

CTCR Response to Matthew Becker Dissent of 6/29/11

Becker's Dissent

In correspondence to the CTCR dated June 29, 2011, the Rev. Dr. Matthew Becker, a rostered and ordained minister of the LCMS, formally expresses his dissent from “the synod’s practice of restricting the office of pastor only to men” and from “the synod’s position of interpreting the first two chapters of Genesis to mean that God created the universe over the course of six twenty-four hour days, and that the natural law of evolution must be rejected.” For his dissent on these issues, Dr. Becker directs the CTCR to two essays he has written, “A Case for Female Pastors and Theologians” [CFPT] and “The Scandal of the LCMS Mind” [SLM], both of which were originally published in *A Daystar Reader* (Portland, Oregon: Daystar.net, 2010), edited by Dr. Becker.

Synod Bylaws and CTCR Policy on Dissent

Regarding “Dissent,” the Synod bylaws (1.8) state the following:

While retaining the right of brotherly dissent, members of the Synod are expected as part of the life together within the fellowship of the Synod to honor and uphold the resolutions of the Synod.

Dissent from doctrinal resolutions and statements is to be expressed first within the fellowship of peers and then brought to the attention of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations before finding expression as an overture to the convention calling for revision or rescision. While the conscience of the dissenter shall be respected, the consciences of others, as well as the collective will of the Synod, shall also be respected.

Nowhere do the Synod bylaws specify the nature of a response by the CTCR to dissent brought to its attention as a result of Bylaw 1.8. The CTCR has, however, developed its own internal policy for responding to expressions of dissent (see attached). This policy lists several procedural steps, culminating in “a determination regarding whether or not there is sufficient basis in the dissent for supporting the dissenter’s(’) claim(s) that the doctrinal position of the Synod is in need of revision” and “an explanation or presentation of the *theological* basis for this determination” (2.d and 2.e; cf. also 3).

Problematic Issues with Becker's Dissent

It is clear to the CTCR that Dr. Becker is, in fact, in dissent from the position of the Synod on the question of the ordination of women to the pastoral office and on issues related to the Synod’s stated position on creation and evolution. However, responding to this dissent in a clear and helpful way is difficult because of several problematic issues in the way this dissent is presented. While these problematic issues do not ultimately form the theological basis for the CTCR’s determination regarding Dr. Becker’s dissent (see below), they are significant issues and they seriously impede the CTCR’s ability to respond to this dissent in a way that might be helpful to the dissenter and to others who have encountered this dissent.

1. First, there are problems of *specificity* or *focus*. Bylaw 1.8.2 speaks of “dissent from doctrinal resolutions and statements” (emphasis added). *CFPT* does not reference or quote a single resolution or doctrinal statement of the Synod regarding the service of women in the church. The concern here is not for the mere technicality of adding a footnote or including a parenthetical reference. The

Synod has adopted dozens of doctrinal resolutions over the years on the service of women which include specific theological language and a certain kind of theological argumentation or reference to reports and documents that set forth this argumentation in more detail. *CFPT* often describes (and then “dissents from”) the “position of the Synod” in ways that do not correspond to the actual position of the Synod or positions set forth in supporting Synod documents (see point two below). *CFPT* refers only twice in passing (both times in a parenthetical comment) to one particular CTCR report on the service of women, without engaging the theological arguments in that report (or any other CTCR report on this issue). While CTCR reports do not themselves constitute “the official position of the Synod,” several of its reports on the service of women are referenced in significant doctrinal resolutions on this issue. Where this is the case, it seems reasonable to expect some engagement with the theological argumentation of these reports and the resolutions themselves.

Dr. Becker’s dissent regarding creation and evolution also suffers from a lack of specificity and focus. His letter of June 29 states that he is dissenting from “the synod’s position of interpreting the first two chapters of Genesis to mean that God created the universe over the course of six twenty-four hour days”—but this language has never been used by the Synod in any doctrinal resolution or statement. *SLM* begins by offering quotations from the (1932) *Brief Statement* and from what is erroneously identified as the (1972) *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* (throughout *SLM* Becker confuses *A Statement* with its “study version,” which was never adopted by the Synod but rather issued by the President’s office to facilitate study of *A Statement*), but focuses most of his attention on 2004 Res. 2-08A “To Commend Preaching and Teaching Creation” and the CTCR’s 1967 report *Creation in Biblical Perspective*. He speaks of the latter as if it were “accepted” as an official doctrinal statement or position of the Synod (which is not the case—1971 Res. 2-12 simply “receives” this report and “commends it for reference and guidance” in a way quite typical for CTCR reports, without elevating it to the status of an official Synod doctrinal statement), and criticizes the former (2004 Res. 2-08A) primarily for what he sees as its lack of clarity and its potential to “stifle fruitful learning and scientific exploration in LCMS high schools and colleges.” The precise nature of his “doctrinal dissent” from this resolution is difficult to discern. In view of Dr. Becker’s positive comments about the CTCR’s 1967 report, it would have been helpful for him to respond in some way to what is perhaps the Synod’s clearest doctrinal resolution on the subject of creation, 1967 Res. 2-31 “To Reaffirm Our Position on Creation, Fall, and Related Subjects” (attached).

