

Open Questions and the Formula of Concord

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According to Timothy Wengert (A Formula for Parish Practice, Article 9, “Lutherans Don’t Have All the Answers”, p. 158), the modern concept of open questions is derived from the Epitome, Article IX, “Christ’s Descent Into Hell”. The questions raised regarding Christ’s descent into Hell were many and varied. The Epitome resolved the issue in a distinctly Lutheran fashion. Christ’s descent into hell is and remains a mystery which we don’t try to explain. How it happened (in body or in spirit) we don’t know. When it happened (before or after the resurrection) we don’t know. Why it happened (to suffer or to proclaim victory) we don’t know. We accept on faith that it happened because the scriptures say it happened. Anything beyond that is an intrusion of human reason into the hidden things of God.

From Article IX of the Epitome sprang the Iowa Synod’s understanding of open questions. The primary issue for the Iowa Synod was the millennial kingdom of Christ upon the earth, which the Iowa Synod asserted over and against other Lutheran bodies, who themselves asserted an amillennialist position. The Iowa Synod argued that the doctrine of the millennial kingdom should remain an “open question”, and not require a final and definitive answer. (According to Timothy Wengert, this concept of open questions passed into the constitution of the original American Lutheran Church of 1930-1960. It did not, however, pass into the constitution of The AALC.)

The problem with this assertion of open questions is that the Iowa Synod incorrectly interpreted Article IX of the Epitome when deriving its concept of “open questions”. The standard of the Epitome regarding Christ’s descent into hell is the *satis est (it is sufficient)*:

For it is sufficient that we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell. But how this occurred we should not curiously investigate, but reserve until the other world, where not only this mystery, but also still others will be revealed, which we here simply believe, and cannot comprehend with our blind reason.

The Epitome states that we cannot comprehend Christ’s descent into hell with our senses or reason, but it must be apprehended by faith alone. We don’t have enough information from scriptures to explain it further. Therefore, it is sufficient that we know the scriptures say the event happened, but we dare not intrude further into the hidden things of God.

The *satis est* of the Epitome is not how the Iowa Synod explained the millennial kingdom. They did not say that it is sufficient that we understand that a kingdom will exist, but in what form and for how long we cannot know. In fact, the Iowa Synod had a very well defined doctrinal statement regarding the millennial kingdom, one they strenuously defended by developing the concept and definition of open questions. Their objection was not that the scripture did not provide enough information to draw conclusions, but that no one should object to the particular conclusions drawn by the Iowa Synod. In this, the Iowa Synod went beyond the Epitome in formulating rationales for what they termed open questions.

The rationales for open questions proceeded beyond the *satis est* of the Epitome, and therefore could not rely on the Epitome as its basis. The Iowa Synod developed the following three definitions for open questions.

1. Open questions are the non-fundamental articles of faith.
2. Open questions are those doctrines about which the symbolic books of the Lutheran church do not put forth a confessional opinion.
3. Open questions are those doctrines derived from scripture, rather than explicit in scripture.

The first definition of open questions was based on the division of the teaching of scripture into fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. The doctrines judged to be fundamental must be held by all, while the doctrines not judged to be fundamental must be left as open questions. This definition is found in the proceedings of the Iowa Synod of 1879, quoted below.

Our Synod was from its very beginning persuaded to make a distinction between such articles in the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as are necessary articles of faith and such other doctrines as are not doctrines necessary for salvation; and our Synod has considered it one of her duties very earnestly and emphatically as an important truth...that there are doctrines, even doctrines of the Bible, concerning which members of our Church may hold different views and convictions without thereby being compelled to refuse each other church fellowship.... In such matters unity should indeed be sought; but it is not absolutely required as in the doctrines of faith.

But the Iowa Synod was not content to define open questions with reference to fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. Their second definition defined open questions as doctrines about which the symbolic books of the Lutheran church do not put forth a confessional opinion. In 1859, the pastors of the Iowa Synod published the following "Declaration" in their synodical organ: *"We treat the teaching pertaining to the 'last things' as an open question, that is, as a question in which there may be a difference of opinion without disturbance of church fellowship and concerning which in the symbols of our Church no confessional decision has been laid down, for which reason both views may exist in the Church alongside each other."*

This argument is curious, because the three ecumenical creeds as well as the Unaltered Augsburg Confession (AC XVII), the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ap XVII), the Small Catechism (SC II 3-6; IV, 19-20), and the Large Catechism (LC II 31, 57-62; III 53-54), all mention last things. It cannot be said that the Lutheran Confessions do not take a position on these matters. A confessional decision *has* been laid down; it is a position that is clear to anyone who does not already hold a contrary position. Therefore the position of the Iowa Synod in this matter is deceitful, in that they say the confessions have not taken a position on the millennial reign of Christ, when clearly they have.

