

Newman's Incoherence

In a previous [blog post](#) in which I listed a number of theological principles I hoped someday to discuss further, I had written the following:

On the question of doctrinal development, the fundamental choice is between Newman's and Barth's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. The issue of continuity between (1) God's revelation in the history of Israel, Christ, the apostolic Church; (2) the canonical Scriptures; and (3) the post-apostolic Church, must be decided theologically, in terms of the inherent intelligibility of the subject matter of revelation, not by alien philosophical criteria rooted in such historical conundrums as the relation between the one and the many, or problems of epistemological skepticism.

At some point I hope to come back to this discussion, especially as it touches on Barth. In the meanwhile, this is an ongoing contribution to a series of discussions on doctrinal development, and, particularly on John Henry Newman's own contribution. (For previous discussion, see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) In what follows I intend to focus on Newman's shorter essay entitled "Faith and Private Judgment," to which I find contemporary Roman Catholic apologists regularly [appeal](#), to show how it casts doubt on the coherency of the claims Newman makes about development in his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*. (John Henry Newman, "[Faith and Private Judgement](#)," *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897), pp. 192-213; [An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine](#) (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920).)

My argument in what follows is that Newman's approach is philosophical, primarily having to do with a concern for epistemological certainty, rather than a properly theological

argument based on the nature of revelation, and the continuity between God's revelation in Christ, the canonical Scriptures, and the post-apostolic church. Moreover, as a philosophical argument, Newman's position is incoherent.

I begin by repeating observations I had already made in my essay "More on the Development of Doctrine."

First, on the question of development of doctrine, there is no choice between Protestantism and any older, i.e., Catholic or Orthodox position, since there was no older position on development of doctrine. Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism all rejected the notion, or, at least had not considered it.

Thus, Newman's position has to be viewed in its historical context. Prior to the nineteenth century, it was assumed by both Reformation Christians and Roman Catholics that the truth of Christian faith was unchanging. Those Reformation Christians I call Reforming Catholics (primarily Anglicans and Lutherans, but also some Reformed like the Mercersburg theology) argued that the Roman church had added to and distorted the original deposit of faith, and that the Reformation was a return to the historic Catholic faith of the Church. So the Anglican Reformer John Jewel argued in his [*Apology for the Church of England*](#) that Anglicanism was a return to and in continuity with the church's faith of the first several centuries, while the Roman church of the late Medieval period was a departure from the same. According to Jewel, there was no evidence for distinctively Roman doctrines like transubstantiation or the papacy in the early church. (Jewel was right here.) Roman Catholics, to the contrary, argued that there had been no such change. Catholic Christians had believed in transubstantiation, the papacy, purgatory, and the Marian dogmas from the very beginning. (They were wrong.)

This all changed with the rise of modern historical method. It became evident in the fifteenth century that the Donation of

Constantine and the Isidoran Decretals were forgeries. (This is an important issue insofar as someone like Thomas Aquinas, whom I otherwise admire greatly, relied heavily on the forged Decretals, which he mistakenly thought were genuine historical documents, in his defense of papal authority.) Nineteenth-century historical method also 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. They were not. The doctrine of the Trinity as formulated by Tertullian was not (exactly) the same doctrine as found in the Cappadocians. Moreover, given the lengthy historical periods involved, the notion of an unwritten oral tradition that could have kept intact and passed down the necessary doctrines was not credible either.

Newman's theory of development was an attempt to deal with this historical realization. Newman could have simply conceded the Protestant case, but instead he embraced an altogether new theological position. It was no longer necessary for the Roman Catholic to claim that the content of Catholic faith had been established once for all from the beginning of the history of the church. One could admit that the doctrines of Roman Catholicism came about through a process of growth and development. One did not have to establish that the Catholic Church had always believed in transubstantiation, or papal infallibility or the Marian dogmas. Like a blossoming plant, these were legitimate developments from an original seed.

[As an aside, it needs to be emphasized that Newman's theory of development never was held by Roman theologians previously, and was much debated after he offered it. Many Roman theologians at the time rejected Newman's theory of development vigorously, and if one reads the Pre-Vatican II

manuals of theology that were the standard way of teaching in seminaries until after that Council, they still embrace the traditional position.]

It is crucial to recognize this shift of ground if one is going to address the question squarely. Newman's theory of development is in actuality a concession to one of the primary Protestant critiques of Roman Catholicism, and an abandonment of the Roman church's historical claim on that issue. In essence, Newman was agreeing that, on the controverted issue of "what the church had always believed," people like Jewel were right. There was a very real sense in which the late Medieval Western church or the Tridentine Counter-Reformation church or Newman's own nineteenth-century church of Vatican I was "not the same church" as the church of the first or second or third centuries. There were significant differences in doctrine and practice. Newman's argument depended on making the case that, despite the appreciable differences between the first or second century church and the nineteenth century church, the differences were neither aberrations nor significant enough to alter the church's very identity. Rather, the differences were in fact legitimate developments of beliefs that Catholic Christians had held in the first or second centuries.

Given this substantial concession, the argument between Reformation Christians and Roman Catholics is not about whether the modern Roman Church is simply identical with the church of the apostles or the second century. It is not. The question that must be settled is whether the differences between the early Catholic church, and the later Medieval, Tridentine, and modern Roman church are such as to mar identity, and whether the differences indicate a falling away from apostolic faith, or, are instead legitimate developments of apostolic faith.

