



Dr. Becker's Ever-Shrinking Word of God

By T. R. Halvorson

Introduction

Dr. Matthew L. Becker¹ is known for teaching publicly that qualified women should be ordained as pastors.² Many wonder how he can reach this conclusion, since they believe God's Word plainly says pastors should be qualified men. The explanation lies in his perspective on the Word.

When laypeople just don't like something the Bible says, they casually cast it off. For an ordained theologian, there are restraints against casting it off as casually. For them, it takes a lot more work because they need to justify false teaching professionally and theologically.

Therefore Dr. Becker's view of the Word is involved and tedious. Through a series of stages, some of which are orthodox and others of which are not, he gradually shrinks the Word of God until it is so small that it no longer has anything to say against women as pastors.

In this article we will take an overview Dr. Becker's use of:

- Jesus as the Word versus Scripture as the Word
- Canonical disagreement
 - *Pseudepigrapha* (false writing)
 - *Apocrypha* (hidden writing)
 - *Antilegomena* (spoken against writing)
 - *Homologoumena* (agreed upon writing)

- Contains the Word; A witness to the Word
- Canon within the canon
- Gospel reductionism
- Science
- Culture
- Provisionalist concept of truth

Jesus as the Word versus Scripture as the Word

To begin, Dr. Becker rightly points out that Jesus is the Word. On the single, glitteringly attractive premise that Jesus is the Word, he spins a false conflict between Jesus as the Word and Scripture as the Word. This is to give us a wary stance toward Scripture where we always are to question whether, by believing Scripture, we might be opposing Jesus, or in the alternative, that by misidentifying a text as part of Scripture, we are opposing Jesus. This is something of a defection from the Lutheran understanding of the means of grace. It heads in the direction of an immediate (without means) knowledge of Jesus by which we would test and qualify Scripture.

He says, quoting Luther twice and then Paul Althaus once:

If necessary, for the sake of the gospel, Christ and Scripture can even be pitted against each other. “Scripture is to be understood, not against, but for Christ: either it must be referred to him, or else it must not be held to be true Scripture... If my opponents have urged Scripture against Christ, we urge Christ against Scripture.” “You urge the slave, that is, Scripture—and only in parts... I urge the Lord, who is King of Scripture.” “Thus if the text of Scripture is opposed to Luther’s gospel-centered interpretation of Scripture, his interpretation becomes gospel-centered criticism of Scripture... Sacred Scripture is its own critic.”³

In the context where Luther said that, he had a reason. Luther was writing with a pointed pen for that reason, which Dr. Becker omits from his discussion. Dr. Becker spreads the ink of Luther's statements with a roller brush, beyond the use Luther was making of it.

Dr. Becker pits Jesus and Scripture against each other despite what Jesus himself says about Scripture. “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.” John 5:39 “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Luke 24:27 “Scripture cannot be broken.” John 10:35 Jesus sounds unaware of the supposed conflict between himself and Scripture.

As Dr. Jack D. Kilcrease said in an online discussion, “The larger point is that [Becker] doesn't really believe fully in the implications of the incarnation. If God can fully communicate himself in Jesus, then He should have no trouble doing it in the words of a book!”⁴

Canonical Disagreement

In the early church, various writings were treated as new scripture. For some time, however, there was no general agreement. Different people drew up lists of writings they accepted as the canon

of the New Testament. The lists varied.

For example, the church at Laodicea rejected the book of Revelation. That might not be so hard to understand considering what it says about them in 3:14-22. The difficulty such rejections create is not as bad as some people make it.

Dr. Becker says:

The first person to identify the 27 writings that would eventually be included in most NT canons was Athanasius, whose 39th Festal Letter (written in ad 367) contains such a list. Nevertheless, that letter was not a formal decision. It merely indicates for those who read it which NT writings were in use among mainstream Christians in Egypt at that time.⁵

He says the first formal decision did not occur until the 16th century when the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent identified which writings are to be used in Roman churches.⁶

The Roman canon is coterminous with the Latin Vulgate translation, a list that contains some apocryphal writings. *Apocrypha* means “hidden.” Protestants are accustomed to hearing about 400 years of God’s silence between the close of the Old Testament and the coming of John the Baptist during which God never spoke by any prophet. The Latin Vulgate and the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, include additional books written between 300 BC and 100 AD that were hidden in the sense that the Jews rejected them as scripture. The Council of Trent, however, accepted them.

The apocryphal books often are printed between the Old and New Testaments or after the New Testament. They include Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach), Baruch, The Letter of Jeremiah, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Old Greek Esther, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, The Prayer of Azariah, The Song of the Three Holy Children, The Prayer of Manasseh, 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, 3 Maccabees (Ptolemaika), 4 Maccabees, Psalm 151.

The Reformed churches also established a canon, a list of 66 books familiar throughout Protestantism.

