

A Diet of Worms and Two Plates on the Table Today

"[The Bereans examined] the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."—Acts 17:11

When Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms (pronounced *dee-ett* of *vorms*), Roman Catholic theologian Johann Maier von Eck commanded him to publically renounce the entirety of his writings, to which Luther famously replied,

*"Since Your Majesty and your lordships want a simple, clear, and true answer, I will give it. Unless I am convinced by the teachings of Holy Scripture or by sound reasoning—for I do not believe either the pope or councils alone, since they have often made mistakes and have said the exact opposite about the same point – I am tied to the Scriptures I have quoted, and by my conscience I cannot or will not recant anything. Here I stand."*¹

The term, *diet*, stands for an assembly where the emperor and princes gathered for the purpose of deliberating on the affairs of the state. *Worms*, the location of Luther's trial, was (and is) a city on the Rhine River in Germany. Dr. Paul Maier described this event, which occurred on April 18, 1521, as

*"one of the most dramatic scenes that we find in all of the history of the second millennium A.D. [for the reason that] we have not only the secular powers represented by his Imperial Majesty Charles V, and all the princes, both Catholic and Lutheran, in Germany, but also all the church people and their representatives as well."*²

In other words, both the most powerful sacred and secular authorities, and also commoners, together with those who were "high and mighty," gathered at Worms, whether inside the official hall or outside packing the streets.³ I would add to Dr. Maier's comments that the looming challenge of that day included the consideration of ultimate authority as assessed under two contexts: 1) The question of the authority of the church with respect to the secular state, and, more to the point of this essay, 2) the question of the source of ultimate authority under which Christ's Church administers its doctrines.



Luther's stated position before the *Diet* on the ultimate authority for Christian doctrine is clear and succinct. Final authority rests solely on the Word of God to the explicit exclusion of "*popes and councils*" (which he deemed to be demonstrably fallible). Pronouncements on the contents of Christian doctrine, either singularly or in assembly, must rest not on human opinion, but only on Holy Scripture.⁴

The "two plates" that I reference in my title concern two widely-disparate interpretations of Genesis 1. Both positions are embraced by orthodox Christians who hold in common the belief that

¹ Frederick Nohl. *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*. (Concordia, 2004), p. 107.

² (DVD) *A Man Named Martin*, pt. 1, *The Man*, video 4. (Lutheran Hour Ministries, 2015).

³ Painting by Anton von Werner, 1877. <https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=diet+of+worms&view=detailv2&id=05AFAA1ED12521F9304811A5734AEE001FBBDD1&selectedIndex=0&ccid=xuEsn5n1&simid=608040020259897564&thid=OIP.Mc6e12c9f99f5791ba1838df4590de229H0&ajaxhist=0>

⁴ This is the position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. ("Of the Holy Scriptures," http://www.lcms.org/doctrine/doctrinal_position).

Scripture is inerrant. For purposes of clarity, these positions are typically identified as “young-earth creationism” (YEC) and “old-earth creationism” (OEC). It is not my purpose here to argue the merits of these respective positions, either on scientific grounds or exegetically. I have written about those considerations elsewhere.⁵ For the sake of full disclosure, I embrace the latter position. The driving purpose of this essay is instead to focus on clarifying the grounds upon which Christians embrace these two positions. Now one might ask, isn’t that obvious? While it may seem so on first consideration that adherents to both positions rest their convictions on the Bible, it is my view that there is a subtle, and yet profound, difference between the ways in which these respective positions are defended.

In support of my perceptions, I highlight certain aspects of my personal experiences within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In one official LCMS document, with respect to matters of interpreting Genesis, the following challenge is issued: “**Unless there is compelling reason on the basis of the biblical texts themselves...we are to believe God created the world in six 24-hour days**” (boldface mine).⁶ I have directly risen to that challenge by writing and disseminating to Synodical leaders my heavily-referenced essay, “The Biblical Demand to Take another Look: Ten Exegetical Reasons the Creation Days of Genesis are Non-24-Hour.”⁷ Nevertheless ecclesiastical leaders have almost unanimously (with three exceptions)⁸ refused to investigate my arguments.⁹ At the very least my essay has been ignored, while one seminary professor actually expressed outright contempt for my having requested from him a critique of *Biblical Demand*.¹⁰ It is not my purpose here to whine and rant. To the contrary, I gladly acknowledge that the persistent resistance by LCMS leaders has only served to sharpen my scholarship through its prodding me to seek critique from scholars outside of our Synod. By this means I have corrected occasional errors and weaknesses in my writings as these have been brought to light through intellectual engagements with experts in this field of study. Is this indeed not how theological reflection is supposed to happen within the body of Christ? Yet sadly I must judge the resistance of the LCMS to engage in these deliberations to be directly contrary to the spirit of Luther and his reformation.

While it is true that Martin Luther embraced YEC, I judge that his over-all posture in this matter (including how he regarded the facts of nature) would approve revisiting that interpretation of Genesis 1 in light of new scientific evidence.¹¹ For example, far from pitting revelation *against* scientific learning, Luther stated in his lectures on Genesis, “**The astronomers are the experts [on the sun and moon] from whom it is most convenient to get what may be discussed about these subjects**” (boldface mine).¹²

Luther didn’t take his stance at *Worms* to counter *skepticism* over the Bible, but to correct a faulty *interpretation* of Scripture that was distorted by the **imposition of ill-considered tradition**. In a manner consistent with Luther’s insistence from Scripture that the Good News of Christ be clarified in his time, I challenge my critics to prove from the same where the position that I espouse is in error. Let the debate that the LCMS first began, now ensue! In full confidence that I have not misrepresented the Bible, I hereby reaffirm that it is upon my essays¹³ that I take my stand before readers, and under God.

Pastor Gary Jensen, October 31, 2016 (O Hallows’ Eve)
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⁵ Every one of my essays can be found at my website, <http://www.christianityontheoffense.com>. My over-arching paper titled, “Assembly of Arguments Grounding Old Earth Creationism,” is a collation a wide range of my essays which address this concern from various angles.

⁶ www.lcms.hughes-stl.com/pages/internal.asp?NavID=2210

⁷ The Biblical Demand to Take Another Look. <http://www.christianityontheoffense.com>

⁸ Paul Maier (Ibid. p. 3, n. 6) and Joel Lehenbauer (p. 3, n. 3). Also an LCMS professor who critiqued *Biblical Demand*, yet who wishes to remain anonymous (“Assembly of Arguments,” Op.cit. (6), (“Critique by univ. prof.”).

⁹ *Biblical Demand*. Ibid, p. 3, incl. note 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, n. 7.

¹¹ Ibid. Section VIII.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. *Luther’s Works: Genesis*. v. I. (Concordia, 1958), p. 41.

¹³ Op.cit. (7).

