

## THE HISTORY OF DOGMA: VOLUME 2

### Chapter 1: Historical Survey

In this chapter, Harnack briefly sketches the development of catholic dogma in the second and third centuries. He begins by claiming that the “institution” of the Catholic Church arose in the wake of the victories experienced by early Christianity over Marcionites and Gnostics.<sup>1</sup> This institution was founded upon “an ‘apostolic’ law of faith, a collection of ‘apostolic’ writings, and finally, an ‘apostolic’ organisation” (1). Once these “apostolic” standards were adopted, “whatever was to lay claim to authority in the Church” had to be consistent with them (8-9). It was at this time, notes Harnack, “that the hellenising of Christianity within the Church began in serious fashion” (9n1). In other words, this is when dogmatic development, as Harnack understands it, really took off.

Harnack sees the early development of *dogma* in generally negative terms (e.g. as the corruption of original Christianity by the interests and concerns of Greek philosophy, etc.).<sup>2</sup> In spite of this, however, he still admits that virtually everything of cultural value that we have and enjoy resulted from this “alliance” between “Christianity and antiquity” (14). Thus, for Harnack,

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (London: Williams & Norgate, 1895; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 2:1. *Please note that future references to this text will be given in parentheses within the body of the paper.*

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 2:6-14. See also G. Wayne Glick, *The Reality of Christianity: A Study of Adolf Von Harnack as Historian and Theologian*, Makers of Modern Theology, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 143-76. Glick makes the following claim concerning Harnack: “He explicitly rejects the view that original Christianity and ‘dogma’ stand in relation to each other as seed and tree; a more appropriate analogy would be that of the Johannine ‘spirit and flesh.’ Though the spirit can never be experienced unless there be a flesh to carry it, the flesh which then describes the experience can never capture and contain its essence in propositional formulas. The tragedy is that the propositions were formulated by a particular mind, the ‘Greek mind’ and then were declared to be of equal revelatory authority with the experience itself” (168).

the story of dogmatic development would seem to be something of a bittersweet affair. But as we'll see, it's still a fascinating story—and hence well worth telling all the same.

## **Chapter 2: The Setting Up of the Apostolic Standards for Ecclesiastical Christianity**

In this chapter Harnack begins to expand in much greater detail on some of the ideas briefly surveyed in the first chapter. In particular, he focuses on three momentous developments in the history of early Christianity which increasingly enabled the Catholic Church to distinguish itself from early competitors, schismatics, and heretics (e.g. the Gnostics and Marcionites). These three developments were: 1) “the transformation of the baptismal confession into the apostolic rule of faith” (20-38), 2) the collection of certain apostolic writings into an authoritative canon of Scripture which became the New Testament (38-66), and 3) “the transformation of the Episcopal office in the Church into an Apostolic office” (67-93).

Concerning the first of these developments, Harnack observes that the Church in Rome, by the middle of the second century, already had a creed which was to be professed by all those undergoing baptism (21). However, by the latter half of this century, the need for “an apostolic creed *definitely interpreted*” was becoming increasingly apparent, for only in this way could the Gnostic and Marcionite heresies be effectively opposed (26). Therefore, the Church in Rome embraced an antignostic interpretation of the baptismal creed and made this interpretation mandatory for admittance into the Roman Church (26). This, according to Harnack, was the origin of what was to become the apostolic rule of faith. As it was developed by Irenaeus and Tertullian, this “rule” declared (among other things) “the identity of the supreme God with the Creator,” the deity of Christ, “the resurrection of all flesh,” and a final judgment (29). It thus served as an effective means of combating Gnosticism and preserving early Christianity (27-29). By “the last decades of the third century,” Harnack tells us, this confession had become a “mark of recognition” and a basis for fellowship among all orthodox Christians (37-38).

The selection of writings which eventually became the New Testament canon appears to have arisen initially as a much-needed reaction to the formation of Marcion's canon, as well as

to the early collection of sacred texts by the Gnostics (39, 45). Although the early orthodox Christians already accepted the Old Testament canon of Scripture, and were in general agreement concerning the spiritual value of many of the books that *did* end up making it into the New Testament, nevertheless, by the middle of the second century, they had yet to collect a group of books “possessing equal authority with the Old Testament” into a new canon of Scripture (40). According to Harnack, the Church selected for inclusion into this canon only those writings which “the tradition of the elders justified her in regarding as genuinely apostolic” (47). Of course, such writings had to have more than simply a *claim* to apostolic authorship; they also had to be consistent with the rule of faith, which had become the dominant principle of biblical interpretation (47, 63). Although it would take many years for the process to be fully completed, in Harnack’s estimation the formation of the New Testament canon constitutes the greatest “creative act” in the entire history of the Church (62n1).