The Lutheran church never has drawn up a canonical list nor assented to anyone else’s canon. Dr. Becker notes: “The evangelical-Lutheran Confessions never identify the Bible per se as ‘the word of God.’”⁷

Books rejected from mainstream canonical lists are called *pseudepigrapha*, “false writings.” They are deemed false either as to who their author is purported to be, as to their content being irreconcilable with the mainstream canonical scriptures, or as not having been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Various pseudepigraphal writings are accepted as scripture, however, by various people. Among the more familiar of these are Gospel of Thomas, Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Heermas, Revelation of Peter, and Epistle of Barnabas.

In review, look at the trajectory toward shrinkage. At its widest, Scripture would be the writings Protestants usually think of, together with the *Apocrypha* and all of the *pseudepigrapha*. But because of flaws in the *pseudepigrapha*, some obvious, some more subtle, we reject those writings. That leaves us with the Reformed canon of 66 books plus the Roman *Apocrypha*. But Protestants (not necessarily including Lutherans) reject the *Apocrypha* for reasons more or less the same as when the Jews rejected those writing. That brings us down to the 66 books of the Reformed canon that Americans and Canadians usually see.

Most of us have no great problem with that because we are used to it. But the trajectory does not stop there. Within the 66 books, there are still more problems.

It may come as a surprise or even a shock that within the 66 books of our familiar Bibles, there are some called *antilegomena*, “spoken against.” These are books that made the 66 book canonical list, but that still were spoken against by some from early times, and continue to be noted by many as having a lesser assurance of being Scripture. The *antilegomena* are: Hebrews, James, 2nd Peter, 2nd John, 3rd John, Jude, and Revelation.

Some NT documents that claim to be apostolic and authoritative remain within the *antilegomena* and thus they are always open to the possibility that they are non-apostolic, non-canonical.⁸

What that leaves is the *homologoumena*, the “agreed upon” books. These are: the 4 Gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1st Peter, and 1st John.

For the lay people, if this is making your head spin, I recommend the article, “Canon of the New Testament,” in the *Lutheran Bible Companion*, vol. 2, pp. 156-64 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014).

As to canonical disagreement, so far, Dr. Becker has said nothing that does not accord with orthodox Lutheran teaching. The problem is not what he has said this far, but the use he is making of these orthodox observations. He uses them to create a momentum of reduction. He deploys the observations to set a trajectory of shrinkage not just to either the 66 books or the agreed upon books, but a trajectory of perpetual shrinkage. His trajectory continues the shrinkage even in the agreed upon books. His review of the shrinkage up to this point is for the purpose of making us comfortable with shrinkage as a principle. After establishing comfort with shrinkage, he can leave the realm of orthodox observations to his own shrinkage of even the *homologoumena* – shrinkage of the agreed upon books – so that only parts of them remain normative or authoritative. While denying to the Church any authority to establish the canon, he will himself exercise an authority to apply new criteria of canonicity by which more and more of the Bible become rejected. He applies criteria such as Gospel reductionism, science, and culture.

He says: “The evangelical-Lutheran Confessions never identify the Bible per se as ‘the word of God.’”⁹

He says:

What is meant by the word “Scripture” here? It appears to be a reference to “the Bible.” Which “Bible?” Which biblical books? The Canon of Trent? Luther’s Bible, which included the Apocrypha (and which contained the *antilegomena* in the back on unnumbered pages and unlisted in the table of contents)? Or the typical Reformed Bible that omits the OT Apocrypha and makes no distinction between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena*?¹⁰

He says:

No church or sect, neither the Roman one nor any other, is in a position to define the canon. For this reason, too, as is well known, the evangelical-Lutheran Confessions contain no article on the Bible or its authority. The Formula of Concord merely underscores that “the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teaching and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of

the Old and New Testaments alone” (FC Epitome, Preface, 1). The Formula does not identify those writings nor does it clarify their attributes or the nature of their authority. More helpful for understanding that authority is the use to which the Scriptures are put in Apology IV, to sharpen the distinction between the law and the gospel in service to faith in Christ. Only later did some Lutheran theologians seek to counter the development of an infallible teaching office in the Roman Church by developing specific attributes for Holy Scripture and by dwelling at length on what it means to say that Holy Scripture is “the inspired word of God.”

