DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSITY

IN THE HISTORY OF DOCTRINE

Introduction

In the preface to his bestselling classic, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes the place of "mere" Christianity in "the household of the faith" (Gal 6:10 NASB) as "a hall out of which doors open into several rooms."[1] The rooms are representative of the different Christian denominations: Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, and so forth. Lewis describes his purpose in writing *Mere Christianity* in terms of trying to persuade non-Christians to come into the hall. But of course he recognizes that this is merely the beginning—and not the end—of the matter. After all, the purpose of bringing people into the hall is that they might then choose one of the rooms. But how does one decide which room to live in? According to Lewis, the key question to ask is not whether one likes the music or the service, but whether one believes that the doctrines taught in that room are really true.[2] But this raises yet another question: Why, if all the rooms are Christian, do they teach and believe different doctrines? How did this situation come about? And how do we account for such doctrinal development throughout the history of the church? The present essay will offer an evangelical response to last of these questions.

Doctrinal Development in Scripture

Some scholars have argued against the very notion of an orthodox development of doctrine. In their view, "any so-called development of orthodox doctrine is corruption, deviation

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[1] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), xi.

[2] Ibid.

into unorthodoxy, or simply heresy."[3] According to Craig Blaising, this view "received its classical expression in the well-known dictum of Vincent of Lerins: 'One must be careful to believe what has been believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.'"[4] But upon reflection, the view that there has not been *any* orthodox doctrinal development seems clearly mistaken.

In the first place, although it is not generally regarded as part of the history of Christian doctrine, we can soften the notion of development a bit by reminding ourselves of the doctrinal growth which took place between the Old and New Testament. Consider, for example, the doctrine of God. The Old Testament took great pains to stress the "oneness" of God. Moses wrote, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4 NIV).[5] Of course, the New Testament nowhere denies that God is one. Indeed, Jesus explicitly affirms it (Mark 12:29). At the same time, there does seem to be development in the New Testament doctrine of God. For while the "oneness" of God is reaffirmed, we also learn that this one God, in the mystery of His being, subsists as three distinct (though inter-related) persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[6] What is more, it is clear that these three persons should not be conceived modalistically, as successive revelatory "roles" which God might play.[7] For at the baptism of Jesus, we have all three persons present simultaneously: the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is incarnate upon the earth, and the Holy Spirit is descending upon Jesus "like a dove" (Mark 1:9-11).

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[3] Craig Blaising refers to this as the "No Development" position. See Craig A. Blaising, "Developing Dispensationalism (Part 1): Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," *Bibliotheca sacra* 145, no. 578 (1988): 136.

[4] Vincent of Lerins *Commonitorium* 2; cited in Blaising, "Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," 136.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural citations within this paper will be taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

[6] Scripture affirms the deity of each of the three persons: the Father in Matthew 11:25, the Son in John 1:1-18, and the Holy Spirit in Acts 5:3-4. Of course, these are just a few of the many examples which could be listed.

[7] Craig A. Blaising, "Monarchianism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 727.

Although the Old Testament revelation of God is entirely *consistent* with the doctrine of the Trinity, this doctrine is nowhere clearly taught in its pages—at least not in a sense that could be easily discerned by someone unfamiliar with the New Testament.[8] It appears, therefore, that God has chosen to reveal Himself to mankind *progressively*, over a long period of time. Indeed, significant development can be discerned between the Old Testament and the New in virtually *every* area of doctrine—God, Satan, demons, salvation, the Messiah, the afterlife, and so forth. The doctrine of *progressive revelation*, therefore, and the orthodox doctrinal development which resulted from it, is important to bear in mind as we examine the issue of doctrinal development in church history.

Doctrinal Development in Church History

Having established the fact of doctrinal development in Scripture, let us now turn our attention to what we might call *post-biblical* doctrinal development. Has this sort of development also occurred? If so, then how are we to recognize and account for it?

