

# More on the Development of Doctrine: The Choice is not between “Protestantism” and the “Older Traditions.”



Michael Liccione has continued the discussion on the Development of Doctrine over at [Perrennis Philosophia](#).

This is the first part of what I hope will be a series of responses.

1) Dr. Liccone begins with a misleading summary of the issue of disagreement. He suggests that when it comes to the question of the Development of Doctrine there are three hermeneutical circles (HC), characteristic of Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. The purpose of the HC is to identify an “authority [his emphasis] of ultimate appeal for distinguishing between true and false doctrine.”

2) The fundamental choice really boils down to two, between the Protestant HC on the one hand and the Catholic and Orthodox HC on the other, which he refers to as “the older traditions.” The main difference is “how they relate belief about the nature and authority of the confessing community itself to the deposit of divine faith.”

3) Liccione believes that the question of authentic authority has to be settled prior to the question of whether there are legitimate developments of doctrine.

4) Nonetheless, there is a criterion that can help one settle which prior explanation one should endorse—abduction, by which

he means “inference to the best explanation.”

Liccione’s identification of the choice in assessing the question of doctrinal development between what he calls the Protestant HC and the “older traditions” is inherently misleading because there is no “older tradition” of doctrinal development. Doctrinal development is a modern phenomenon.

Prior to the nineteenth century, it was assumed by both Protestants and Roman Catholics that the truth of Christian faith was unchanging. In distinction from the Radical Reformation (Anabaptists and Puritans), which rejected the entire Catholic tradition as a departure from biblical faith, “Reformed Catholics” (Lutherans, Anglicans, Mercersburg Reformed) argued that in many areas, the Medieval Western Church (Roman Catholicism) had added to and distorted the historic Catholic faith of the patristic Church, and that the Reformation was a return to the historic faith of the patristic Catholic Church. So John Jewel in his *Apology of the Church of England* argued that Anglicanism was in continuity with the church of the first several centuries, and Rome was not. Jewel argued (correctly) that there was no evidence for transubstantiation or the papacy in the early patristic church. Roman Catholics, to the contrary, argued that there had been no change, and that Catholic Christians had always believed in transubstantiation, the papacy, purgatory, and the Marian dogmas from the very beginning.

In the centuries following the Reformation, Counter-Reformation Roman Catholics adopted two different theories to explain this – the French traditionalism of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704) and the scholasticism of Spanish Jesuits like Gabriel Vasquez (1549-1604) and Francisco Suarez (1548-1617). See Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge University Press, 1957).

Against Protestantism, which, Bossuet argued in his *History of*

*the Variations of the Protestant Churches* was nothing but a history of incompatible variations, Bossuet insisted that any variation in religious belief is an indication of error. The Tridentine position was that the faith had been delivered to the Church by Christ complete and entire. The Church had preserved the faith without change. Any admission of change was heresy.

Post-Tridentine Jesuits adopted a different, and contrary position. They explained what would later be called doctrinal development in terms of logical explanation. Development is a logical drawing out the logical consequences of what can be found in Scripture.

Example: (from Chadwick, p. 27)

It is revealed that God was in Christ.

It is revealed that Christ was very man.

It is therefore a necessary inference that in Christ there were two natures.

Note that the two views are incompatible. For Bossuet, the doctrine of the two natures had to have been revealed by Christ and believed by the Catholic Church from the time of the apostles. For the Jesuits, it could have been left until Chalcedon to draw the necessary logical consequences. Chadwick discusses some of the controversy that followed from the Jesuits' views. The Inquisition intervened when theologians debated the proposition: "It is not *de fide* that a particular person, e.g., Clement VIII, is the successor of St. Peter." Since it could not be demonstrably proven that a given pope had been validly baptized, ordained, and canonically elected without simony, it was claimed that one could have only "moral certainty" that a particular pope was the successor of Peter. The proposition was eventually judged to be "scandalous," but not heretical.

This all changed with development of modern historical method. As early as the fifteenth century, it became evident that the

Donation of Constantine was a forgery. Nineteenth century historical method made clear that Christian theology had developed over centuries. Modern historical method had discredited the traditional Roman Catholic notion that Catholics simply believe what the church had always believed. It was no longer possible to claim that the Marian dogmas, transubstantiation, or the papacy had been the historic faith of the church from the beginning.