The church has no right to coin new doctrines, not even when they concern the authority of Holy Scripture. The church’s doctrinal authority resides solely in its responsibility to set forth the evangelical sense of the prophetic and apostolic words in Scripture. On occasion, too, Luther acknowledged that not everything in the Scriptures, not even everything that the apostles taught, is of binding and normative authority for contemporary Christians. That position, too, which is reflected in the twenty-eighth article of the Augsburg Confession, has surely contributed to further disagreements among latter-day Christians about what is and is not normative in the NT.¹¹

He says:

Is there a single verse or set of verses in whichever Bible is being referenced here that makes reference to the contents of the Christian Bible as a whole? Is it not the case that the first person to refer to the writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament collectively as “the Bible” was Chrysostom, who lived in the fourth century? While the prophetic and apostolic writings certainly contain passages that refer to “the word of the LORD” and that make reference to “God-breathed” writings (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21), can anyone be absolutely certain which writings are being referred to here? Or what the phrase “*pasa graphe heopneustos*” really means? Because of the presence of the OT Apocrypha and the NT *antilegomena* within most Lutheran Bibles, the application of the above two biblical passages to the entire Bible is problematic. At best 2 Tim. 3:16 refers to the Septuagint (which included the OT Apocrypha), but we cannot be certain of this. Because there are legitimate concerns about the canonical character of some OT and NT biblical writings, the traditional Protestant biblical canon as such cannot serve as the “rule and guiding principle” of Christian theology, nor is the totality of this canon “the pure, clear fountain of Israel” (FC SD, Preface, 3), as Martin Luther’s prefaces to the biblical books also make clear (see LW 35:235ff.). Not every biblical book or biblical passage is of equal canonical, theological weight.¹²

He says:

While the Lutheran Church has refrained from identifying an authoritative list of canonical writings, it has been concerned to maintain the ancient and venerable distinction between the *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* and to keep open the question about the margins of the canon. One cannot avoid the fact that the *antilegomena* within the NT itself cannot shirk questions about their apostolicity, antiquity, catholicity, and especially their orthodoxy. It was because of questions about the latter that Luther famously passed judgment on some *antilegomena* books in the

OT Apocrypha and in the NT (especially James, but also Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation). To be sure he did not exclude these *antilegomena* from his edition of the Bible, but it is interesting to note that his 1522 edition of the NT did not list these writings in the table of contents and these books themselves were put in the very back of the book on unnumbered pages! He clearly did not want people focusing on these writings, which he, like the ancient biblical scholars, thought contained teaching that was at least inconsistent with authentic apostolic teaching, if not outright contradictory to the gospel.¹³

He says, “For Christians today, only the *homologoumena* writings in the NT serve as the principal source and norm of Christian teaching.”¹⁴ With all the preparatory observations recounted above, he has conditioned his students to be ready to accept this overstatement. Academics may support that statement, but he said, “for Christians today,” not “for academics today.” Christians hear texts of the *antilegomena* in the One-Year Lectionary and the Three-Year Lectionary. They pray texts of the *antilegomena* in the liturgy. As to his claim of “today,” a notable example is the relatively new and highly popular “This is the Feast” stemming from the *antilegomena* Revelation 5:12-13, 19:5-9. Popular Bible verses that ordinary Christians can recite or closely paraphrase are *antilegomena*. For example, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” is the *antilegomena* 2 Peter 1:21.

Dr. Becker also fails to account for Luther’s own use of *antilegomena* at critical points. For example, when Luther realized that he must reform the canon of the Mass or the Reformation would be lost through corrupted, anti-evangelical liturgy, he gained the core insight of his reform from the *antilegomena* Hebrews. From various passages in Hebrews, he zeroed in on the paramount idea of his reform, that the Mass is a testament of forgiveness, a sacrament God gives to us, not a sacrifice we give to God.¹⁵

Contains the Word; Witness to the Word

In his argument, Scripture continues to shrink even smaller than the *homologoumena*. He combines Liberal Protestantism’s view that the Bible is not the Word of God but only contains the Word along with much error, and Neo-orthodoxy’s view that the Bible is not the Word of God but only a “witness to the Word.” He says the Bible contains a witness to the Word. He says:

Only in a qualified way may one refer to the Bible as “the word of God,” and only then because it contains the authoritative apostolic and prophetic witness to the word of God in its varying forms and content.¹⁶

In other words, there are portions of Scripture that contain the Word of God, and portions that do not. We are left to sift the wheat and the chaff.

This overlooks the problem that in this sifting, we are editing, and the power of editing is the power of authorship. By this we make ourselves the authors of Scripture.

Canon within the Canon

Since the Bible is only a witness to the Word and we have to sift, that leads to the notion of a “canon within the canon.” Under this notion, we could hold a bound volume containing only the *homologoumena*, and still within that, we would recognize a further shrinkage to which parts of

the canon we will deem should be canonical. We will give the canon within the canon authority, and look askance upon the rest.