In the first place, it seems undeniable that orthodox doctrinal development has taken place throughout the history of the church. For example, consider Luis Molina's remarkable reconciliation of divine sovereignty, providence, and foreknowledge with libertarian human freedom by means of the doctrine of divine middle knowledge.[9] This doctrine was not explicitly formulated until the sixteenth century and yet it would be difficult to deny that the doctrine is perfectly consistent with orthodoxy. Or consider John Nelson Darby's development of

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[8] This is one reason why there was so much conflict between Jews and Eastern Orthodox Christians over the doctrine of God. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, vol. 2, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 203-04.

[9] Some of the more important volumes for getting a handle on Molina's doctrine of divine middle knowledge include the following: William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez*, vol. 7, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, ed. A. J. Vanderjagt (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. William P. Alston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Alfred J. Freddoso, "Introduction," in *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Luis De Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

dispensationalism, including his doctrine of a "secret rapture" of the church prior to the great tribulation.[10] As developed by Darby, these doctrines didn't arise until the nineteenth century. And yet, if we are not to reject them as unorthodox, it seems that we must grant at least *some* place to orthodox doctrinal development.

This raises an important question: How do we distinguish legitimate (or orthodox) doctrinal developments, from those which are illegitimate (or unorthodox)? For example, it seems to me that while Molina's doctrine of divine middle knowledge and Darby's doctrine of dispensationalism are examples of legitimate doctrinal development, the Roman Catholic doctrines of papal infallibility and the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven are examples of illegitimate development. But if this is so, then how do we distinguish one from the other?

First, as evangelicals we want to argue (I think) that legitimate doctrinal developments have some reasonably firm basis in the teaching of Scripture. As Craig Blaising has observed, if our chief source for doing theology is Scripture, then Scripture should be accorded the primary place of authority. He goes on to make a very important point. "If this primary authority is shifted to some other source, the doctrinal development may well move in the direction of apostasy."[11] On the other hand, those doctrinal developments that look to Scripture as their primary authority are much more likely to be sound and orthodox.[12]

Second, it seems to me that the proposed development should also be consistent with the rule of faith. According to M. E. Osterhaven, in the early church the rule of faith was

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[10] For helpful overviews of John Nelson Darby, dispensationalism, and the pretribulation rapture of the church, please see Robert G. Clouse, "Rapture of the Church," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 908-10; W. A. Hoffecker, "Darby, John Nelson," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 292-93; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, Rev. and expanded. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007); Ernest Robert Sandeen, "John Nelson Darby and Dispensationalism," in *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 59-80.

[11] Blaising, "Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," 138.

[12] Ibid.

essentially a summary of the essence of Christian beliefs, which was derived from Scripture.[13] The importance of having such a rule became apparent in debating with heretics, for heretics, like the orthodox, would often appeal to Scripture (although they often twisted its meaning to suit their purposes). The rule of faith, therefore, in providing a "clear, succinct statement" of Christian beliefs, helped ward off unjustified appeals to Scripture in support of heretical doctrines.[14] Of course, one of the things that makes the rule of faith difficult to apply is that its content has changed over time. Osterhaven notes that in contrast to usage by the early church, "later usage came to include the whole body of official church teaching." Since most Roman Catholic theologians adopted this later usage, "the Reformers of the sixteenth century proclaimed Scripture alone to be the 'only rule of faith and practice,' a position into which they were driven when they repudiated beliefs and practices for which they found no warrant in the Bible."[15]

This can help explain, at least in part, why Protestants and Roman Catholics can each see themselves as justified in their rejection (Protestants) or acceptance (Roman Catholics) of the doctrines of papal infallibility and the bodily assumption of Mary. From the standpoint of Protestant theology, neither of these doctrines has adequate support either from Scripture or the rule of faith. But from the perspective of Roman Catholicism, the doctrines are consistent with the rule of faith because they conform to "official church teaching."[16] Nevertheless, since we are here concerned to offer an *evangelical* argument for doctrinal development, it seems to me that we are justified in regarding these particular Roman Catholic doctrines as both unbiblical and unorthodox when measured against the standards of Scripture and the rule of faith.