Finally, transforming the episcopal office into an apostolic office was achieved through the notion of apostolic succession. Essentially, the idea was this: the original apostles of Jesus had founded churches and appointed leaders (i.e. bishops) within these churches whom they had personally instructed. These leaders then passed the baton of faith to the leaders of the next generation, a process which (it was claimed) had continued right up to the present. This was a necessary and important move for the Church for, as Harnack reminds us, “the heretics also claimed an apostolic origin” for their rule of faith (67). By providing plausible arguments for the truth of apostolic succession, the early Catholic Church was ultimately able “to realise an actual outward unity by means of the apostolic inheritance, the doctrinal confession, and the apostolic writings” (74, 85).

### **Chapter 3: Continuation. The Old Christianity and the New Church**

In the latter half of the second century new movements arose to challenge the perceived moral laxity of the Catholic Church (94). The first of these, Montanism, was led by Montanus (who proclaimed himself the promised Paraclete) (95). He called upon Christians to

separate from the world, gather into his community, and await the New Jerusalem (95). Although the Montanists claimed to be recipients of new revelation, they also declared their allegiance to the apostolic rule of faith and the developing New Testament canon (100-01). Tertullian found them so persuasive that he joined their ranks and wrote in their defense (105-06). But the Catholic Church rejected them on the grounds of “innovation,” claiming that all that was needed for life and godliness was found in the Old Testament and the writings of the Apostles (106-07).

The other major challenge to Catholic Christianity arose over concerns about what to do with professing Christians who had fallen into grievous sins like adultery, fornication, idolatry, etc. (111). Whereas initially the Church “excluded gross sinners from Christian membership” (although still commending them to the grace of God), Bishop Calixtus and, over time, many others, began to relax these standards in certain cases (109-11). In response, the Roman presbyter Novatian claimed that the Church had “the right and duty” to expel such sinners “once for all” (118). According to Harnack, however, this stricter standard was short-lived, for “the Novatian Churches speedily ceased to be any stricter than the Catholic in their renunciation of the world” (121).

Harnack concludes this chapter with an “Addenda” (128-48) and “Excursus” (149-68). In the former, he surveys early dogmatic development regarding the notions of priesthood, sacrifice, and the sacraments (most of which, from the perspective of Protestant evangelicalism, can only be regarded as unbiblical and superstitious in character). In the latter, he notes the reasons for the early prominence of the Church in Rome. For example, the Roman Church appears to have been the first to acknowledge the authority of the New Testament canon (151-52) and the first to use the notion of apostolic succession to help safeguard the interests of the Church (153). In addition, the other Churches “communicated with one another through the medium of Rome” (154), and the Roman Church helped support other congregations both financially and otherwise (164). Nevertheless, while the Roman Church had something of a *de facto* primacy, “it was immediately shaken,” notes Harnack, “when it was claimed as a *legal* right associated with the person of the Roman bishop” (160; see also 166).

#### **Chapter 4: Ecclesiastical Christianity and Philosophy. The Apologists**

In this chapter Harnack discusses the early Christian Apologists: Aristides, Justin, Athenagoras, Tatian, Theophilus, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix. He describes their attempts to represent Christianity as a (revealed) rational religion, or philosophy, as “the foundation of ecclesiastical dogmatic” (170). The apologists primarily addressed their writings to non-Christians (e.g. emperors, intellectuals, etc.) in an attempt to persuade them to extend toleration toward Christians, as well as convince them of the divine wisdom, reasonableness, and high moral character inherent in the Christian religion (179-99). Harnack summarizes the Christian dogmas developed by the early Apologists thus: “*They are the rational truths, revealed by the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, and summarised in Christ . . . which in their unity represent the divine wisdom, and the recognition of which leads to virtue and eternal life*” (203).

Of particular interest for our purposes is the development of the Logos Christology by these apologists. As they wrestled with the Christian doctrine of God, in light of the early rule of faith, they concluded that the Logos is the Word, Revelation, and Reason of God, who was brought forth (or begotten) from the essence of God, “by a free and simple act of will” (210). According to Harnack, this begotten Logos was understood to be truly God, but he is God with a beginning, “a second God” (211). He cites, correctly it seems, Tertullian’s statement in *Against Hermogenes* that “there was a time when the Father had no Son” (211). For this reason, says Harnack, the Apologists conceived the Logos to be subordinate in rank to the Father, for he is “the created God” (211). Nevertheless, this subordination “is not founded on the content of his essence, but on his origin” (212).

