

## Beware of False Doctrine

Teaching the truth of God's Word includes the rejection of untruth and error, whether that arises from within the church or from outside. The human spirit so easily drifts onto bypaths and wrong ways by following its own light, by being its own inspiration, and by interpreting the Word according to its own fancies and whims. Throughout the ages, the church has had to defend the truth of the Gospel against errorists inside and outside of the church. Two of the Ecumenical Creeds originated in the controversies about the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Both had to meet departures from the truth from *within* the church. The *Augsburg Confession* was a common confession of the churches of the Reformation whereby they were "*distinguished from the Papists and other repudiated and condemned sects and heresies.*" The Apology also had this purpose "*that condemned errors might not steal into the Church of God under the name of the Augsburg Confession.*" The Smalcald Articles indicate "*why we have abandoned the papistical errors and idolatries and can have no fellowship with them.*" The Catechisms are to help ordinary Christians distinguish between pure and false doctrine. The Formula of Concord has not only the positive statement presenting the truth but also a negative statement or antithesis rejecting the error.

The church constantly has to watch that no false doctrines are admitted into its teaching under the guise of truth. The church has no guarantee that it will remain undisturbed in possession of the truth (Cf. <sup>1</sup> Cor. <sup>11</sup>:<sup>18</sup>; Gal. <sup>1</sup>:<sup>6</sup>; <sup>1</sup> Tim. <sup>4</sup>:<sup>1</sup>). The church cannot permit its pastors, teachers, or other church workers to teach according to their own choice or fancy, or to teach what contradicts the church's concept of doctrine. Hence it must be convinced of the correctness of its doctrines according to the Scriptures. It will state and define and defend its doctrine in a confession of faith drawn from the Scriptures. This confession will be examined again and again as to its Scriptural correctness, but as long as pastors or people belong to a church and bear the church's name, they are, in conscience, bound to uphold the church's confession of faith. If the church no longer has the conviction that its confessions teach the Scripture-truths correctly, the confessions lose their force, are valueless except as historical documents, and no longer bind either the church or its pastors and members. But therewith, that church has lost its right to independent existence.

The church must exercise doctrinal discipline since it cannot continue to exist on error without pure doctrine. The church must put its pastors, teachers, and people under the obligation to hold loyally and sincerely to the truth as the church has drawn it from the Word of God and laid it down in its Confessions. The church today must be able to say with the Reformers of the sixteenth century (Preface to the Book of Concord): "*Since, therefore, such is the case, and being instructed from the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures, we are sure concerning our doctrine and confession... For it seemed exceedingly necessary that, amidst so many errors that had arisen in our times, as well as causes of offence, variances, and these long-continued dissensions, there should exist a godly explanation and agreement concerning all these controversies, derived from God's Word, according to the terms of which the pure doctrine might be discriminated and separated from the false. Besides, this matter is of importance also in this respect, viz., that troublesome and contentious men, who do not suffer themselves to be bound to any formula of the pure doctrine, may not have the liberty, according to their good pleasure, to excite controversies which furnish ground for offence, and to publish and contend for extravagant opinions. For the result is... that the pure doctrine is obscured and lost, and nothing is transmitted to posterity except academical opinions and suspensions of judgment.*"

How aptly these last phrases describe so many books that hold pride of place in the theological book market: Academical opinions and suspensions of judgment. A Lutheran theologian or pastor or student will want to know what these men, whose names are circulating around the world and whose books are being translated into other languages, write and say, but if he wants to remain a Lutheran, he will apply the test-stone of the Confessions to these modern theologisings, which are not even theology in the strict sense, and say with the Reformers: "*Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger's breadth either from the subjects themselves, or from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of the pure doctrine.*"