He says,

Once again one must ask, what is meant by the term “Scripture” in this section? The Formula uses the more precise designation “the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments” (FC Epitome, Rule and Norm, 1), which leaves open the question about the OT Apocrypha and the NT *antilegomena* and it centers upon the “canon within the canon” in the *homologoumena* writings, namely, the proper distinction between law and gospel.¹⁷

He says,

These central apostolic writings, in their witness to the gospel concerning Christ, are the only norm for the church’s total teaching, since the apostles themselves (via their reception of the Holy Spirit promised them by Christ) became organs for God’s self-revelation, and because all subsequent events that happen in the church must be guided and shaped by this revelation.¹⁸

Among Lutheran theologians in general, this phrase “canon within the canon” is given varying meanings. At various points in Dr. Becker’s writings, he seems to be harkening to some of those meanings. The practical effect, however, is that some of the Gospels and Paul’s writings become the canon, and then within those, further shrinkage will happen because of what is deemed to witness to Christ and what isn’t, particular applications of law-gospel distinction, science, and culture.

Gospel Reductionism

Above we saw that Dr. Becker says “the proper distinction between law and gospel” is the touchstone of the canon within the canon. This has ready-made appeal to Lutherans because the Lutheran confessions rank the distinction between law and gospel as “a particularly brilliant light.” (Formula of Concord, Article V) During the Reformation, law-gospel distinction was a theological principle among Lutherans, and it became a key piece of Lutheran confessional writings. But it was not the sole principle, and if it ever was a hermeneutical principle, it was not the sole one, and it never was the foundation of Scripture’s authority. “Thus saith the Lord,” still is the foundation of the authority of the Word, and all challenges to the authority of the Word still have the character of the Serpent’s question, “Hath God indeed said?”

Dr. Becker not only makes law-gospel distinction a hermeneutical principle, but the only one, and then removes the law as having authority, leaving only the Gospel as having authority, and then founds the authority of Scripture on the Gospel alone, even if the Gospel is not the only word God ever said.

In the saying, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for



training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16), Paul did not say only the Gospel but all Scripture, and he did not say that the only use was to bring us to salvation but also to reprove, correct, and train in righteousness, and he did not found the authority of the Word on law-gospel distinction but on Scripture being “breathed out by God.”

So, when Dr. Becker says, “The Scriptures have authority for the sake of this gospel,”¹⁹ that is true as far as it goes. The Scriptures do have authority for the sake of the Gospel, though not only for the sake of the Gospel. But if he were to carry that further and say, the Scriptures have authority only because of the Gospel, that would be error.

He does say:

There is no such thing as “a primary” purpose of Scripture, for the use of that term implies a “secondary” or even a “tertiary” purpose to Scripture. Jesus knows no such level of “purposes.” The *sole* purpose of the Scriptures is to make people wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39). The Scriptures are “rightly used *only* when they are read from the perspective of justification by faith and the *proper* distinction between law and gospel” (emphasis added). The Scriptures are rightly used only when they are searched to find in them the gospel, namely, the life, the death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ “for me.” Certainly this “searching” also uncovers divine words of law and judgment, and these words have their rightful say about us sinners and even about Christ, who suffered on the cross as “the world’s greatest sinner” (Luther). Nevertheless, the law is to be rightly distinguished from the gospel so that the gospel receives its greatest clarity in contrast to the law and reveals how the gospel speaks a word against the divine law for the sake of faith in Christ alone.²⁰

This gospel reductionism further shrinks the Word of God. By Dr. Becker’s theory, God no longer is allowed to, or if He is allowed, He no longer has any interest in saying anything to his beloved creatures besides the Gospel, even though other things could be beneficial and spoken from kindly generosity. He says:

One may certainly affirm the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures to be the only infallible rule of Christian faith and life, because they teach faithfully and with clarity the truth of the gospel which God wanted recorded for the sake of creating and sustaining faith in Christ, but the entirety of the Bible cannot serve as that infallible rule.²¹

He says:

Not every individual statement or assertion in the Bible is consistent with the gospel. Every reader of the Christian Bible ought to distinguish between what is incidental or peripheral within the Bible and what is essential and central to its overall message and purpose. The gospel about Christ, which is attested in diverse ways within the Scriptures, is the key that unlocks the meaning of the whole of Scripture and allows its individual parts to be understood in relation to that biblical whole.²²

It is true that the Gospel is a key that unlocks the meaning of the whole Scripture. That is an insufficient basis, however, for concluding that statements inconsistent with the Gospel are not God's Word and hence not Scripture. The Law is God's Word, it is Scripture, and it has uses.

He says,

Of course sorting out the competing and conflicting claims within the various sources of Christian theology requires careful attention to the issue of the prioritizing of sources and norms within theology and of discerning wherein the truth truly lies. Here the witness of the apostle Paul to "the truth of the gospel" is helpful (Gal. 2.5, 14). He acknowledged that even within the Scriptures themselves not everything is normative for contemporary Christian faith and practice, that even the key apostle of Jesus, namely, Peter, could err in a matter of faithful practice, and that the church itself could become corrupted and act contrary to the truth of the gospel. The gospel promise, then, really is the central focus for Christian theology, and the concern for it will always distinguish a properly conservative theology from those that deny or disregard it. A truly orthodox and conservative theology is concerned for the truth of the gospel and the sound teaching that flows from it; yet such a theology is also properly liberal in that it truly liberates individuals from sin, death, and the power of evil and liberates them for loving service in the world. While Christian, academic theology will take its primary cues from the biblical gospel, it will also be open to other insights, insofar as these overlap with its own proper concerns and goals and assist it in the task of clarifying the truth claims within its subject matter.