Finally, the lack of specificity or focus is evident in both *CFPT* and *SLM* in that dispersed throughout both essays are frequent references to what “many in the LCMS assert” (*CFPT*, 5), various arguments that are “often made in the LCMS” (*CFPT*, 2), the views of “some individuals in the LCMS” and “some members of the LCMS” (*SLM*, 2), certain things that “many LCMS Christians have said” (*SLM*, 6), the views of various “LCMS interpreters” (*SLM*, 13), etc.—all of which are completely irrelevant to the matter at hand (i.e., formal dissent from the doctrinal position of the Synod) and exacerbate the difficulty of responding to Dr. Becker’s dissent in a meaningful way.

2. Second, and to some extent related to the first, there are serious problems with the content of Dr. Becker's dissent on these issues. We limit ourselves here to an illustrative (yet significant) example. *CFPT* refers repeatedly to "the LCMS 'order-of-creation' argument," although it does so without reference to any LCMS doctrinal resolution or statement, or any theological documentation from official LCMS sources of any kind. It then characterizes "the LCMS 'order-of-creation' argument" in any number of ways that are not consistent with what the LCMS itself has said in its official resolutions, statements, or theological documents. For example, *CFPT* depicts the "LCMS 'order of creation' argument" as having primarily to do with the "order" (the "chronological sequence") in which God created Adam and Eve. It speaks of the LCMS "notion that God's order means that women are subordinate to men in that created order" and that "this ordering means that women cannot serve in the pastoral office because such service would put them in a position of authority over men." The Synod's foundational resolution on this issue, however (1969 Res. 2-17), does not argue in this way. It does not begin with some "notion" of an "order of creation" which subordinates all women to men and to male authority, with the result that women cannot hold the pastoral office merely because this would involve them in a "position of authority over men." Rather, this resolution begins with a clear and simple (and restrained) statement about the Synod's understanding of specific passages of Scripture: "Those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office." In other words, says the Synod, the Scriptural prohibitions against women "teaching" and "exercising authority" are *not* to be applied indiscriminately to "any and all teaching" done by women or "any and all authority" exercised by women, but they have specific reference to "the pastoral office" and service in the church "involving the distinctive functions of this office." Numerous CTCR documents (including the 1968 report *Woman Suffrage in the Church*, which provided the basic theological rationale for 1969 Res. 2-17) offer further commentary on these and related exegetical issues and on the broader issue of the "order of creation" (which is never presented narrowly in LCMS documents as a mere matter of "chronological sequence"). It is very difficult to respond helpfully to an expression of dissent that does not engage the actual arguments that the Synod has made in its doctrinal resolutions and theological documents and instead engages in arguments against undocumented characterizations and even caricatures of the Synod's position, such as Dr. Becker does in the following:

If the LCMS truly applied the texts consistently, it would not only prohibit women from serving as pastors and theologians, but it would teach that women are more prone to temptation by Satan because they are the weaker sex, that women should remain silent in the churches, and that they will be saved by giving birth to children. The LCMS would also teach women to keep their heads covered in public and during the divine service so as not to offend the angels. The LCMS would teach women to keep their hair long and free of braids and not to wear expensive clothes or jewelry. To be fully consistent, the synod would have to teach that no women may serve in authority over a man anywhere, in the church or in society, since this is "an order of the Creator" that is in the very structure of creation. How would such teaching be

generally received in a culture far different from the apostles, a culture in which women regularly serve as judges, legislators, presidential candidates, company CEOs, professors, surgeons, airline pilots, military officers? (*CFPT*, 6)

The lack of focus and specificity in *SLM* (described above) present the same difficulties in responding to the specific content of its argumentation.