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[13] See M. Eugene Osterhaven, "Rule of Faith," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 961-62.

[14] Ibid., 961.

[15] Ibid., 962. Of course, the issue was a bit more complicated than this statement might lead us to believe. See, for example, the discussion in Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 83-87.

[16] Osterhaven, "Rule of Faith," 962.

On the other hand, if we apply these standards to Molina's doctrine of divine middle knowledge and Darby's doctrine of dispensationalism, it seems that both should be recognized as legitimate doctrinal developments. For both of these doctrines can appeal to specific scriptural passages interpreted in a manner that is consistent with the rule of faith as it was taught in the early church.

Recognizing and Accounting for Doctrinal Development:

Biblical Arguments

So how do we *account* for such doctrinal developments? First, and most important, the Bible appears to anticipate such development. Consider Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. Using himself as an example of an "expert builder" (v. 10), he describes how he laid the only legitimate foundation for any Christian church through his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (v. 11). But while Paul had laid this very secure "doctrinal foundation," someone else was now building upon it.[17] And this, Paul warned, was a project that required great care and skill, as well as quality building materials, if it was to survive the fiery test to which the Lord would eventually subject it (v. 13; see also 2 Cor 5:10). Paul described the sort of building materials which one might use as "gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw" (v. 12).

So what relevance does this passage have for the issue of doctrinal development? According to David Lowery, the building materials listed in this passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, they could refer to the "quality of the builder's work," the worthiness of his motives, or the soundness (or lack thereof) of his doctrine.[18] Of course, such interpretations need not be mutually exclusive. A teacher of sound doctrine, for instance, could, *for that very reason*, be viewed as building with quality materials. Although the quality building

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[17] Harold W. Mare, "1 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein et al., vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 207.

[18] David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 511-12.

materials mentioned by the apostle should probably be understood to include *more* than just sound doctrine, the context suggests that this doctrinal element is certainly quite important. After all, the "foundation" has a clear doctrinal component, and Paul is describing someone who is "building" upon just such a foundation.[19] It thus seems entirely appropriate to see some sort of relationship between the quality of a builder's materials and the soundness of his doctrine.

The passage can thus be read (at least in part) as envisioning a process of doctrinal development, in which teachers arise who are "building" (via their teaching) upon the doctrinal foundation of the church (i.e. the gospel of Jesus Christ). Those who use quality building materials (e.g. gold, silver, costly stones) are teachers of sound doctrine, whereas those using shoddy materials (wood, hay, or straw) are teachers of false, superstitious, and harmful doctrines. Ultimately, such work will be tested before the judgment seat of Christ. But it's at least possible that it may also be tested prior to that time (e.g. by means of God's judgment expressed through a decision of the church). If we consider the matter historically, such judgment *might* look like the condemnation of certain doctrines by orthodox ecumenical councils of the church, or some other recognized body of believers. Such testing by God would serve the beneficial purpose of revealing any lack of quality in the building materials being used and could therefore become a means for removing such shoddy materials, thus leaving primarily just the silver, gold, and precious stones of the structure intact.[20]

A second example can be found in Ephesians 4:11-16. In this passage, Paul employs the metaphor of "the body of Christ" to teach certain truths which also seem relevant to our

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[19] Further support for this interpretation can be found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:20-22, Paul describes *believers* as a building, being "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (v. 20). Once again, it seems clear that there is specific doctrinal content to this foundation upon which the church is being built. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus, "the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:20), commands His followers to "go and make disciples . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Further, in Acts 2:42, we read about how those "built on the foundation of the apostles" (Eph 2:20), ". . . devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." Passages such as these seem to lend additional support to this view.

[20] I believe that this was a point made by Professor Michael Svigel during class discussion, April 8, 2010.

discussion of doctrinal development. For example, in verses 11-13 he describes Christ as giving

a variety of gifted individuals to the church, "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (v. 12).