The supposed logic of this is that, since the Bible correctly tells us that Peter erred, therefore the Bible errs, and because the Bible correctly tells us that the Church errs, therefore the Bible errs. Further, we can do better than the Bible at avoiding error by judging the Bible using the Gospel. By holding to the Gospel, we can filter the errors out of the Bible. This is what academics produce?

He says,

What difference does it make to our salvation from sin and death by faith in Jesus Christ, if the story of Adam and Eve is best understood figuratively, or if the Israelites came out of Egypt on wet ground, or if Moses' lifting up of the bronze serpent can be understood both symbolically and as an historical event? "Am I really expected to hold that my salvation through Jesus Christ is somehow related to, perhaps even dependent upon, an unequivocal assertion that once there really was salvation through a brazen serpent for the Israelites in the wilderness? If [this] is so, then the historicity and factuality of all matters recorded in the Bible as a necessary tenet of faith antecedes any subsequent distinction between Law and Gospel." Is the virgin birth of Jesus in and of itself necessary as an element in or presupposition of our salvation? It may well be, and I think it is, but its relation to the gospel is different from the issues in the other questions here. What if some of the miracles of Jesus are also meant to be understood figuratively? Is their "happenedness" the key issue or is not this issue, too, only significant in relation to John's statement about the sole purpose of Scripture? Even the demons know historical facts. What they lack is faith in Christ.²³

What difference does it make if Jesus' miracles were figurative? Let John the Baptist and Jesus tell us.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

John heard about the deeds of the Christ, not figurative stories. Jesus said, tell John what you hear and see, not figurative stories. John was not expected to believe because the figuratively blind received their figurative sight, even though those miracles pointed beyond themselves to the spiritually blind receiving their spiritual sight. Jesus encouraged John to believe because of the Becker-distained "happenedness" of the miracle, the factualness of it. The same is true for the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, and the dead being raised. What good could it have done for Jesus to proclaim himself the resurrection and the life if his raising people from the dead had been only figurative? While happenedness is not the key issue, it remains an issue, and it is the basis on which Jesus sustained the faith of the greatest prophet ever while he suffered in prison. Do we have to suffer as much before we come to understand why, for people who do suffer for the faith, happenedness matters?

In the name of upholding the Gospel, Gospel reductionism abolishes the Gospel, because even the greatest prophet, John, would be left with nothing supporting his faith in prison.

What becomes of the faith if we remove all the words of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed that make claims of historical and biographical fact, claims of happenedness? Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, buried. Did the Apostles go into all the world and get themselves martyred for figurative claims, and would the world kill them for figurative claims? Look at the figurative claims the world of that day made for their own, many gods. They had little problem with figurative claims and their pantheons usually had room for one more. No, the factualness and happenedness of Jesus are key parts of what discredited the pantheons and therefore got the Apostles killed. A factual Jesus exposed the fraud of a figurative Zeus.

Science

After all the shrinkage of the Word already observed, science becomes another basis for further shrinkage. Dr. Becker says,

Theologians today will continue to make use of the Bible as the principal source of Christian theology, at least if they desire to maintain the particular identity and integrity of Christian teaching. But the Bible cannot be the sole source of Christian theology. Other sources factor in to the theological task, even if they have only a subordinate role to play in the articulation of theological understanding. If post-liberal theologians are correct to stress that the Christian theologian must take his or her primary bearings from the particularities of the biblical revelation, especially the gospel promise, that revelation is never the sole factor in the theological enterprise.²⁴

He says,

Historical investigation of the biblical texts, coupled with an understanding of contemporary cosmological knowledge, serves to clarify the nature of the Christian doctrine of creation. In this light one must conclude that the Christian doctrine of creation does not entail the acceptance of biblical expressions of cosmology as literal descriptions of fact, such as the outdated view that the earth is immovable or that it rests on pillars or that the world was created over the course of six actual days in the recent past. The “limiting power” or “clarifying power” of these additional extra-biblical sources/ resources thus shapes the formulation of church teaching.²⁵

This reasoning makes the error of conflation. It combines two things that are different into one, and then treats them as being the same. Biblical statements about the earth being immovable or resting on pillars occur in types of writing that are given to figures of speech. People who built faulty cosmologies by overlooking that were wrong. For example, Psalm 75:2:

When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants,
it is I who keep steady its pillars. Selah

Given that this is poetry, rather than legislation, adjudication, narration, genealogy, etc., we could have been alert to the fact that this is a figure of speech, and science need play no part in us realizing that.