CTCR Determination and Its Theological Basis

The CTCR takes very seriously the right and responsibility of members of the Synod to express dissent and its own role in responding to expressions of dissent. The purpose of the section above is primarily “apologetic” in nature—i.e., to explain, at least in part, the difficulties it encountered in attempting to “do justice” to Dr. Becker’s dissent and to respond to the various arguments and opinions he has expressed. Ultimately, however, what is said above by way of “apology” is not foundational for the following determination by the CTCR:

Dr. Becker’s dissent does not provide a sufficient scriptural or confessional basis to support his claim that the doctrinal position of the Synod is in need of revision on the issue of the ordination of women to the pastoral office or on the issue of creation and evolution.

The theological basis for the CTCR’s determination is the evidence provided in Dr. Becker’s essays that he is operating on the basis of an understanding of the authority and interpretation of Scripture that is at odds with the Lutheran Confessions (see, for example, the Preface to *The Book of Concord*; FC Ep Summary, 2; FC SD Summary, 9, 20; Ap XXIII, 71; Ap VII, 27; Ap XII, 106, etc.) and the scripturally and confessionally-based position of the Synod as set forth in the *Brief Statement* (see paragraphs 1-3) and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* (see especially “The Infallibility of Scripture” and “Historical Methods of Interpretation”). Statements such as the following in Dr. Becker’s essays reflect a view of and approach to Scripture that are clearly incompatible with the Synod’s doctrinal position on the authority and interpretation of Holy Scripture:

Those biblical texts that imply the subordination of women to men are the result of an influence of Aristotle on a pattern of patriarchy found in Hellenistic Judaism that had been adopted by some early Christians but was not normative in all places or for later times. While traditional Judaism and some early Christian writings view the inferior ontology of women as obvious, this was not the dominant view in early Christianity, especially in the Johannine and Pauline communities that stressed the Christian mandate to love as Christ loves and that subordinated traditional patterns of female-male relationships on the basis of power and authority to a pattern that was based on Christian love and the dynamic working of the Holy Spirit to equip both men and women for ministry. In this later view, great importance is put upon mutual service under Christ. Thus, the views toward women that one finds in Aristotle and Jewish rabbinic thought seem sharply opposed to a central consequence of the gospel, namely, that “in Christ there is neither male and [*sic*] female” (Galatians 3:28). (*CFPT*, 3)

While some biblical texts suggest such “an ordering” of female subordination to men, these texts no longer make any sense in contemporary western, scientific societies. The cosmological foundation on which such an “order of creation” argument rests has been overturned by knowledge from the natural sciences and

by cultural changes in the west over the past three hundred years. Given the plethora of data in nature that support the theory of the evolution of human beings, is it really possible any longer to maintain with theological integrity that a man (“Adam”) was created “first” and a woman (“Eve”) created “second?” Has not this traditional view been overturned by physical data and contemporary scientific investigation of nature and natural history, in a manner similar to what has taken place in the interpretation of those biblical texts that imply and support a Ptolemaic, geocentric understanding of the universe? To argue that God actually created the man first, and then the woman from the rib of the man, and that this chronological sequence has significance for the ontological authority of men over women, is as outdated as the traditional interpretations of those biblical texts that speak of the earth being founded on pillars, of the earth not moving, of the sun going around the earth, of the sun rising and setting, of the earth as the center of God’s creation, and so on. Just as the data from Galileo’s investigations confirmed the Copernican theory and brought about the end of literalistic interpretations of these cosmological passages, so the data from natural history and anthropology have spelled the end of this kind of literalistic “order of creation” construct. (*CFPT*, 3-4)

If a woman has been given the creaturely gifts of intellect, an aptitude for teaching, and the Spirit’s gifts for ministry, her gifts ought to be used in service to the church. Why should that final, 23rd chromosomal pair be more important to the “ordering” of a woman to a man in the church than the gospel itself? (*CFPT*, 4)

While no Christian theologian will teach that modern evolutionary theories offer a sufficient explanation for the origin of the world or a complete and exclusive account for the nature of human beings as creatures of God, Christian theology has the responsibility to let “nature speak on its own terms.” Theology cannot interfere with scientific investigation by simply appealing to “what the Bible says.” (*SLM*, 9)

Scripture itself indicates that we can trust the facts of nature and need not try to re-interpret their “speech” to us, even if such “speech” apparently conflicts with our particular readings of Scripture. If there is such an apparent conflict, then we need to re-examine our interpretation of Scripture and our understanding of nature.... Since God’s “book of nature” is reliable and not deceptive, and since human reason is a creaturely gift of God the Creator, human reason is a generally reliable means for “reading” that God-given “book.” (*SLM*, 11)

