

A Brief Account of the Development of Doctrine

Introduction

In the preface to *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes the place of “mere” Christianity as “a hall out of which doors open into several rooms.”¹ The rooms represent different denominations: Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and so forth. Lewis describes his purpose in writing the book as trying to persuade non-Christians to come into the hall where the core beliefs are the same. But this, of course, is merely the beginning. For the purpose of bringing people into the hall is that they might then choose one of the rooms. But how does one make such a choice? According to Lewis, the key question to ask is not whether one likes the decorations, 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 different doctrines? How did this situation come about? And how might we account for such doctrinal differences? The short answer is that doctrines have developed over the centuries, and they have developed differently in different traditions. In this brief article, I’ll attempt to offer an evangelical perspective on these issues.

Now you might be thinking that doctrinal changes merely reflect the traditions of man. But we can find doctrinal development in the Bible itself. For example, 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).³ Of course, the New Testament nowhere denies that God is one. Indeed, Jesus explicitly affirms it (Mark 12:29). But 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 exists as three distinct (though inter-related) persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁴ And it’s clear that these persons should not be understood as different “roles” which God might play at different times.⁵ For at the baptism of Jesus, all three persons are simultaneously present: the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is incarnate upon earth, and the Spirit descends upon Jesus “like a dove” (Mark 1:9-11).

Although the Old Testament revelation of God is *consistent* with the doctrine of the Trinity, we really don’t find this doctrine clearly stated until we reach the New Testament. It thus appears that God has chosen to reveal Himself to mankind *progressively*. And this idea of *progress* is important to bear in mind as we next examine the issue of doctrinal development in church history.

Doctrinal Development in Church History

Has doctrinal development taken place since the Bible was completed? It seems undeniable that it has. For example, although the early church regarded Jesus as both human and divine, there was a great deal of discussion about precisely how this was to be understood. Eventually, in A.D. 451, the Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus Christ should be confessed as one person with two natures—one human and one divine.⁶ By encapsulating these truths in a precise doctrinal formula, the Chalcedonian statement offers an example of doctrinal development which the major branches of Christendom regard as orthodox.

Of course, there have also been developments about which Christians have disagreed. But since it’s not my purpose here to become embroiled in denominational disputes, I will leave it to you to consider what some of these might be. If you would like some examples, you can consult a good history of Christian doctrine.⁷

For our purposes, it's enough to simply notice that such disagreements raise a very important question; namely, how might we distinguish *legitimate* from *illegitimate* doctrinal developments? Although different denominations will answer this question a bit differently, it seems to me (as an evangelical Protestant) that legitimate doctrinal development should *at least* be characterized by two important criteria. First, there should be a reasonably firm basis in the teaching of Scripture. Second, there should be consistency with the rule of faith as articulated by the early church.

In the early church, the rule of faith was essentially a summary of the essence of Christian beliefs.⁸ The rule was particularly important in debating with heretics. For heretics, like the orthodox, would often appeal to Scripture (although typically twisting its meaning in rather odd and unorthodox ways). By providing a “clear, succinct statement” of Christian beliefs, the rule of faith helped ward off unjustified appeals to Scripture in support of heretical doctrines.⁹ This is why any legitimate doctrinal development should be *both* grounded in Scripture *and* harmonious with the rule of faith.

If we apply these standards to the development mentioned earlier, it seems to me that the Chalcedonian definition of the person of Jesus Christ should indeed be accepted as a clear example of *legitimate* doctrinal development.

Biblical Arguments Concerning Doctrinal Development

How might we *account* for the development of doctrine throughout the history of the church? To begin, we must first recognize that the Bible appears to anticipate it. Consider Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 3. Using himself as an example of an “expert builder” (v. 10), Paul describes how he laid the only legitimate foundation for any Christian church through his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (vv. 10-11). But while Paul had laid this very secure “doctrinal foundation,” someone else was now building upon it.¹⁰ Paul described the sort of building materials which one might use as “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw” (v. 12).

According to New Testament scholar David Lowery, these building materials can be interpreted in a variety of ways. They could refer to the “quality of the builder's work,” the worthiness of his motives, or the soundness of his doctrine.¹¹ The context suggests that this doctrinal element is important. After all, the “foundation” has a clear doctrinal component, and Paul is describing someone who is “building” upon this foundation.