That says little, however, about what we should take away from other writings in the Bible using other types of writing not usually very given to figures of speech. Because some people gave a natural reading to figures of speech, should we give figurative readings to natural speech? Is that what science does?

He says,

If there is an apparent conflict between natural data and a straightforward, literal interpretation of Scripture, then the interpreter needs to re-examine his or her interpretation of Scripture and keep an open, humble posture towards the self-correction of scientific theories within science itself. We need not try to re-interpret the data of nature to fit with a non-critical reading of biblical cosmology.²⁶

The clause, “self-correction of scientific theories within science itself” is interesting. It admits that science errs and needs correction. It claims a superiority of self-correction. It presupposes that biblical interpretation lacks self-correction. In the example above about the earth resting on pillars, no science was needed to correct the faulty interpretation. Orthodox hermeneutics themselves, consistently applied, self-corrects the faulty interpretation.

The statement, “We need not try to re-interpret the data of nature to fit with a non-critical reading of biblical cosmology” exposes arrogance. By that statement, while the Bible needs to be reinterpreted, the data of nature does not. We obstinately can stick to our interpretation of the data of nature. That needs no review.

He says,

Obviously that means that the Christian doctrine of creation must accept what the sciences tell us about the origin of the universe from the Big Bang and the evolution of life on the planet, but likewise the sciences ought to remain open to Christian theological insights about metaphysics, the reality of God, the nature of God's ongoing involvement in creation, the origin of life, the nature of human life, and the nature of faith commitments in the sciences and theology.²⁷

The word "obviously" is a placeholder in the statement where a reason should be given, but never is. Why is that obvious, and if it is obvious, why is it so hard to say the reason?

Probably the explanation is that stating the reason would open the claim to examination. The Big Bang is current orthodoxy in science, but scientific orthodoxies change, and Dr. Becker himself already has assured us that we have to reinterpret Scripture because of scientific self-correction. This superiority of self-correction likely means that something will significantly modify or even displace the Big Bang Theory. Question for Dr. Becker: Are there no reputable scientists already modifying or challenging the Big Bang? Is it obvious that self-correcting modifications of the Big Bang won't make it end up looking a lot like:

For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm. (Psalm 33:9)

He asks,

How many people in the past three hundred years have rejected the Christian faith, or have never given it a second thought, because they were told, or they thought, they had to accept a literalistic reading of Genesis (and similar biblical texts with cosmological connections) as an essential element of that faith, when all the physical evidence and rational argument goes against such a literalistic understanding?²⁸

Many reject the Christian faith, and that is a grievous fact. But Dr. Becker's explanation of the problem overlooks some core Lutheran understandings. First, as Luther explains the Third Article of the Creed,

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

The weakness of our reason, our inability to believe in Jesus by our reason, is panoramic and not localized to the doctrine of creation. People who have rejected Christ and say it is because of the doctrine of creation are giving their self-accounting of their unbelief. Are they capable of an accurate diagnosis, or so free of sin to give an honest answer? Their self-report is not necessarily the truth.

Further, it is something of a slight against the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit calls someone by

the Gospel, enlightens them with his gifts, sanctifies and keeps them in the true faith, do reason's doubts about creation have more power than the Holy Spirit? Yes, grace is resistible. But we ought to be more careful what we say about the relative powers of our reason and the Holy Spirit's gifts.

Dr. Becker speaks of the scandal of the LCMS mind because it believes the traditional doctrine of creation, and he talks as if that scandal is the reason for unbelief. But Paul identifies the cross as the scandal and offense, and the cross as the reason for his being persecuted, and not creation as the scandal or the reason for persecution. Galatians 5:11.

Dr. Becker is an excellent exemplar of the problem with missionalism as an ism. He says,

Issues surrounding creation/evolution and biblical interpretation are missional, evangelistic issues, especially for teachers and administrators in the schools of the LCMS. A basic understanding of and sensitivity to scientific knowledge is essential for the future of the church's mission to people in a scientifically-informed culture.²⁹

So, we should change doctrine by backing into it from market research? We should change the doctrine of creation to what sells best?

Finally coming into range with how shrinking the Word serves ordination of women, Dr. Becker says:

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.³⁰

Notice, he did not ask about scientific integrity. He asked about theological integrity. In his theory, theological integrity depends on science, not Scripture.

