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INSTITUTES OF ELENCTIC THEOLOGY

BY

Francis Turretin

*Pastor in the Church and Academy of Geneva
and S. S. Professor of Theology*

TRANSLATED BY

George Musgrave Giger

Princeton University

EDITED BY

James T. Dennison, Jr.

*Westminster Theological Seminary
in California*

VOLUME 2

ELEVENTH THROUGH SEVENTEENTH TOPICS

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XIII. Although believing is sometimes taken for simply assenting, it does not follow that it is always so taken or that the whole nature of faith is contained in assent alone because in innumerable other passages belief embraces assent and trust.

XIV. So far is the example of Abraham (Rom. 4) from proving that faith is not trust, that it invincibly demonstrates that it is necessarily included in it because he could not be said to have been "fully persuaded [*plērophorētheis*] and to have believed in hope against hope," unless by trust (inasmuch as he conceived in his heart a firm trust in the truth and power of God, although all things appeared against it). Thus he could not be said "to have staggered not through unbelief" (v. 20) unless inasmuch as through the trust opposed to it he was strengthened against all those things which seemed to oppose the divine promise.

XV. If trust is called by the Scholastics "strengthened hope," this must be understood of the trust of hope, which differs from the trust which is peculiar to faith in various particulars. The former is only of a future good, but the latter of a present; or as if present, as also of a past. The former has for its object more the "thing of the word" (i. e., the promised goods); the latter rather the "word of the thing" or the promises of it—although they so differ that the one depends upon the other and they cannot be separated from each other.

ELEVENTH QUESTION: THE OBJECT OF FAITH

What is the object of faith in general and can what is false come under it? We deny.

I. Because various questions are agitated about the object of faith, we must distinctly discuss them. We do so in four propositions.

The first proposition, concerning the object of faith: that it ought to be true, not false.

II. First proposition: "The object of faith ought to be true and nothing false can come under it." The reason is that the word of God (which is most true) is the sole object of faith and cannot be exposed to any error or falsehood, no more than God himself (its author, who is the truth itself and who, as he cannot be deceived, so he cannot deceive anyone, not knowing how to lie). And yet if a falsehood could come under faith, the word of

God could be false, the law would oblige us to believe a lie and divine faith would be a principle of deception (which is absurd). Hence Paul says the faith of the Corinthians would be vain and the apostles found to be false witnesses, if Christ had not risen and if what was false should be believed (1 Cor. 15:14, 15*).

III. The various examples adduced to prove that falsehood can come under faith prove nothing of the kind. The Ninevites were bound to believe that their city would be overthrown, not absolutely and simply, but only conditionally—unless they would repent (as is evident from the edict of the king proclaiming a fast: "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" Jon. 3:9). Hezekiah ought not to have believed a falsehood when Isaiah threatened him with death because this word was not so much the prophetic prediction of a thing absolutely to happen, as a conditional threat to excite his humble deprecation of it. This he sufficiently perceived when straightway having turned to the wall, he prayed to Jehovah, who also heard his

prayer, adding fifteen years to his life (Is. 38:2, 5). Or it was a declaration of the severity of the disease, which according to the natural order of things ought to result in such an event (unless God would deliver him miraculously).

IV. Adam was not bound to believe absolutely that in his state of uprightness he would possess eternal life; but only conditionally if he continued in obedience. This condition was not to be believed because it was not promised, but to be performed because it was commanded. If after his fall, he was bound to believe absolutely that he would die, he ought not equally to have believed before his fall that he would live. The cases are not the same. For in his innocent state, the condition was as yet to be fulfilled; while after the fall, the condition was in fact violated and so the threatening could be actually put in force. Meanwhile although after the fall he was bound to believe absolutely that he was exposed to death, he was bound to believe nothing distinctly concerning the event because it was not revealed to him.

V. According to the command of God concerning the sacrifice of his son (Gen. 22:2), Abraham was bound to believe what was strictly true—that God had commanded him to slay his son and to commit the event to God. But he was not bound to believe that Isaac would be slain by him (which was false; although perhaps he had reached that opinion because he did not sufficiently perceive the meaning and end of the command given to him); yet this was only human faith, not divine. Although by divine faith Abraham believed that God was able to raise up his son if he should die, it does not follow that he ought equally by divine faith to believe in his death; nor ought this to have lessened his alacrity in performing his duty because he was not obliged to attend to the event, but only to the duty enjoined upon him; nor could it hinder the trial of his faith, which was sufficiently evident in this, when notwithstanding all the obstacles in the way of the fulfillment of that command, he still girded himself to obey it, committing the event to God.

VI. The Israelites were not bound to believe absolutely from the promise of God that each and every individual would enter the land of Canaan without any condition; for the event taught that the condition of faith (although tacit) was always implied and since many were destitute of it, it is not strange that they were excluded from this blessing.

VII. Although we are bound to believe that God willed preceptively and approvingly what will never actually happen on account of the obstinacy of man, it does not follow that we are obliged to believe a falsehood. For we are not bound to believe that this will really happen or that God decreed it, but only that God willed to enjoin it upon man and that this is his duty (which is perfectly true).

VIII. In Jer. 4:10, God is not said to have deceived the people effectually by obliging them to believe a falsehood, but permissively (as words often are active in sound, but are permissive in meaning or declarative) allowing them to be seduced and deceived by the mouth of false prophets or judicially giving them up to a spirit of error. The words can be understood also interrogatively (although the mark of interrogation is wanting, as often elsewhere) with the meaning—Have you deceived the people? Can it be that you have duped the people with the vain hope and promise of peace, when you mean no such thing?