These individuals include apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers—all of which have

(or had) teaching responsibilities in the church. Elsewhere, the church is said to be "built on the

foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph

2:20). We've seen that this foundation includes specific doctrinal content. Since evangelists,

pastors and teachers are linked with the apostles and prophets in the passage we're now

considering, it seems that they have been gifted by Christ to provide for the ongoing needs of the

church for instruction in sound doctrine.[21] This instruction is to continue, says Paul, "until we all

reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to

the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

It's important to notice that if these interpretations are correct, then the Bible itself

seems to anticipate doctrinal development throughout the history of the church. And since the

Bible is the primary authority for the evangelical theologian, this would seem to adequately

account for the phenomena of doctrinal development.[22]

Recognizing and Accounting for Doctrinal Development:
Theological Arguments

If we can adequately *account* for the development of doctrine on the basis of

Scriptural teaching, we still need to ask how we can *recognize* such development when it

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[21] Harold H. Hoehner, "Ephesians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 635.

[22] Of course, if passages like John 16:12-15 should be understood as applying not only to the apostles, but to post-apostolic Christians as well, then our case would be strengthened all the more. Regardless of how this passage should be interpreted, however, it seems that 1 John 2:27 promises all believers much the same thing. The "anointing" that we have received from Christ (or the Father) is the Holy Spirit, who is said to teach us "all things." Although this probably does not refer to the subtle nuances of Christian doctrine, it nonetheless does leave the door open for doctrinal development of some sort taking place through the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the post-apostolic community.

actually occurs. In this section I want to consider how two theologians from different traditions suggest we recognize and account for doctrinal development.

Let's first look at the work of Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic theologian. Rahner offers four ways in which we might recognize and account for the development of doctrine.[23] First, and most prosaically, doctrinal development may sometimes be nothing more than a restatement, in different words, of some originally revealed proposition. In such a case, the development (if one can really call it that) is "implicit" in the original statement.[24]

Second, sometimes development may occur by drawing out the implications of two revealed propositions via a process of syllogistic reasoning.[25] For example, we might reason as follows: 1) Scripture teaches that Jesus is God the Son incarnate. 2) But it also teaches that Jesus is fully human. 3) Therefore, Jesus must be one person with two natures—divine and human.

Third, Rahner suggests that God, as an omniscient being, is able to communicate truths, knowingly and intentionally, that may not be readily apparent to the initial recipients. The truths are in some sense *implicitly* present in the originally revealed propositional statements, and yet it may take time and changing circumstances (along with the work of God's Holy Spirit) to make those truths clear to the later recipients of His revelation. This is quite different from human speech: "A human speaker can never survey all the necessary consequences which in fact follow from his statements."[26] But things are different with God.

According to Rahner, God "is necessarily conscious of the actual vitality and dynamism of his immediate communication, and aware of all its . . . consequences. Moreover he

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[23] The following discussion on Karl Rahner is indebted to two sources: Stanley N. Gundry, "Rahner on the Development of Dogma," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15, no. 4 (1972): 207-13; Karl Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, vol. 1 (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), 39-77.

[24] Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," 57-8.

[25] Ibid., 58-60.

[26] Ibid., 60.

has from the very beginning the intention and the will to bring about its explication and to guide it in his own Spirit."[27] He then comments, "What *we* 'deduce' in this way, God has not indeed *stated* 'formally' in the initial propositions from which our deduction proceeds . . . but he has really 'com-municated' it".[28] This is a very intriguing suggestion. For it allows for genuine doctrinal development, in a normal, healthy sense, from Spirit-led deductions and interpretations of what is in some sense *implicitly* present in the original text, but nonetheless hidden from the original recipients. This is the idea of *progressive illumination* in which, by God's grace and through His guidance, each generation has something valuable to contribute to the full understanding of God's revelation. As *potential* examples of this process we might recur, once again, to Molina's doctrine of middle knowledge and Darby's doctrine of dispensationalism.[29]