Now to the fresh material.

Newman's method relies on the following principles:

First, the theory of development itself. The concession of differences in church teaching does not mean discontinuity, but genuine development.

Second, a confidence in historical sources and the ability to read historical sources; after all, if the historical sources are not inherently intelligible, how can we know that the doctrines of papal infallibility or the Trinity are developments?

Third, a confidence about the inherent intelligibility of the Scriptures; after all, if the Scriptures are not inherently intelligible, how can one know that the doctrine of the Trinity or papal infallibility are or are not in the Scriptures?

Fourth a *reductio ad absurdum* with regard to Protestantism. A crucial way in which Newman attempts to disarm the Protestant critique of discontinuity between patristic Catholic faith and the modern Roman church is to argue that Protestants themselves cannot claim immunity from development. If it can be argued that Protestants endorse doctrines not found either in Scripture or the early church, then the Protestant critique of Catholic discontinuity collapses, or, at least cannot be maintained consistently.

Newman's ace in the hole here is the doctrine of the Trinity (but also such practices as infant baptism). Protestants endorse the doctrine of the Trinity, which, Newman claims, is not in Scripture, but is a later doctrinal development. Newman places before the Protestant an unwelcome dilemma. If the Protestant sticks to his original rejection of development, then he logically must disregard the doctrine of the Trinity, which is not found in Scripture, but is a later development. Conversely, Newman argues that, since Protestants accept the doctrine of the Trinity although it is not formulated in

Scripture, they are inconsistent in not accepting the doctrine of papal authority, which is also a later development. Moreover, he raises the bugaboo of skepticism. If one rejects the doctrine of the papacy, how does one prevent oneself from rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity? Where will it all end?

It should be noted that all four of the above principles presume a position of epistemological realism. Epistemological realism presumes that it is possible for ordinary human beings to have reliable historical knowledge, to achieve a reasonable certainty about the meaning of texts, both biblical and post-biblical, that errors in reading and interpretation can be corrected by ordinary processes of observation, understanding, and judgment, and, that one can attain reliable (although not infallible) knowledge apart from any infallible magisterium or teaching office. After all, it was not the magisterium that introduced Newman to his theory of development. To the contrary, he proposed development as a solution to a problems raised by epistemological realism as applied to texts, problems that the magisterium had hitherto denied existed.

However, Newman holds these realist principles along with other epistemological principles that are actually incompatible with realism, and which could reasonably be called "Cartesian." What is meant by Cartesian epistemology? First, Cartesian epistemology places a primary value on epistemological criteria. "How can we be certain of what we know?" is the most important question to be answered. Second, Cartesian epistemology assumes a methodology of doubt and both a practice of and fear of skepticism. Only that can be known which can be established by methodological principles that cannot be doubted. Third, Cartesian epistemology is methodistic or foundationalist. An epistemological methodist holds that one is not entitled to believe or know anything unless one has first established a prior method or criterion for discerning true from false beliefs. A foundationalist holds that any system of belief must be built on such prior

foundationalist beliefs that have been first established as indubitable or trustworthy. (For a discussion of theological methodism and foundationalism, see Jason E. Vickers, "Canonical Theism and the Primacy of Ontology: An Essay concerning Human Understanding in Trinitarian Perspective," *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, W. Abraham, J. Vickers, N. Van Kirk, eds. (Eerdmans, 2008), 156-174). Finally, a specifically Cartesian (as opposed to evidentialist or empiricist) methodism embraces the primacy of the knowing subject rather than the known object. The key epistemological problem is that of establishing the certainty (or infallibility) of the knower rather than beginning with the inherent meaningfulness of the known object.

Specifically, Newman's Cartesian methodology is reflected in his critique of "private judgment," his assumptions about the unclarity and insufficiency of Scripture, and his claim that apart from an infallible magisterium one can have no reliable interpretation of Scripture, and no criterion for truth.

Turning to Newman's essay on "Faith and Private Judgment," we note that Newman first makes statements about Scripture that presume a realist epistemology, that Scripture does indeed have an inherent intelligibility (what we might call a "plain meaning"), and can be understood by ordinary readers apart from an infallible magisterium.

Thus Newman insists that "divine faith" means believing that God is true, that his Word cannot be doubted, that God's messengers [the apostles] were commissioned to proclaim God's word, and that, accordingly, the word of God's messengers must be accepted, not because one sees it as true, but "because God has spoken." "This," says Newman, "is what faith was in the time of the Apostles, *as no one can deny.*" (194-196) Newman says later in the essay that apostolic authority "is quite clear from the nature of the case; but also *clear from the words of Scripture.*" (my emphasis) (198). Moreover, Newman says to his audience, "[Y]ou know they preached to the world

that Christ was the Son of God, that he was born of a Virgin, that He had ascended on high, that He would come again to judge all, the living and the dead.” (196.)

So, at minimum, Newman believes that Scripture clearly and plainly teaches the following: (1) The reliability of God’s revelation, and of God’s attested witnesses; (2) the divine sonship of Jesus Christ; (3) the virginal conception; (4) Jesus’ resurrection and ascension; (5) the second coming of Christ. Everything Newman writes indicates he believes that these are items plainly taught in Scripture, that his audience can agree that they are taught in Scripture, that an infallible magisterium is not needed to discern them.