Second proposition: there is no other object of faith than the written word of God.

IX. Second proposition: "The object of faith is none other than the written word of God according to the measure of revelation." Faith (*pistis*) is one thing; knowledge (*gnōsis*) another. The latter is gained even from nature by beholding the works of God, but the former only from supernatural grace and revelation by the hearing of the word (which alone is the object of faith [*piston*]). Hence faith is said "to be of hearing" (Rom. 10:17). In

1 Cor. 1:21, Paul testifies, "Because the world" (i.e., the human race) "in the wisdom of God" (i.e., by a contemplation of the workmanship of the world in which the wonderful wisdom of God shines forth) "by wisdom knew not God" (to wit, unto salvation), "it pleased God to save them that believe by the foolishness of preaching" (i.e., by the gospel). This appears foolish in the judgment of men: substituting faith alone by which we believe the word for knowledge which arises from his works.

X. We say that this word as written is the object of faith, against the Romanists, who maintain that there is an unwritten (*agraphon*) word in the voice of the church which can establish our faith. We acknowledge no other God-inspired (*theopneuston*) word than the in-written (*engraphon*) and written; which, therefore, we are strictly prohibited adding to or taking anything from. Now although the word as to substance is always the same (which ought to be apprehended by faith), still not equally according to degrees because God willed to reveal it at sundry times (*polymerōs*) and in divers manners (*polytropōs*); now obscurely, as under the Old Testament, then more clearly, under the New. Hence the object of faith is not simply the word, but the word revealed in this or in that manner. Thus the measure of the revelation is also the measure of faith and indeed not in this sense—that faith always clearly sees what things are declared in the object and according as they are declared; but that it sees or is bound or is able to see no more than what is revealed.

Third proposition: the object is either material or formal.

XI. Third proposition: "The object of faith is either material or formal." The material are the things believed (namely the whole word of God and all its propositions, whether they pertain to the law or to the gospel). They become known to us by a divine and supernatural revelation; if not as to the why (*to dioti*) or the mode and reason,

at least as to the fact (*to hoti*); either explicitly in so many words or implicitly and by necessary and evident consequences (which we have proved belongs to the word of God, Topic I, Question 12).

XII. A formal object implies a reason or cause under which things are believed (to wit, the principle itself of believing). This is not the authority of the church as Romanists hold (because although the church may be the motive to faith in those about to believe and the human instrument and means of it, yet it can never be called its principle, as we have already seen in the proper place), but the authority of God, the only one credible of himself (*autopistou*) as the first and infallible truth, revealing himself in the word, in which is granted the ultimate analysis of faith (as in its own formal object, which alone can establish divine faith because it rests in no one except God alone, Jer. 17:5, 7).

Fourth proposition: the object is either common or proper.

XIII. Fourth proposition: "The object of faith is either general and common or it is proper and special." The general is the whole word of God, which is proposed to us that it may be believed, whether in respect of histories (which narrate things done) or of prophecies (which predict things future) or of doctrines and precepts (which regard no differences of time) or of promises and threatenings (which are made to the pious or impious). All these fall under the object of faith, although in different ways according to the nature and condition of each.

XIV. Although primarily and of themselves, all things are not of faith which are contained in God's word (so as to belong to doctrines and articles of faith and that to know all those things is necessary to salvation), still it is of faith and necessary to salvation to believe all things were committed to writing by the inspiration (*theopneustōs*) of God for the fulness of the knowledge of the church.

XV. The proper and specific object of justifying faith, not as it is a theological virtue (under which respect the sole and entire word of God is embraced equally as true and infallible) but as it is a gospel condition, is the doctrine concerning Jesus Christ and the promise of the remission of sins and of salvation in his blood. This proposes for its object God, not simply as a Creator and Lord, but as a Redeemer and Father in Christ; as covenanted and ours, who wishes to be our God that he may bestow salvation upon us. And here God and Christ ought to be indissolubly joined together. God as the supreme good, in whom we are to be made happy; Christ as the only and infallible means by which we are to be led to God. Christ wished to signify this when he says that eternal life is placed in the knowledge (i.e., in the faith) of God the Father and of Jesus Christ whom he sent (Jn. 17:3). This is undoubtedly so because the Father cannot be savingly known unless by the Son, who also has manifested the Father to us and by his own blood prepared a way for us to him (Mt. 11:27; Jn. 14:6).

Is Christ only the secondary object of faith?

XVI. However when we say that God and Christ are the object of faith, we must take special care not to take this in a Socinian sense. In order to overthrow the divinity of Christ, they distinguish the object of faith into primary and secondary: the Father being the primary object, who is the first and supreme cause of our salvation; the Son the secondary object, who is only the second intermediate and instrumental cause of our salvation. Faith in the Father is terminated in him as the ultimate object, but faith in Christ is not terminated in him, but through him is directed to God and rests at length in him. The former is supreme divine worship, proper to God alone; the latter subordinate, mediate, divine worship, ascribed from grace. Thus Socinus speaks against Wujek ("Responso ad libellum Jacobi Wuieki Jesuitae," 4 *Opera omnia* [1656], 2:557-67; cf. "Of the Person of Christ," Sect. IV, chap. I, *Racovian Catechism* [1818], pp. 154-55).

XVII. We think that Christ is indeed to be distinguished from the Father in faith and its object in two ways: both in person, as he was eternally begotten of the Father; and in office, as he was made a Mediator between God and men. But as neither the order of subsistence in the divine persons nor the office he bears destroys the mutual equality of the persons (since they always remain mutually