lose. **One can lose the confession of the Lutheran Reformation, not only in giving it up, but also by believing with**

**far too great a certainty that one possess it.** Karl Barth once quoted (*Theology and Church: Historical Lectures*, vol 2, pg. 80) the verses of a German Lutheran in the middle of the previous century:

A certain church is our church,  
A wall around it, salvation, and arms,  
Augsburg's victorious confession,  
Like a fortification around it.

What a false security that was! What would Luther have said to this Lutheran! How gruesomely did the judgments of God in Europe sweep away this illusion. We must ask our brothers in America to examine themselves to what extent they still perhaps live under the illusion of the "certain" confession and of the church "secured" by the confession. "Back to the Brief Statement!" That is the call which the people around "Confessional Lutheran" [movement] continually send to their church. The "Brief Statement" is the confession, by which the people of [the] Okabena [movement] measure the orthodoxy of the "Common Confession" and other documents. Would it not be appropriate at this time, that people on all [different] sides should first pause and study again the Lutheran confession, and honor it? It is, indeed, still a powerful force in the churches of our faith in America. Behind the formulas of the old orthodoxy, which is still vital there, and of modern fundamentalism, which attempts to seep into Lutheranism from the Reformed environment; lies buried the Lutheran faith, which can still distinguish between Law and Gospel, and which knows what the means of grace are. But nobody knows what will become of the next generation, if the fleeting agreement of [various] theological schools, with its pseudo confession made [only] for the [present] moment, takes the place of consensus of the Church which lasts over time, as the Lutheran confessions express it. It is a false concept of unity in doctrine, if a complete uniformity in the explanation of all passages of the Bible with dogmatic content is demanded, and if this demand is justified with the warning of Paul,

*That you at all times speak unitedly, and do not let divisions be among you, but rather hold firmly to one another in one mind and in one belief. (1 Cor. 1:10)*

It is the same false concept of doctrinal unity, if one directs the warning

*That you watch those, who start divisions and disagreements contrary to the teaching which you have learned, and avoid them. (Rom 16:17)*

toward every brother in faith who has a different theology. The teaching which Paul mentions in both passages is clearly the pure doctrine of the gospel, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*,

the doctrine of justification of the sinner, which he announced in Corinth with Peter and Apollos, although he did not come from the same theological school as these men. These passages, and equally the great passage about the unity of the church in Ephesians 4, which are the basis for article 7 of the Augsburg Confession, really assert clearly nothing else at all than that which the Lutheran Church has found in them, the *consensus de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum*. But what is here called **doctrina** should really be clear: **not a theological theory about the gospel** together with a system of theories about all the questions connected with it, **but rather the teaching or the gospel itself, which happens in the church** in the pulpit and lectern, in the confessional and in pastoral counseling. There, where the unity of the church of Christ is at all, there is also the unity of the Lutheran Church to be sought. Thus the great *satis est* of the 7<sup>th</sup> article of the Augsburg Confession is also the foundation of all unity among Lutherans. What this *satis est* includes in particular, what the consensus about the teaching of the gospel is in detail, this is what the confessions of our church tell us. Therefore, these confessions are, as they are collected in the Book of Concord, the only means of real ecclesiastical unification for the Lutherans of the world.

The concept of open questions, like *satis est* and *adiaphora*, has become an open door to false doctrine. If not strictly defined and limited, they become openings used by the camel of false doctrine, always seeking to stick its proverbial nose under the tent. Open questions are not, however, the same thing as *adiaphoran* (things neither commanded nor forbidden). Open questions can be defined narrowly, as in the Brief Statement, or broadly. When defined narrowly, it serves to delineate things about which it is pointless to argue. In cases such as this, better to say “it’s a mystery” and leave it at that. When defined in other than a narrow sense, the border between what is and is not an open question is ill-defined and is in itself a source of argument. The medieval argument about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin would fall under the narrow definition of open questions---and look how much strife that argument stirred up. (And yes, I know that wasn’t strictly how Aquinas phrased the argument in his *Summa Theologica*, but he argued some pretty pointless things---this being one of them.)

The Iowa Synod used its broad understanding of open questions to weaken the article of doctrine concerning the inspiration of scripture, claiming it couldn’t be found in scripture, but was derived (2 Tim 3:16). Of course what they did not say was that the Trinity is nowhere explicit in scripture: that is, that the article of doctrine concerning the triune nature of God is nowhere laid out as a dogmatic proposition. By weakening the hermeneutic, and therefore by allowing any doctrine that does not have an explicit dogmatic statement to become a doubtful thing, we undermine the Gospel of our Lord. The scriptures are not a dogmatics text, and should not be interpreted that way (Isa 28:9-13). The Iowa Synod, by constructing its own scriptural interpretation, betrayed its inherent *quatenus* subscription. If they had a *quia* subscription, the BoC would have served to limit their doctrinal drift, to constrain it within certain boundaries. Thus a theologian such as Carl Braaten, with his relatively weak view of scripture, nonetheless

has a strong confessional subscription, which subscription keeps him from straying too far from the pure faith.

The pastoral epistles have much to say about the issue of open questions. The apostle Paul warns Timothy not to give heed to “fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions” (1 Tim 1:4). He warns Timothy about certain proud men who know nothing, but dote about “questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself” (1 Tim 6:4-5). He warns Timothy to avoid foolish and unlearned questions, “knowing that they engender strife” (2 Tim 2:23). Finally, Paul warns Titus to “avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain” (Tit 3:9). From this we can discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in these matters, which is to give them wide berth.

I wrote all that to say this: the article in Creed and Deed concerning open questions was necessarily short. Given the space limitations, it was difficult to encompass the nuances surrounding the issue of open questions. (This is into the sixth page, and we’ve barely scratched the surface.) But knowing how the idea of open questions is used by the opponents of sound doctrine to create envy, strife, evil surmisings, and perverse disputings, it is propositionally safer to say there are no open questions than to open that door. For an article of that sort to create space for someone’s loose understanding of open questions would force us to spend inordinate amounts of time defending against false doctrine. I would rather discuss the issue with you now, in this fashion, than to fight against false prophets seeking to justify their heresy.