Newman’s critique of private judgment is incompatible with the realist interpretation of texts he assumes above, however. Newman’s critique of private judgment is that private judgment is the insistence on using one’s own reason or will to decide whether one will accept a statement as true rather than accepting the statement of a commissioned divine messenger as true merely because the messenger is God’s messenger. As stated, this assertion is one with which no Reformation Christian would have strong objections. Soren Kierkegaard makes a similar point in his essay “On the Difference Between an Apostle and a Genius,” and it is a crucial distinction in Karl Barth’s theology in his book *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, and in the distinction he makes in *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 between the three-fold Word of God as preached, as written, and as incarnate. (Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and the Difference Between an Apostle and a Genius* (NY: Harper & Row, 1962); Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (NY: Harper, 1957); *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God* I/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975).

Newman notes correctly that some who call themselves Protestants do indeed exercise “private judgment.” One could argue that “private judgment” is the very essence of Liberal Protestantism, as the Rudolf Bultmanns or John Spongs or

Marcus Borgs of the world do not hesitate to dispense with what the apostles wrote about the resurrection of Jesus, the virginal conception, or, most notoriously, recently, same-sex sexual activity, based on what they already “know” to be the case. As Spong writes about the virginal conception: “Of course these narratives are not literally true. Stars do not wander, angels do not sing, virgins do not give birth, magi do not travel to a distant land to present gifts to a baby . . . The virgin birth tradition of the New Testament is not literally true.” (*Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 215.)

But in order for Newman to make his case, he needs to affirm that Protestantism is, by definition, “private judgment.” He attempts to make his case by a rather interesting but sophisticated sleight-of-hand. Newman distinguishes between the authority of a living voice, and the authority of a book: “There is . . . an essential difference between the act of submitting to a living oracle, and to his written words; in the former case there is no appeal from the speaker, in the latter the final decision remains with the reader.” (*Discourses*, 200.)

Newman’s point is that, in the case of a living authority, it is always possible for the authority to correct your interpretation of his or her words: “No, you have misunderstood. I did not mean X; I meant Y.” In the case of a text, the author has no such recourse: “[A]re not these two states or acts of mind quite distinct from each other; – to believe simply what a living authority tells you, and to take a book, such as Scripture, *and to use it as you please, to master it*, that is, to make yourself the master of it, to interpret it for yourself, and to admit *just what you choose to see in it, and nothing more?*” (my emphasis). (199.)

As it stands, Newman’s argument is that Protestantism is necessarily private judgment in that the appeal to *sola*

scriptura is an appeal to a dead rather than a living voice, and, that, inevitably, the reading of a text by a dead author means that the reader does as he or she pleases with the text, makes him or herself master of the text, admits just what one chooses to see in it, and nothing more.

The crucial question here is whether Newman is making a moral argument or an epistemological argument. That is, do readers misinterpret texts by dead authors for perverse reasons, knowing that they cannot be corrected by the original author? Or do readers necessarily misinterpret texts by dead authors because, absent a living voice, there is no possible way to arrive at an objective meaning of the text?

If the former, then a magisterium is indeed necessary, but not an infallible magisterium. If biblical texts [and other texts by dead authors] are inherently intelligible, then churches that wish to be faithful to Scripture do indeed need to have some form of magisterium to discipline those who perversely decide to interpret Scripture apart from what the community has come to discern is its plain meaning. So a Bishop Spong should have been disciplined for denying every one of the items that Newman listed above as plainly taught in Scripture: divine speaking, Jesus' divine sonship, the virginal conception, the resurrection and ascension, the second coming.

Similarly, all scholarly guilds have such magisteriums as well. One of the disciplines that the novice literary scholar, philosopher, or even classical musician must be trained in is how properly to read or interpret texts or musical scores. Anyone who has ever taught students has had the experience of reading a clever, or more often, confused, argument, in a paper, that is invalidated simply because the student has misread the author, and indeed, sometimes intentionally and perversely so.

Such an argument would be an argument for standards of excellence in biblical interpretation. Those who have the

responsibility of interpreting Scripture in the church should have the necessary training in the original languages and cultural background, in how to do exegesis, in discerning good arguments from bad ones, should share the church's faith in the authority of Scripture, and have knowledge of the best history of previous interpretation as guidance in order to avoid obvious errors. In addition, there needs to be a process of church discipline in order to evaluate and reject bad readings of Scripture.

The contemporary crisis about same-sex blessings in the mainline denominations is precisely an argument over this issue. It is not that biblical scholars have come to a new consensus that previous generations of Christians have misunderstood what Scripture teaches about sexuality; rather, the new position is that we know what the Bible says—the traditional interpretation was right about that. The advocates of the new position just reject what Scripture says on the subject, and claim that the Spirit is leading us to a new view that corrects the old one. That is, they are indeed exercising what Newman calls “private judgment,” rejecting the authority of divinely commissioned messengers.

But this may not be what Newman is claiming. Newman could be claiming something like some newer post-modern theories of interpretation that texts have no determinate meanings, and, accordingly, are necessarily subject to the whims of interpreters. He does not believe that some Protestants are necessarily perverse in their interpretations of biblical texts, but that all Protestant interpretation of Scripture is necessarily an instance of private judgment. Newman makes the following claims: Faith was a virtue exercised by the first Christians, but “is not known at all among Protestants now.” (201). Protestants “know nothing of submitting to authority, that is, they know nothing of faith; for they have no authority to submit to.” (206.)