Newman's theory of development was an attempt to deal with this historical change. The doctrine of development was necessary because modern historical method had discredited the traditional Roman Catholic position. Contrary to the entire previous Roman Catholic tradition, Newman argued that it was no longer necessary to claim that the content of Catholic faith had been established once for all from the beginning of the history of the church, but rather that the doctrines of Roman Catholicism came about through a process of historical growth and development. One did not have to establish that the church had always believed in transubstantiation, or papal infallibility or the marian dogmas. These were later developments from an original seed. Note that Newman's position is not what Liccione calls the "older tradition," but is simply a departure from what previous Catholic tradition had always affirmed. Newman's theory met serious opposition from Roman Catholic theologians after his conversion; Orestes Brownson repeatedly claimed that Newman's views were heretical; When Newman tried to get a favorable hearing from Giovanni Perrone by presenting him with a list of developments that could not be accounted for under the traditional theory (the validity of heretical baptism, the canon of Scripture, the sinlessness of the virgin Mary, the doctrine of indulgences, eucharistic sacrifice, and others), Perrone responded: "All these the Church has always held and professed." (Chadwick, 184). Of course, Perrone was mistaken, but he was correct in his assumption that he was affirming the "older tradition."

Note also that Newman's theory was necessitated by recognition of facts that were not problems for Reformed Catholics. Jewel had argued the Church of England was truly Catholic while Rome was not, on the basis of continuity between the Church of the earliest centuries and Anglicanism. The Church of England maintained the primacy of Scripture; the Rule of Faith, real presence (but not transubstantiation); episcopacy (but not papacy)—all doctrines of the patristic Catholic Church of the first several centuries. Newman's theory was a concession to the historical scholarship of Reformed Catholics like Jewel. Jewel was correct that the papacy, the Marian dogmas, and transubstantiation did not exist in the patristic church; they were later additions after all. What Newman's theory amounted to was an apologetic to justify Roman Catholicism while granting a key concession Tridentine Catholics had always denied—that the Protestants were right about the history of the distinctively Roman dogmas in the Church.

So the real question is not whether one accepts the HC of the "older traditions" on doctrinal development or the HC of Protestantism. There is no "older [Roman Catholic] tradition" on doctrinal development. Modern historical scholarship has demonstrated that the post-Tridentine position about church tradition (the genuinely "older [Roman Catholic] position") is untenable. Rather, the question is whether, given that historical study has demonstrated that such doctrines as papal infallibility, the marian dogmas, or transubstantiation, were not part of the original faith of the Catholic Church, Newman's *new* theory of doctrinal development can save Roman Catholic claims by accounting for the changes which were previously denied, but can no longer be doubted, in such a manner as to preserve a continuity of identity, or, rather, whether such developments are aberrations—departures from the historic catholic identity of the church.

So the choice is not between what Michael Liccione calls the Hermeneutical Circle of Protestantism and the Hermeneutical

Circle of the “older traditions.” Rather, as I have said elsewhere, the choice is between Newman and Karl Barth on how to interpret the Council of Nicea.

More will follow later, if and when I have time.

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## A Palm Sunday Sermon

Psalm 31: 9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 15: 1-47

Exactly ten years ago I was visiting an Episcopal Church on Palm Sunday. The service had begun with the Procession of the Palms and the readings of Jesus’ triumphal procession into Jerusalem, and the readings had concluded with a reading of the Passion Account of Jesus’ crucifixion. The priest then went to the pulpit and began his sermon with these words: “The idea that Jesus died for our sins has caused more suffering and evil than any other idea in the history of the world!” He then proceeded to preach a sermon in which he outlined every horrible event in the history of the church—I think he talked about the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, Antisemitism; I’m fairly certain he mentioned the Nazi holocaust—and he stated repeatedly throughout the sermon that all these horrible events could be traced to a single idea—that Jesus had died for the sins of the world. We then stood and said the Creed.

Without commenting on this priest’s orthodoxy—which was certainly lacking—one might ask what could possibly motivate someone to make such an outrageous claim? From the pulpit no less? Well, if the priest was intending not to comment on the church’s teaching but on its practice, he might well have had

a point. We need to be honest that there have been plenty of times in church history when Christians have just got it wrong. One of my favorite versions of the King Arthur legend is the story of Perceval or Parzifal, the very first version of the story of the Holy Grail. Perceval is a story of redemption. The protagonist loses his faith, and, at a crucial moment in the story, is redeemed when he encounters a procession of pilgrims on Good Friday. He is dressed as a knight and they point out to him that it is not right to bear arms on the day that Jesus Christ died. Perceval is oblivious to what day it is, and they remind him that today is "Holy Friday, the day when every one should adore the cross and weep for their sins. He who was clean from all sin saw the sins in which the whole world was bound and befouled and became a man for our sins." Perceval is moved to tears, and goes to a hermit to confess his sins. The tale ends: "Thus Perceval learned how God was crucified and died on a Friday, and on Easter Day he received the communion."