Culture

Dr. Becker further shrinks the Word of God to conform to culture and society, to the day and age in which we live. He says,

The cultural-historical and theological assumptions of 1 Tim. 2:8-15 are anachronistic and opaque. First, this text includes specific cultural applications which are clearly out-of-date with basic western societies. For example, who today is opposed to women braiding their hair (v. 9) or wearing gold jewelry, pearls, or "expensive" clothes (v. 9)? The cultural assumption of "subordination" of wives to husbands (vv. 10-11) is also far from a universal assumption in western democracies. While the principle of expressing "proper reverence for God" (v. 10) remains normative, the specific ways in which this principle is to be applied have changed.³¹

Further, he says,

Just because something is taught or even commanded in Scripture does not mean that that teaching or command is normative for contemporary evangelical practice. Other factors come into play as well, and these other factors may override the specific scriptural mandate. Attention must be given to the change of situation that has taken place between a first-century Mediterranean setting and that of a twenty-first-century American or European cultural setting.³²

Here again, he uses conflation. The texts about the braiding of hair, the wearing of jewelry, and expensive clothes are not explained by Paul using the same reasons as he does concerning the roles of husbands and wives, or the same reasons as he does concerning qualification for ordination into the office of public ministry. As to the two latter matters, Paul provides two grounds that are not culture bound, grounds that have nothing to do with first century Mediterranean culture, and grounds that twenty first century Europe and North America do not change. He bases them on (1) creation, and (2) fall. This reveals why Dr. Becker had to destroy the doctrine of creation to stand any chance of selling his theory of women's ordination.

But that leaves the doctrine of the fall into sin. He has to change that too, and he does. He says,

The character of the historical origin of sin must be reinterpreted. While the advent of sin is to be traced to the first hominids who disobeyed God's will, it is not necessary to trace that origin to "Adam and Eve" having eaten from a tree in an actual place called "the Garden of Eden" several thousand years ago.³³

Leaving aside for the moment his mishandling of Genesis, Dr. Becker sets himself up as an interpreter of Genesis superior to Paul, for Paul says:

For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. (1 Timothy 2:14)

Dr. Becker is to be commended for avoiding the use of a false caricature used by others. There are others who support ordination of women who portray Paul as somehow painting Eve as a worse sinner than Adam or Eve as temptress of Adam, and that bad portrayal allows them to convince people that Paul's whole argument is wrong. But Paul never made that argument. He did not say the Eve tempted Adam or that Eve was a worse sinner. He only distinguishes them with regard to the fall in one respect, that Eve was deceived and Adam not. If anything, that probably makes Adam worse. The thing is, though, deception relates to teaching and hence to ordination.

In the structure of argument, however, where others use the caricature and fail because it is a caricature, Dr. Becker uses ... nothing. And even if Genesis is myth, even as myth, in the text Eve still says, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Doesn't the deception in the myth have even mythological significance? That is why Dr. Becker, more astute than many, doesn't deal with it, because just here, so many go from the frying pan to the fire. Question for Dr. Becker: What is the mythological significance of Eve's being deceived and Adam not?

Provisionalist Concept of Truth

The shrinkage of God's Word continues. It does not stop with the Big Bang, evolution of species, twenty first century culture, or indeed, anything. Dr. Jack D. Kilcrease illuminates how Dr. Becker has posited a provisionalist concept of truth.

He is saying that secular science and culture limits what the Bible can and cannot say. Nevertheless, he is wise enough to realize that secular science cannot disprove everything in the Bible. In his mind, it has disproved 7 days of creation and literal Adam and Eve, so we can't believe in those anymore. It hasn't disproven the virgin birth and the Trinity, so we can keep those, for now. Beyond the difficulty of placing fallible human sciences above the Word of God, he projects a provisionalist concept of the truth. In this, the articles of the faith are like all other forms of human knowledge. That is, they are believable for now, though we might stop believing them once we get more information.³⁴

Thus I have titled this overview, “Dr. Becker’s Ever-Shrinking Word of God.”

Suggested Resources

For a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of Scripture from Lutheran orthodoxy, see Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and On Scripture*, 2nd ed., trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009).

For a definitive treatment of Gospel reductionism, see David P. Scaer, “[The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod](#),” *The Springfielder* 40 #2 (September 1976): 107-118.

For the official LCMS statement on Scripture, *A Statement of Scripture and Confessional Principles*, Article IV, “[Holy Scripture](#).”

For a competent and trustworthy review of Dr. Becker’s book, *Fundamental Theology*, see Jack D. Kilcrease, “[Book Review: Fundamental Theology](#),” *Logia*, April 8, 2015.