And the difference lies in the living voice. Newman notes that

people “now-a-days deduce from Scripture, instead of believing a teacher.” (201.) He notes an essential “difference between the act of submitting to a living oracle, and to his written words.” He says “The same sort of process takes place in the case of the written document of a person now dead.” The biblical scholar who expounds Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians “says he has faith in Paul’s writings, he confessedly has no faith in St. Paul.” (200.)

On the face of it, Newman’s argument may be an argument against the authoritative reading of any text written by dead authors. Indeed, it must be so if his argument is to bear weight. If Newman’s argument is that Protestants are incapable of reading biblical texts because *all Protestants* perversely force their own interpretations on the texts, it is simply an *ad hominem* argument against his opponents. The solution to bad or irresponsible readings is good and responsible readings. It is only if biblical texts lack inherent intelligibility in such a manner that all readings of biblical texts are necessarily attempts (in Newman’s words) to become “master of the text” that Newman’s argument has epistemological weight.

There are contemporary Roman Catholics who seem to read Newman as making such an epistemological claim. I have read contemporary Roman Catholic apologists who claim that [Scripture has no “plain meaning,”](#) and [that there can be no appeal to Scripture alone](#), “for there is endless dispute about what it means on just about every point,” that without an infallible ecclesial standard of orthodoxy, faith is simply a “matter of opinion.”

If Newman is making that claim, then his argument really is Cartesian, but it is also incoherent. If, because the biblical writings are the writings of dead authors, they are not inherently intelligible, then how can one know that doctrines like the Trinity and Marian dogmas that Newman claims are not found in Scripture really are developments, and are not in Scripture after all? Perhaps if we could get St. Paul back

from the dead, and he could speak in his living voice, he would tell us that Newman had misunderstood him, and the Protestants were right. If nothing in Scripture is inherently intelligible, why could not we argue that *everything* is a development, including those things that Newman had said were “clear from the words of Scripture” – the virginal conception, the Sonship of Christ, the resurrection and second coming of Christ? It is only if Scripture has enough intelligibility that we can discern what it actually says that we can discern that certain things are clearly taught in Scripture, and that other things that are not clearly taught, but were later believed in the church, must be developments.

If the writings of dead authors are necessarily subject to the arbitrary whims of interpreters, would this apply to all writings, or only to biblical writings? How could Newman have confidence in his own private judgment as a historian to interpret the history of Arianism (based on documents written by dead authors), and indeed, the fact of development itself, but have no such confidence in regard to biblical interpretation? Is not the work of historians equally subject to the critique of private judgment? Would there not be a need for an infallible magisterium to interpret not only biblical texts, but the fact of historical development itself? Moreover, that an authority must be living is in conflict with Newman’s own epistemological realism in investigating historical documents, and also with any hope for the authority of previous ecclesial statements, like the councils, because those authors are also no longer living.

Newman’s critique of private judgment is also incoherent in another way. Newman’s argument is that, apart from a living voice, there is no way to discern the meaning of biblical texts; accordingly, he posits the necessity of a living infallible magisterium as the living voice that alone can tell us the meaning of Scripture. Unfortunately, the logic of Newman’s argument presumes that the living voice is the living

voice of the original author. Only the actual author can be the living voice that clarifies his actual meaning. As Newman himself puts it, in the case of the living voice, "there is no appeal from the speaker; in the latter the final decision remains with the reader." The advantage of a living voice is that the author can clarify his or her original meaning: "No, that is not what I meant. You have misunderstood. I meant this instead."

But the living voice of the magisterium is not the living voice of the prophets and apostles who actually wrote the Scriptures. St. Paul is dead. And unless the magisterium claims the power of necromancy, its claim to know the intent of dead authors is just as fatuous as any other, and is just as subject to Newman's critique of private judgment. And, of course, the voice of private judgment is also a living voice. The problem is that neither the living voice of private judgment nor the living voice of the magisterium is the living voice of the actual apostles, and so, if Newman's argument about the text of dead authors is valid, then neither magisterium nor individual interpreters can tell us the meaning of biblical texts. Once an author is dead, his or her meaning lies forever beyond the ability of interpretation because only the voice of the *actual* living author can prevent "appeal from the speaker," and allowing final judgment to rest with the reader. A living author who was not the author of the text under consideration can give us no help in discerning the meaning of that text. A living magisterium can tell us the meaning of a contemporary papal encyclical, for example. What it cannot do, if Newman's argument is sound, is to provide us with the meaning of dead authors like St. Paul. The logical implication of Newman's argument is not that only a living magisterium can tell us the meaning of biblical texts, but that no one can.

Part of Newman's problem is that he makes the mistake of thinking that the job of interpretation is to discover

authorial intent in the sense of getting inside the author's mind. (This seems to be the point of appealing to a living voice, and reflects the Cartesian turn to the subject. The matter of texts concerns what the author was thinking, not objects referred to in the texts.) But, as noted above, once an author is dead, we have no immediate access to his or her mind.

What we do have are texts. Unless we are going to concede that once an author is dead, his or her meaning is lost forever, we have to affirm that texts, as texts, have an inherent intelligibility, and can be understood in themselves. Moreover, the purpose of texts is not normally to point to the intentions of authors, unless the texts are confessional. Rather, texts are referential. They point beyond themselves to external realities, and it is these external realities to which the text bears witness. So one assesses the intelligibility of a text not by trying to get inside the intentions of its author (whether dead or alive), but by referring to the subject matter to which it bears witness. In the case of Scripture, these referential realities are such things as God's triune revelation in the history of Israel, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, the presence of the Spirit in the church.