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. Those using quality materials are teachers of sound doctrine, whereas those using shoddy materials are not. Ultimately, such work will be tested before the judgment seat of Christ.

Another example occurs in Ephesians 4. Here Paul employs the metaphor of “the body of Christ” to teach certain truths which seem relevant to our discussion. In verses 11-13 he describes Christ as giving gifted individuals to the church, “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (v. 12). These individuals include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—all of which have (or had) teaching responsibilities in the church. Since evangelists, pastors, and teachers are linked with the apostles and prophets, it seems that they have been gifted by Christ to provide for the ongoing instructional needs of the church.¹²

According to Paul, this instruction is to continue “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4:13).

If these interpretations are correct, then the Bible seems to anticipate at least some level of doctrinal development throughout church history.¹³

Theological Arguments Concerning Doctrinal Development

We’ve seen that the Bible seems to anticipate at least some level of development throughout church history. But even if we can adequately *account* for such development, we still need to ask how it occurs.

So let’s briefly consider what two very different theologians have to say about this issue. Let’s first look at an intriguing suggestion from the late Karl Rahner. Although Rahner was a Roman Catholic, some of his thinking about the nature of doctrinal development can be very illuminating for evangelicals as well. While he makes several valuable observations, for the sake of brevity I will mention only one.¹⁴

Rahner suggests that God, as an omniscient being, is able to communicate truths 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.¹⁵ This is a fascinating 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. In this way, each generation may contribute something valuable to the full understanding of God’s revelation. Clearly, only an omniscient and providential God could orchestrate such a gradual development of doctrine from an original deposit in this way.

Let’s now consider what Craig Blaising, an evangelical theologian, has to say about this issue. Blaising accords Scripture the primary place in “doing theology.”¹⁶ But he recognizes that the theologian will also make use of many other sources of knowledge. These can come from tradition, philosophy, the natural sciences, and any other branch of human learning. As our knowledge of God’s general revelation in creation continues to grow, there is thus the possibility that this increased knowledge could contribute toward the project of orthodox doctrinal development.¹⁷ What’s more, developments in biblical interpretation, the study of history, and logic could also make a contribution. Finally, he says, we must not overlook the importance of personal faith in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating truth that could also lead to the orthodox development of doctrine.¹⁸

Conclusion

This essay has argued that doctrinal development has definitely occurred and has attempted to show how we might recognize and account for it both biblically and theologically. I began this program with C. S. Lewis’s illustration of Christianity as a giant house with many different rooms (representing the different Christian denominations). Although the development of doctrine has brought many benefits and blessings to the church, nevertheless, it has also played an unfortunate role in many of the splits and schisms as well. In light of this, I want to conclude with a question: Is there any reason to hope that these divisions might yet be healed before the return of Christ? It seems to me that the Bible offers us some fairly good reasons for being cautiously optimistic.

For example, in his high-priestly prayer, Jesus asks the Father to bring his people “to complete unity” so that the world might know that he was sent by the Father (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 (perhaps still quite remote from the present) of greater doctrinal unity than the church presently enjoys.

Of course, in working toward such unity, we should never compromise the clear teaching of Scripture. But we should be willing to humbly and charitably listen to what other Christians have to say, and to carefully consider it in light of Scriptural teaching. As evangelical Peter Toon observed near the end of his book on doctrinal development, “we must . . . strive to obtain that unity of the Church which all confess we have in Christ. Merely to talk of the ‘invisible Church’ of which we are all members, and to claim that this invisible unity is all that God requires, is not acceptable.”¹⁹

Like it or not, our Lord’s prayer will certainly be granted. And personally, I think that this should be a great encouragement to all of us. For God is graciously using a variety of Christian evangelists, pastors, and teachers to build up the body of Christ and (eventually) bring all of His people to unity in the faith.

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

² *Ibid.*

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural citations within this article will be taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Craig A. Blaising, “Monarchianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 727.

⁶ For a brief discussion of this creed, see John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 34-36.

⁷ In this regard, one of the premier examples would be Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. 5 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

⁸ See M. Eugene Osterhaven, “Rule of Faith,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 961-62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 961.

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

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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 this 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 all 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Rahner, “The Development of Dogma,” 60-61.

¹⁶ Craig A. Blaising, “Developing Dispensationalism (Part 1): Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 145, no. 578 (1988): 137.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 138-39.

¹⁹ Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 125.