The Epitome, far from supporting the Iowa Synod in its definition of open questions, actually closes the door on their first definition. The scriptures have spoken extensively regarding last things. The doctrine that formed the basis for the Iowa Synod's development of the open

questions issue was clearly described in scripture, and the doctrinal position of the Iowa Synod was well-developed. Therefore, the *satis est* of the Epitome does not apply.

Furthermore, the argument of the Iowa Synod regarding their second definition was disingenuous, for on their main issue the Lutheran church had taken a stand in its earliest confession, and in both its catechisms. Since the confessions took a stand, the Iowa Synod could not state that their peculiar doctrine could be an open question. A confessional decision on that issue had been laid down.

The Iowa Synod eventually created a third definition for open questions. This definition is much more subtle than the rest, and is much more dangerous for the Gospel message. In “The Formation of the American Lutheran Church”, Fred Meuser shows how Johann Michael Reu developed this third definition by means of a controversy over the inerrancy of scripture. For Reu and his followers in the Iowa Synod, fundamental doctrines were those explicit in scriptures, while non-fundamental doctrines were those derived from scriptures. Using this understanding of fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, Reu developed the position that those doctrines which were not explicit in scriptures, but only derived from them, were non-fundamental doctrines and therefore were open questions. This definition could be thought of as a development of the first definition, as it created a standard by which to judge which doctrines were fundamental and which were non-fundamental. But the demonstration of this definition in practice clearly shows its subtle dangers.

Reu applied this understanding to inerrancy by stating that while the inspiration of scripture was implicit in scripture, the doctrine of inerrancy was only implied. In the controversy between the Iowa and Ohio Synods, the Ohio Synod took the position that the inerrancy of scripture was asserted in scripture, while the Iowa Synod took the position that inerrancy was derived from the divinity of scripture. For Johann Michael Reu and the Iowa Synod, the inspiration of scripture was a fundamental doctrine, but the inerrancy of scripture was not. The inerrancy of scripture is therefore an open question and must not be made an article of faith or become a prerequisite for church fellowship.

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 triune nature of God is nowhere laid out as a dogmatic proposition. Moreover infant baptism is nowhere explicit in scripture. There is no clear proof text or passage outlining infant baptism, nor are there any clear texts demonstrating infants being baptized. Infant baptism is implicit in Justification by Grace alone, through Faith alone, in Christ alone. The article of faith concerning infant baptism is derived from the very structure of the scriptures themselves. 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, its own peculiar hermeneutic, weakened the Gospel message itself, putting souls at risk of judgment.

In contrast to the position(s) of the Iowa Synod, the Epitome states that where the scriptures have not spoken clearly, such questions are taken on faith alone. The argument of the Epitome would say that yes, some questions are closed, those being any questions addressed in the Scriptures. Derived from this are two definitions of open questions, each of which aligns well with the Epitome. 1) Open questions exist only regarding those matters for which Scripture answers either not clearly or not at all. In these matters neither individual nor Church is permitted to develop or augment Christian doctrine. 2) Open Questions do not exist. The scripture is completely clear in all questions which deal with "life and faith". Therefore, it is dangerous and misleading to speak of exegetical difficulties, theological problems, and open questions in the exposition of the doctrinal content of the Bible.

The concept of open questions is deceitful and disingenuous. It is a lie created to support doctrines that could not be supported any other way. It was created so that church bodies holding doctrines condemned in the Lutheran Confessions could nonetheless claim to be Lutheran, because those contrary doctrines they held should be judged to be open questions, and therefore must not be divisive of church fellowship. For this reason, if we use the term "open questions", we must state that the only open questions are those for which Scripture answers either not clearly, or not at all. But better still is to say that "open questions" do not exist, for the term is a deceitful invention that distorts the Gospel message and destroys faith.