One of the biggest problem with Newman's theory of private judgment is that it is an *a priori* epistemological theory imposed on biblical and historical texts, and ignores the ways that biblical scholars actually work. Biblical theologians do not focus so much on trying to assess Paul's state of mind when writing, but rather try to assess his meaning by attending to the subject matter of which he writes. So, for example, there has been much recent discussion of Paul's doctrine of justification in what has been called "The New Perspective." These scholars point out that previous discussions of justification (both Catholic and Protestant) have viewed justification in primarily individualist terms,

and consequently have missed the significance of God's covenant with Israel as a corporate body, as well as the corporate ecclesiology of the church as a people of God, for Paul's discussion. Such scholarship makes advances by examining closely the actual texts, and mutual conversation leads to both challenges and advances. What it does not tend to do is to rely on magisterial ecclesial authority to get at readings. While such authority should certainly be taken into account, it cannot dictate meaning. Both Trent's insistence that justification means a "making righteous," as well as radical Lutheran "law/gospel" dichotomies are taken to task by the New Perspective as mistaken readings. That Paul is dead does not prevent biblical scholars from understanding his texts.

It is perhaps not surprising that Newman seems simply oblivious here, assuming that all Protestant biblical interpretation is simply "private judgment," and the only guarantee of authoritative interpretation is an infallible interpreter. Newman was not himself a biblical scholar. He did not engage in the kind of biblical exegesis that we find even in Luther or Calvin, nor does he show familiarity with such works. Moreover, the kind of confessionally orthodox critical biblical scholarship that one finds later in Newman's countrymen like English biblical scholars B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, or later, E.C. Hoskyns, or modern biblical theologians like N.T. Wright or Brevard Childs, did not yet exist. Now all biblical scholars (both on the left and right, Protestant and Catholic) presuppose that careful critical exegesis can get to textual meaning. In that light, Newman's epistemological anxieties about recovering the meanings of texts written by dead authors is a counsel of despair.

As a historian, Newman had confidence in his own ability, his "private judgment," to discern the meanings of the texts of dead authors sufficiently to write books about Arianism, and to recognize that there had indeed been developments of

doctrine to the point that the historic Roman Catholic position was not credible, but his rhetorical need to discredit Protestant theology seems to have so prejudiced him that he simply refused to concede that Protestant scholars could either understand or submit to the authority of biblical texts.

In that light, perhaps we should assume, for the sake of argument, that Newman's claim is not primarily an epistemological but a moral one. Newman is saying that those who do not believe the [Roman] Catholic Church do not believe because they do not have the virtue of faith, that is, they do not want to submit to divine authority, but would prefer to exercise their own private judgment instead. This reading is confirmed in his insistence that those who exercise "private judgment" today would have disbelieved the apostles as well. (203.) But, again, in light of the admitted changes in church teaching admitted by Newman's doctrine of development, this simply begs the question of whether or not the developments are legitimate, and whether or not the Roman Church has maintained sufficient continuity to claim identity with the apostolic Church. That is, Newman's argument would work if there was no need for a theory of development. If it were self-evident that the Roman church of Newman's day was in a continuity of identity with the church of Paul and the apostles, and that the nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Church had the same apostolic authority that Paul had, refusal to believe Rome would be equivalent to refusal to believe Paul.

But once one admits "development," this claim to continuity is no longer self-evident. Remember that Reformation theologians like Jewel argued that the late Medieval church was evidently not the same church as the apostolic or patristic church, as could be demonstrated by such innovations as transubstantiation or papal authority, which were not the historic positions of the apostolic or Catholic church of the

first several centuries, and this could be demonstrated historically. Advocates of the historic Roman Catholic position had always denied Jewel's claim, and so had to argue that he had either read the texts wrong, or that there was an unwritten oral tradition that had passed along the controverted dogmas. Instead, Newman's theory of development concedes Jewel's historical conclusions—the later dogmas did not exist in the early church – and concedes as well that there was no secret oral tradition. Given those concessions, it simply does not follow that to reject Roman authority is equivalent to rejecting apostolic authority. Given the fact of development, retention of identity through historical change becomes a genuine question.

So the Reformed Catholic (Jewel and Anglicanism) argument is to the contrary of Newman's here. It is not the case that if one does not believe the [Roman] Catholic Church, it follows that one does not or would not believe the apostles. To the contrary, someone like Jewel would insist, we do not believe Rome because we *do* believe the apostles, and Rome has departed from their teachings, *and this can be demonstrated historically*. Reformation Christians would insist that they disbelieve Rome not because they do not have the virtue of faith, but because they do. It is because they have submitted their private judgment to the authority of the apostles as clearly and intelligibly passed down in Scripture, that their conscience is bound by the clear teaching of Scripture, and they cannot assent to that which is a departure from apostolic authority.

Newman's theory of development is a concession to this claim insofar as he admits that there are differences between apostolic teaching and later Roman Catholic teaching. The issue at hand is whether these differences are, as the Reformed Catholic would say, "departures," or whether they are legitimate developments. It is not a begging of the question to suggest that genuine differences are departures, in which

case the late Medieval and Tridentine Roman Catholic Church are not in continuity with the apostolic church. It is arbitrary to claim that those who question the legitimacy of such developments lack the "virtue of faith."