The Apologists’ strong emphasis on living a life of virtue via the sheer power of the human will, coupled with their comparative neglect of Christ as Redeemer (although this theme was certainly not absent from their writings), leads Harnack to conclude, “It is not Judaeo-Christianity that lies behind the Christianity and doctrines of the Apologists, but Greek philosophy . . . the Alexandrine-Jewish apologetics, the maxims of Jesus, and the religious speech of the Christian Churches” (228).

## **Chapter 5: The Beginnings of an Ecclesiastico-Theological Interpretation and Revision of the Rule of Faith**

This chapter primarily discusses the dogmatic development which resulted from the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian. The importance of Tertullian can be particularly seen in his development of the terminology in which both Trinitarian and christological dogmas became increasingly formulated and expressed (235). Nevertheless, in Harnack's estimation, "the great work of Irenaeus is far superior to the theological writings of Tertullian" (236). This is because, in part, Irenaeus was able to achieve a greater degree of systematic consistency in his writings which were organized around two fundamental ideas: "the conviction that the Creator of the world and the supreme God are one and the same" and "the conviction that Christianity is real redemption" achieved through the actual historical appearance of the incarnate God-Man, Jesus Christ (237-43, 262).

This latter notion plays a particularly important role in Irenaeus's doctrine of recapitulation. According to this doctrine Christ, as the last Adam, recapitulates the career of the first Adam, undoing through his obedience what was lost to humanity through Adam's original disobedience. Thus, "through disobedience at the tree Adam became a debtor to God, and through obedience at the tree God is reconciled" to man through the death of his Son (291; see also 273-75). According to Everett Ferguson, "The doctrine of recapitulation was important in the context of the Gnostic controversy because it secured the reality of the incarnation, the unity of mankind, and the certainty of redemption."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, Irenaeus also made a substantial contribution to the discussion about the relationship of the Old Testament to the New (300-10). Essentially, while granting certain differences between the two testaments, he nonetheless argued for an overarching unity of purpose based on their both having a single divine Author (305).

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<sup>3</sup> Everett Ferguson, "Recapitulation," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 917.

## Chapter 6: The Origin of the Scientific Theology and Dogmatic of the Church

“The Alexandrian school of catechists was of inestimable importance for the transformation of the heathen empire into a Christian one, and of Greek philosophy into ecclesiastical philosophy” (319). Harnack compares the school’s first teacher, Clement of Alexandria, to the Jewish philosopher Philo (323, 325). Although Clement rejected all speculations that could not be “easily reconciled” with Holy Scripture, he interpreted Scripture in such a way that it was consistent with what he deemed to be the best of Greek philosophy (326-30). While admiring Clement’s intellectual achievement, Harnack contends that were the “evangelical spirit” of Clement’s “practical position” ever lost, one would merely be left with “a depotentiated system which could absolutely no longer be called Christian” (330).

Harnack next treats of Origen, whom he compares to Augustine in both importance and influence (332). Although both were influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, Origen’s speculations took him in a direction which was later judged heretical. A biblical exegete who regarded Scripture alone “as the absolutely reliable divine revelation,” his theological system was nonetheless “in principle and in every respect, monistic” (335, 343). This led to a real tension in Origen’s thinking for, on the one hand, the world, as a created entity, “is contrasted with God,” while on the other, “it belongs to God as the unfolding of his essence” (344). Indeed, in Harnack’s estimation, the “key” to Origen’s system is “the original indestructible unity of God and all spiritual essence.” “From this,” he says, “it necessarily follows that the created spirit after fall, error, and sin must ever return to its origin, to being in God” (346). The outworking of this idea affects Origen’s entire system, from his formulation of the doctrines of God and Christ (349-61) to those of universal salvation and a completely spiritual (in the sense of *non*-physical) eternal state (361-78). He was able to square these doctrines with Scripture, at least in part, by employing an allegorical method of biblical interpretation (346-48).

Not surprisingly, Harnack concludes this volume by claiming that the development of theological speculation in the third century signified the “transformation of the rule of faith into the compendium of a Greek philosophical system” (380).