¹ Dr. Becker is on the roster of ordained clergy of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. He is an impressively accomplished Professor at Valparaiso University. He has done fill-in or vacancy work in congregations, including teaching confirmands. He publicly teaches a variety of doctrines that are, to put it politely, at variance from those of the Synod. These teachings touch on the office of public ministry, creation, the order of creation, the fall, sin, Scripture, and I don’t know what all (but I keep reading more of it, and it’s voluminous). See of his writings, e.g., Curriculum Vitae of Dr. Matthew Becker ([DOC format](#) | [PDF format](#)). See, for example, *Fundamental Theology: A Protestant Perspective* (New York: T & T Clark, 2014); “[The Scandal of the LCMS Mind](#)” (revised), *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 165-184. “[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#),” *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013) (also at *Transverse Markings* [here](#), August 20, 2013); “[A Case for Female Pastors and Theologians](#),” in *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 126-140; “[An Arbitrary Confessional Basis in the LCMS \(Pt. 1\)](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, July 8, 2014; “[An Arbitrary Confessional Basis in the LCMS \(Pt. 2\)](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, July 8, 2014; “[An Arbitrary Confessional Basis in the LCMS \(Pt. 3\)](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, July 8, 2014; “[A Letter from President Harrison to the CTCR](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, June 12, 2013; “[Creationism and the Doctrine of Creation in the LCMS](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, May 14, 2013; “[The Being of Adam, the New Adam, and the Ontology of Pastors](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, August 1, 2011; “[Further Comments on the Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Ministry](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, June 18, 2011; “[Concern over the Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Ministry in the LCMS](#),” *Transverse Markings: One Theologian's Notes*, May 18, 2011. “[For the Record](#),” *The Daystar Journal*, March 22, 2015. Also see, Matt Harrison, “[Regarding a recent decision of a panel not to proceed with charges regarding a public false teacher in the LCMS](#),” *Witness, Mercy, Life Together*, January 26, 2015. “When a public teacher on the roster of Synod can without consequence publicly advocate the ordination of women (even participate vested in the installation of an ELCA clergy person), homosexuality, the errancy of the Bible, the

historical-critical method, open communion, communion with the Reformed, evolution, and more, then the public confession of the Synod is meaningless. I am saying that if my Synod does not change its inability to call such a person to repentance and remove such a teacher where there is no repentance, then we are liars and our confession is meaningless. I do not want to belong to such a synod, much less lead it. I have no intention of walking away from my vocation. I shall rather use it and, by the grace of God, use all the energy I have to call this Synod to fidelity to correct this situation." Scott Diekmann, "[Rev. Dr. Matthew Becker: Nature Interprets Scripture](#)," *Stand Firm*, April 16, 2012. Larry Beane, "[Quid Est Veritas?](#)" Gottesdienst Online, March 23, 2015.

² See, e.g., Matthew Becker, "[An Argument for Women Pastors and Theologians](#)," in *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 126-140

³ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points on Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Journal* (Summer 2013).

⁴ Dr. Jack D. Kilcrease, comment in thread on Confessional Lutheran Fellowship, Facebook, April 8, 2015, 11:11 a.m. used from the closed group by permission of Dr. Kilcrease.

⁵ *Fundamental Theology*, Kindle Locations 6467-6469).

⁶ *Fundamental Theology* (Kindle Locations (6459-6461).

⁷ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013) (also at *Transverse Markings* [here](#), August 20, 2013).

⁸ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 6639-6640).

⁹ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013).

¹⁰ Matthew Becker, "[The Scandal of the LCMS Mind](#)" (revised), *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 165-184.

¹¹ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013) (also at *Transverse Markings* [here](#), August 20, 2013).

¹² Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013) (also at *Transverse Markings* [here](#), August 20, 2013).

¹³ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 6648-6656).

¹⁴ *Fundamental Theolog*, (Kindle Locations 6616-6617).

¹⁵ Bryan Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass*, (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove, 1982), pp. 28 and 20.

¹⁶ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 6347-6355).

¹⁷ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013).

¹⁸ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 6621-6623).

¹⁹ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013).

²⁰ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013).

²¹ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 7181-7183).

²² *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 7112-7116)

²³ Matthew Becker, "[Talking Points about Doctrinal Authority in the LCMS](#)," *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2013).

²⁴ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 6295-6299).

²⁵ *Fundamental Theology*, Perspective (Kindle Locations 6815-6819).

²⁶ *Fundamental Theology*, Perspective (Kindle Locations 9888-9891).

²⁷ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 9981-9985).

²⁸ Matthew Becker, “[The Scandal of the LCMS Mind](#)” (revised), *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 165-184, at n. 66.

²⁹ Matthew Becker, “[The Scandal of the LCMS Mind](#)” (revised), *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 165-184, at n. 67.

³⁰ Matthew Becker, “[An Argument for Women Pastors and Theologians](#),” in *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 126-140.

³¹ Matthew Becker, “[An Argument for Women Pastors and Theologians](#),” in *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 126-140.

³² Matthew Becker, “[An Argument for Women Pastors and Theologians](#),” in *The Daystar Reader* (Portland, Ore.: Daystar.net, 2010), 126-140.

³³ *Fundamental Theology*, (Kindle Locations 9920-9922).

³⁴ Dr. Jack D. Kilcrease, comment in thread on Confessional Lutheran Fellowship, Facebook, used from the closed group by permission of Dr. Kilcrease.