Newman's incoherence is also shown in that his argument presumes that one can clearly identify the [Roman] Catholic Church as a continuous body that has always taught the same things: "If [people] are so fastidious that they cannot trust her as the oracle of God, let them find another more certainly from Him than the House of His own institution, which has ever been called by His name, *has ever maintained the same claims, has ever taught one substance of doctrine*, and has triumphed over those who preached any other." (my emphasis) (210.) This statement is in conflict with Newman's own theory of development, and begs the question. The whole point of the theory of development is an acknowledgment that there are sufficient changes in dogma to challenge whether or not the Roman church is a sufficiently continuous historical body that it can be identified as the Catholic Church. One cannot presume that mere historical continuity preserves identity until one has shown that the developments are legitimate.

Moreover, Newman's position will work only if the voice of the magisterium is *always* infallible. He claims that "*whatever* an Apostle said, his converts were bound to believe." (my emphasis) (196.) [It is questionable whether this statement is correct. For example, there would be no reason to believe that St. Paul would have been any more infallible than the next guy when it came to giving directions to find the nearest tavern in downtown Athens. The specific claim is that apostles have a special authority as witnesses to revelation. More on this later.] However, the doctrine of development itself indicates that the magisterium is not always infallible. If that were the case, no doctrine of development would be needed. The whole point of development is that the church teaches at some times what it has not taught previously. But what this means

is that at any given moment one cannot know whether the current teaching of the church is the definitive teaching, or rather whether a new position will arise as there are new doctrinal developments.

In addition, as modern debates about papal authority make clear, the appeal to infallibility does not provide the kind of epistemic certainty that is needed here. There are both maximalist and minimalist interpretations of papal infallibility. Despite Newman's claim that one is required to believe "*whatever* an Apostle said," the official teaching about the magisterium is that the pope is infallible only when he speaks *ex cathedra*. Popes can and do make moral and theological errors. A doctrine of infallibility is helpful only in those instances when we can be sure the pope or magisterium is not making such an error.

Minimalist defenders of papal infallibility emphasize that there are only a handful of times when the magisterium has spoken infallibly, namely, the definition of papal infallibility itself, and the Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption. Maximalist defenders engage in what has been called "creeping infallibility," the tendency to presume that any statements of the magisterium must be presumed at face value to be infallible until subsequent statements to the contrary indicate the lack of infallibility. Roman Catholic apologists often take either one stance or the other, depending on whether they are trying to persuade their audience that infallibility is not really a burden (minimalist), or, to the contrary, emphasizing infallibility's epistemic value in providing certainty (maximalist).

That infallibility proves to be of little epistemic help can be seen in the conflict over artificial contraception that has been raging in the Roman church ever since Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on artificial contraception. Dissidents from the doctrine frequently claim that it has not been defined infallibly. Defenders claim that while it has not

been so defined, it nonetheless meets all the criteria of infallibility, and must be accepted as such.

However, until it is so defined, whether one decides that it does or does not meet the criteria means that one must exercise one's private judgment in determining whether it has been so defined. An interesting case in point is the correspondence between former Catholic University of America Professor Charles Curran and then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict) during the process through which Curran was eventually deprived of his status of being a Catholic theologian on the grounds of his challenging *Humanae Vitae*. (The documentation can be found in Curran's *Faithful Dissent*, (Sheed & Ward, 1986).) Throughout the correspondence, Curran repeatedly raised a single issue, whether or not it was permissible for faithful Catholics to dissent from non-infallible statements of the magisterium. Repeatedly, Curran insisted that he adhered to the doctrine of infallibility, but that *Humanae Vitae* was not infallible. He repeatedly asked clarification from his prosecutors as to whether *Humanae Vitae* was infallible, and said that such a clarification would lead him to submit. Curran's opponents simply refused to answer his question. Certainly if the maximalists are correct, it would have been easy to do so, since, as maximalists argue, it meets the criteria of infallibility. Instead, Curran was repeatedly asked simply to renounce his teachings because he had disagreed with the magisterium. In the end, Curran had to be left wondering whether he was disciplined because he disagreed with an infallible teaching of the magisterium, or, instead, whether he was disciplined simply because he challenged a statement of the magisterium, which might have been infallible, but might not have been. A doctrine of infallibility which might or might not apply in specific instances provides no more epistemic assurance than what Newman calls "private judgment." (For an argument along the same lines, see Mark E. Powell, "Canonical Theism and the Challenge of Epistemic Certainty: Papal Infallibility as a

Case Study," *Canonical Theism*, 195-209.)

Newman's primary problem was his unrecognized embracing of modern epistemological assumptions that I have called Cartesian. So, first, Newman assumed that the primary problem to be addressed was one of epistemological certitude. Newman's distinction between private judgment and the infallible authority of the church reflects this anxiety, and the embracing of a false dichotomy between absolute certainty and the mere opinion that characterizes private judgment is symptomatic of modern epistemological anxiety. That Newman insists that Protestant biblical interpretation is always "private judgment," that Protestants "waver about," that if people had faith, "they would not change," (202) reflects this, as does his concern that, apart from submitting one's judgment to a living authority, one cannot have the virtue of faith. Certainly some [contemporary disciples](#) of Newman, who insist that, unless we believe that the post-canonical Church has the "same degree of divine authority" as the apostles, we cannot "transmit the deposit of faith, as distinct from [mere] human opinion," reflect this modernist epistemological anxiety as well.

