

Tapestry or Travesty

by Dr. Matthew L. Becker

The Creator's Tapestry: Scriptural Perspectives on Man-Woman Relationships in Marriage and the Church arrived in today's mail. This CTCR Report, adopted in Dec 2009, attempts to fulfill the 1995 LCMS Synod Resolution 3-10 that called upon the Commission "to prepare a comprehensive study of the scriptural relationship of man and woman."

One would think that after nearly 15 years, the CTCR could have developed a report that would actually engage the topic in a comprehensive manner. Such comprehensiveness ought to have taken into account not only the relevant biblical materials and persuasive theological reflection on those materials by contemporary theologians, but also the most important data from the natural and social sciences that clearly impact a contemporary theological understanding of these materials and their teaching about human beings.

Unfortunately, this 58-page report is neither comprehensive nor theologically insightful. It merely summarizes superficial and literalistic readings of the first chapters of Genesis and the usual New Testament "proof-texts" that people have used over the past centuries to keep slaves and women in their subordinate places. Frequent reference to previous CTCR reports on women in the church ensures that this report contains nothing new. What it bears witness to is an LCMS canon law tradition that will help to keep the church body entrenched in the positions it has taken with regard to men and women in church and society.

What the report concludes about the practice of veiling women in Greco-Roman culture (p. 33) could just as easily be said of the report itself: it contains little that is meaningful for people who live today in western societies.

Why is the report mostly meaningless? For starters, the modern situation of the readership is totally ignored. In what world, or better, in what remoteness from the world, do the authors of this report really live? While aspects of the report might have meant something to some (Jewish) Christian communities in the early centuries of the church, anyone who actually lives in the post-Enlightenment, post-Revolutionary scientific and political world of today will find the report mostly conceptually empty.

Is not the first task of a theological report for the contemporary church to provide insight for contemporary people? But how can the report do this when it does not take any notice of the actual world in which people in North America live? Although the report contains a section entitled "Man and Woman in the Contemporary World," there is no evidence that the authors of the report actually took into account modern data and perspectives on sex, marriage, and gender, let alone biology, genetics, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, political theory, and the other natural, human, and social sciences that have a bearing on how we ought to understand the genres and meanings of those biblical texts that provide theological understanding of human beings today. Such scholarly insight cannot be legitimately ignored--and yet that is precisely what this report does. While we know that the CTCR allowed a few actual women to speak to it, there is little evidence in the report itself to suggest that this testimony had any effect on the final report.

In the half hour I needed to read the report this afternoon, I kept scratching my head in bewilderment. The sections on Genesis 1-3 contain no systematic-theological reflection. There is certainly no evidence that the authors of the report have taken into account any extra-biblical knowledge and perspectives that ought to inform a contemporary formulation of the Christian doctrine of creation and theological anthropology. Sensitivity to biblical language and literary genre and to extra-biblical knowledge that has a direct bearing on how we are to understand this language today is missing. (Surely in the 15 years it took to create this report some time could have been set aside to listen and to learn from experts in the natural and human sciences so that the final report would be up-to-date and informed.) I cannot detect any systematic theological input in the document, though there are some exegetical insights.

To be sure, while the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are the sole judge and rule of doctrine and theology, Scripture is never alone: it is always interpreted in specific contexts, which themselves shape the formulation of doctrine and the expressions used in Christian theology. By ignoring this contemporary dynamic, the report is mostly meaningless.

A few final comments: The section entitled "God Renews Man and Woman" is particularly inadequate. It contains nothing about how God renews the man or woman who is not married and who will not marry. Is God's design that all people should marry and have a family? Where is this clearly stated in Scripture? And yet this appears to be an implication of the report.

Paul's teaching, based on his view that the Lord would return imminently within Paul's own lifetime, is that marriage ought to be avoided, if at all possible. What does the report have to say about this? Nothing. Jesus' teaching, too, about the end of the world has implications for marriage. "Let anyone who can make himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom do so..." But this teaching, based as it is on the eschatological views of Jesus, is left unexplored in the report. (BTW, if I were a single person, I could easily conclude, "This CTCR report is not for me.")

Not surprising, the report also contains the usual sections on "order of creation" and "headship" and "subordination." For my criticisms of these concepts, I will simply direct the reader to my chapter in The Daystar Reader, "A Case for Female Pastors and Theologians." I will let others decide if the report's position on these matters is more persuasive than my criticisms of them.

If this report reflects the best theological thinking in the LCMS today, then it only confirms to me that the discipline of theology in our church body is clearly inadequate. What we really need is a foundational document that presents an adequate understanding of the Christian doctrine of creation for people living today, that sets forth a theological anthropology that is informed (but not ultimately normed) by the natural and social sciences, and that guides men and women into deeper reflection about God's intentions for men and women in God's creation. Such a foundational document, if it is truly to be foundational, would make clear to modern people, both in and outside of the Christian church, what the Christian faith is and what that faith entails as a consequence for the Christian life.

Frankly, for some time now the LCMS has been tossing out official documents on women, whose contents, if ever insisted upon in the church's teaching to modern, educated unbelievers, would only serve

as an unnecessary obstacle to that faith. That's a travesty, not a tapestry.

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