Of course a “figurative” interpretation of Genesis 1-9 (not to mention the many other passages in Scripture that speak of God as creator, of the world as God’s creation, and of the new creation) does entail a revision of the traditional “creationist” manner of articulating the doctrines of creation, anthropology, and sin, and many Christians are deeply uncomfortable with such a prospect. This “discomfort” is at least as great as the discomfort many 16th-Century Christians must have felt in view of the revision to traditional teaching that the Copernican Theory entailed. As then, however, so also now: such modification would not necessarily undermine an orthodox understanding of creation, human beings, sin, and grace. For example, scientific data about the reality of physical death in the animal and plant kingdoms prior to origin of human beings (e.g., fossils of animals that lived long before the origin of human beings) must lead those who

interpret the Bible in light of scientific knowledge to restate the nature of God's good creation prior to the advent of human sin (e.g., such a good creation must have included the reality of death prior to the existence of human beings) and the character of the historical origin of sin (e.g., the advent of sin is to be traced to the first hominids who disobeyed God's will but not necessarily to their having eaten from a tree in an actual place called the Garden of Eden several thousand years ago). (*SLM*, 12)

Statements such as these by Dr. Becker speak for themselves in conveying his understanding of the authority and interpretation of the Scriptures. As noted above, this understanding is clearly incompatible with the Synod's doctrinal position on the authority and interpretation of Scripture.* For this reason, the Commission affirms once again its determination that Dr. Becker has not provided sufficient basis for his claim that the position of the Synod is in need of revision, and expresses once again its conviction that Dr. Becker is in dissent from the position of the Synod not only on the specific issues of the ordination of women to the pastoral office and the issues of creation and evolution, but also on the more foundational position of the Synod on which these positions are based: namely, the authority, infallibility, and faithful interpretation of the Holy Scriptures themselves.

The CTCR therefore appeals to Dr. Matthew Becker, by the mercies of God, to reconsider his dissent and to reexamine, on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, his positions on the authority of Scripture and the two issues concerning which he has expressed dissent, even as the Synod expects him to honor and uphold the doctrinal positions of the Synod.

Conclusion: "Life Together"

The Synod's process for expressing dissent begins with this reminder: "While retaining the right of brotherly dissent, members of the Synod are expected as part of the life together within the fellowship of the Synod to honor and uphold the resolutions of the Synod" (Bylaw 1.8).

Numerous resolutions of the Synod have been adopted over the years that help to explain this expectation and how it relates to the *sola Scriptura* principle, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, and questions of Christian conscience. Attached to this response is one particularly significant and time-honored resolution that merits careful review and reflection by all members of the Synod, 1971 Res. 2-21 "To Uphold Synodical Doctrinal Resolutions." It seems fitting to close this response by quoting the final two paragraphs of the preamble of this resolution:

The object of the Synod, as stated in Article III, 1, of the Constitution, is (1) to conserve and promote a unity in which all are "united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor.1:10), and (2) to avoid schism caused by contrary doctrine (Rom.16:17). This purpose of the Synod is defeated when individuals are permitted to teach in accordance with their private views, for then there can be no such thing as a synodical position, and a meaningful corporate confessional commitment is impossible. Formal commitment of the Synod to a confessional base is pointless unless the Synod has the right as a synod to apply its confessional base definitively to current issues and thus conserve and promote unity and resist an individualism which breeds schism.

* See *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* for a discussion of critically related issues such as the proper (ministerial) and improper (magisterial) use of reason in approaching and interpreting Scripture, the relationship between the Gospel and Scripture (material and formal principles), the role of historical and scientific methods in Biblical interpretation, etc.

The Synod holds that a member cannot justly charge the Synod with “binding his conscience” when the Synod, in applying its confessional base to current issues, adopts doctrinal statements which it believes to be in harmony with the Word of God and requires that such resolutions be considered normative for every member. A doctrine of Scripture remains a doctrine of Scripture despite the fact that it is formulated in synodically adopted resolutions. If a member cannot for conscience’ sake accept a doctrinal resolution of the Synod, he has the obligation and opportunity through mutually approved procedure to challenge such a resolution with a view to effecting the changes he deems necessary. Failing in that, he is completely free by reason of his wholly voluntary association with the Synod to obey his conscience and disassociate himself from the Synod. Meanwhile every member of the Synod is held to abide by, act, and teach in accordance with the Synod’s resolutions.

Adopted by the CTCR
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