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God is providentially guiding His church into all truth. By changing the historical circumstances in which new generations of Christians live and work, God is able to reveal new insights to His people from the original deposit of revelation. These insights were in some sense present in the original deposit, but could not possibly be recognized or appreciated until later generations, in different circumstances, arose to notice them. Clearly, only an omniscient, sovereign, and providential God could orchestrate such an intentional, gradual development and unfolding of doctrine, from an original deposit.[30]

Finally, Rahner suggests that new doctrinal propositions can arise out of the non-propositional religious experience *of God* among post-apostolic Christians. For example, a personal experience of God, including His love, grace and acceptance in Christ, could conceivably result in the expression of doctrinal truths which have never been previously

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[27] Ibid., 61.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Please note that I only point to these as *potential* examples. I am not making any grandiose claims for either of these doctrines.

[30] Here the metaphor of a plant, growing from an initial seed, suggests itself. For one theologian's development of this metaphor, see Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 85-86.

expressed in propositional form. To illustrate his point, Rahner invites us to reflect on the mysterious, life-changing power of human love as an analogue for our experience of the divine love:

> The lover knows of his love . . . . The knowledge is infinitely richer, simpler and denser than any body of propositions about the love could be. Yet this knowledge never lacks a certain measure of reflexive articulateness: the lover confesses his love at least to himself, 'states' at least to himself something about his love. . . . Reflexion . . . in propositions . . . is thus part of the progressive realization of love itself . . . . The progress of love is a living growth out of the original (the originally conscious) love *and* out of just what that love has itself become through a reflexive experience of itself.[31]

Once again, this strikes me as a very insightful and powerful observation, which offers yet another way to recognize and account for the orthodox development of doctrine.

Let's now turn our attention to what Craig Blaising, an evangelical theologian, has to say about how we might recognize and account for doctrinal development. We've seen that Blaising recognizes the primary authority of Scripture in "doing theology," or theological method.[32] However, after Scripture the theologian will also make use of many other sources of knowledge. These can come from tradition, culture, philosophy, the natural sciences, and any other branch of human learning. As a cultural example from the past, Blaising cites "the use of the analogy of feudal relations in Anselm's soteriological doctrine of the offense of God's honor."[33] Similarly, as our knowledge of God's general revelation in creation continues to grow and become ever more accurate and precise, then this too can contribute toward the project of orthodox doctrinal development.[34] For example, it is at least *possible* that genuine insights into the nature of man from disciplines like psychology and sociology could lead to orthodox developments in the Christian doctrine of man.

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[31] Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," 64.

[32] Blaising, "Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," 137.

[33] Ibid., 138n9.

[34] Ibid., 138.

In addition to this, Blaising also argues that developments in hermeneutics, historiography, logic, and rhetoric could all result in the orthodox development of doctrine in some form or fashion. Finally, he rightly notes that as evangelicals, we must never forget the importance of personal faith in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating truth that can also lead to orthodox doctrinal development.[35]

Conclusion

This paper has argued that doctrinal development is a fact and has attempted to show how we might recognize and account for it both biblically and theologically. We began this essay with C. S. Lewis's illustration of Christianity as a giant house with many different rooms (representing the different Christian denominations). Since the advent of Christianity in the first century, the development and diversification of doctrine has played a significant role in many of the splits and schisms within the church.

Is there any reason to hope that these divisions might yet be healed before the return of Christ? In his high-priestly prayer, Jesus asks the Father to bring his people "to complete unity" so that the world might know "that you sent me" (John 17:23). In a similar vein, Paul describes the purpose of the teaching ministry of the church as building up the body of Christ "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:13). Although the unity envisioned by Jesus and Paul is doubtless much deeper than mere doctrinal uniformity (and probably does not exclude *all* doctrinal diversity), it may nonetheless be the case that we can anticipate a future time of greater doctrinal unity than the church presently enjoys— although admittedly, this may be quite remote from the present. Be that as it may, our Lord's prayer will certainly be granted in the Father's good time. And this, I think, should encourage all of us in our theological labors. For God is graciously using teachers (like us) to build up the body of Christ and (eventually) bring all of His people to unity in the faith.

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[35] Ibid., 138-39.

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