[As an aside here, Newman's critique of Protestant change and diversity is itself incoherent; it ultimately derives from the work of Roman Catholic apologist Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *History of Variations of Protestant Churches*, but the point of Bossuet's work is to contrast Protestant diversity with Roman Catholic uniformity across time. By recognizing the reality of development, Newman has introduced Catholic diversity, and has undone Bossuet's argument. It is no longer the case that the Roman Catholic Church is the one Church that has always believed the same things; rather, its unity is now a unity of mere historical succession. But on those grounds, the critique of Protestant diversity collapses; the Protestant can always argue that while Protestants have institutional diversity, real unity is found in a continuity with biblical faith; and

here, while there is much diversity among Protestants based on such things as geographical diversity, in essence, historical Protestantism holds the same basic faith – *sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*. All historical Protestants embrace the Creeds. All historical Protestants reject papal innovations not found in Scripture, e.g., transubstantiation, the Marian dogmas. Where Protestants disagree, it is either because some have renounced historical Protestant principles, e.g., Liberal Protestantism or sectarian cults like Mormonism who have claimed extra-biblical revelation, or they disagree about issues not specifically addressed in Scripture, e.g., church polity, or they disagree about issues where Scripture is not really clear, and where there have been disagreements within Roman Catholic theology as well, e.g., eucharistic theology, predestination.]

Returning to the main argument, this dichotomy between mere opinion and infallible certainty is simply a false dichotomy. We do not have to embrace the Cartesian dilemma. As authors like Leslie Newbigin have argued, confidence in biblical revelation does not provide us with absolute certainty, but it does provide *Proper Confidence*, which is all we need. We can have what modern philosopher of science Michael Polanyi calls *Personal Knowledge*. The choice between absolute certainty and mere opinion is what Catholic philosophical theologian Bernard Lonergan would call a “counterposition,” the alternative to which is what Lonergan calls the “virtually unconditioned”: A prospective judgment is “virtually unconditioned” if evidence for its affirmation is sufficient, its conditions have been fulfilled, and no further questions remain. We can agree, as does Catholic moral philosopher Alastair MacIntyre, that knowledge is situated in traditions, that advance in knowledge takes place through conversations between and within traditions. Or, as Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance suggests, our minds can penetrate to the inherent intelligibility of created objects because they are created by an intelligent creator, language reflects our own

intelligibility as made in his image, and biblical texts have their own intelligibility, as the inspired record of apostolic witnesses to God's revelation in Christ, which the church can indeed understand without the need for an infallible magisterium. Such knowledge is not infallible, it is not simply a matter of "taking a look," it is subject to correction, and continuing progression in the light of more insights, and judgments, and conversation within and between traditions, but it does indeed attain to correct judgments and adequate comprehension of created realities, including biblical texts. (On the above alternatives to Cartesian methodist epistemology, see Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Eerdmans, 1995); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1974); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 1999).)

Furthermore, as authors like Jeffrey Stout and Newbigin have argued, the modern epistemic demand for certainty itself leads to skepticism, and Newman's epistemological dilemma is certainly a case in point. (See Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight From Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*.) One can call Newman's bluff. If we cannot be certain apart from an infallible interpreter, why not admit that there are no infallible interpreters and we simply cannot be certain? Why not become a Liberal Protestant or an agnostic instead? If, as Newman argues in *The Essay of Development*, the Trinity can no more be found in Scripture than are the papacy or the Marian dogmas, why not become an Arian or an adoptionist? Why not simply concede Newman's point in his essay on "Faith and Private Judgment" that there is no escape from imposing our own meaning on the texts of dead authors and become a post-Modernist? During his own lifetime, Newman's

critic and brother-in-law J. B. Mozley noted that there is a real affinity between Newman's epistemological method and skepticism, and in fact his method was embraced by later Catholic Modernists like Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell, who claimed to be his faithful disciples, but that he had just not followed his argument to its proper conclusions. (J. B. Mozley, [*The Theory of Development: A Criticism of Dr. Newman's Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*](#) (London: Rivingtons, 1878); Alfred Loisy, [*The Gospel and the Church*](#) (NY: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1912); George Tyrrell, [*Christianity at the Crossroads*](#) (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913).

Moreover, if a living authority is the only way of interpreting Scripture, why settle for the particular living authority of the Roman Catholic magisterium? Why not embrace Mormonism instead, or, again, the view of those Liberal Protestants who believe that the Holy Spirit is leading them to a new understanding about issues of sexual liberation? As former Episcopal bishop Charles Bennison stated notoriously, "The church wrote Scripture. The church can re-write it."

Theologically, the biggest problem with Newman's theory of development combined with his epistemological skepticism about private judgment, is that it conflicts with the basic principle by which Karl Barth revived modern Trinitarian theology in his *Church Dogmatics* 1/1—that God is in himself who he is in his revelation. On Newman's theory, God is not *in se* who he is in his revelation, because the Scriptures, as the inspired apostolic record of revelation, are not really trustworthy and intelligible records of revelation. In themselves, they are subject to the whims of private judgment, and can mean whatever we want them to mean. God needs the help of an infallible magisterium to guarantee their meaning.

Although given the length of what I have already written, I will not develop this here in detail, the solution to Newman's epistemological dilemma lies in not embracing it in the first

place. A Reformed Catholic methodology would begin with ontology, with confidence in the knowability of God's revelation in Christ, with the priority of the known object rather than the Cartesian knowing subject, and Cartesian demands for epistemological certainty. Theologians like Thomas F. Torrance, Kevin Vanhoozer, and William Abraham's recent Canonical theism project make this case. (See not only Torrance's many works, but also Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (WestminsterJohnKnox, 2005), and William Abraham, et al., *Canonical Theism*, cited above.)

A properly theological approach must begin with revelation, and the intelligible subject matter of revelation. God's triune economic activity in his covenant with Israel, his incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection, and his continuing presence in the church through the Holy Spirit point to the immanent identity of the Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in himself, and this is the proper subject matter of theology. It is this triune economy of redemption to which Scripture, as the prophetic and apostolic witness to God's revelation in Christ, bears witness in its plain literal sense.

In light of God's revelation in Christ, and the principle that God is in himself who he is in his revelation, the issue about development concerns not so much *sola scriptura* as canon. Newman's claim that the key to apostolic authority is that it provided a "living voice," and living voices cannot be challenged, is facetious. Even in their lifetimes, the apostles were not considered authoritative because they were alive, but because they were apostles. Rather, the key to the apostle's authority is that the apostles were disciples of Jesus during his ministry, and were witnesses to his resurrection. Apostles were eyewitnesses of the mission, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Their authority was not that they were living, but that they were witnesses. This is why

one of the criteria of the canon of Scripture during the second century was that the authors of writings recognized as canonical had apostolic authority. They were either apostles, or were contemporaries of apostles. By recognizing the canon, the second-century Church placed itself under the authority of these particular dead witnesses. In doing so, the Patristic church agreed with the Reformers that the Scriptures are inherently intelligible, and are sufficient for salvation. The Rule of Faith was not something external to Scripture, but is a summary of its subject matter as the Scriptures were already being used in the worship of the church before they were formally canonized. The second century church did not create the canon, but recognized the authority of those writings whose subject matter was summarized in the Rule of Faith, and were of apostolic provenance. In recognizing that authority, the church forever submitted itself to the judgment of these canonical Scriptures. (See Oscar Cullmann, "The Tradition," *The Early Church: Historical and Theological Studies* (SCM Press, 1956).)

There is, then, an inherent distinction between the authority of the apostles as divinely appointed eyewitnesses to God's revelation in Christ, and all subsequent church tradition. That the magisterium is living gives it no inherent authority unless it can be shown that the apostles delegated their authority as eyewitnesses to successors. But this authority could not be transferred because it rested on the testimony of eyewitnesses, and successors by definition are not eyewitnesses. The uniqueness of apostolic authority as divinely commissioned eyewitnesses is crucial here. Not only are there no successors to this distinct authority of the apostles, there cannot be because only the apostles were eyewitnesses to the original revelation of God in Christ. There can be episcopal successors to apostles, but there can be no further apostles.

It is in the light of the unique authority of the canon as the

writings of the divinely commissioned apostolic eyewitnesses that subsequent issues of development must be assessed. Here the distinction I had noted in a [previous post](#) about Newman's failure to distinguish between what I had called "Development 1" and "Development 2" has crucial significance. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, which is not formulated explicitly in Scripture, is nonetheless, a development only in the sense that it is an articulated implication of what Scripture clearly says about the economic Trinity. If God is *in se* who he is in his revelation, then the God who has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the history of redemption must be immanently Triune in himself. If Scripture says that Jesus is the Word who was "with God," and "was God," the Word who "became flesh" (John 1:1,14), if Jesus is the one in whom "the fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9), if Scripture applies to Jesus "the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9), then Jesus is indeed "God from God," "of the same substance" as the Father. As Bernard Lonergan notes, throughout the development of Christological [and Trinitarian] doctrine, "it was the same christological doctrine that was handed on." The development of Nicene dogma was not an advance from obscurity to clarity, but an advance "from one kind of clarity to another." (Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology* (Westminster Press, 1976), 14). Similarly, David Yeago notes that, while the New Testament "does not contain a formally articulated doctrine of God of the same kind as the later Nicene dogmas," when the question is considered in terms of theological judgments rather than identical language or conceptions, a "conclusive, case can be made that the judgement about Jesus and God made in the Nicene Creed—the judgement that they are 'of one substance' or 'one reality' — is indeed 'the same', in a basically ordinary and unmysterious way, as that made in a New Testament text such as Philippians 2:6ff." ("The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia*, (Spring 1994) 3(2), 152-164). This accords with Athanasius' own

rejection of Arianism. Athanasius did not view his position as a development (in the sense of something new). He claimed merely to be articulating what the Church had always believed. The Arians were innovators, not the orthodox.

The question is quite different when it comes to matters like papal primacy or the marian dogmas. Not only are these not taught clearly in Scripture; they are not at all (like the Trinity) implications of material clearly taught by the canonical witnesses. (They are examples of Development 2.) Moreover, any claim that they are legitimate developments must be assessed historically. If the historical distance between the time of the apostolic writing, and their eventual appearance centuries later makes an unwritten oral transmission impossible (and it does), and if they are not taught in Scripture by those apostolic eyewitnesses whose testimony is alone relevant (and they are not), then their developmental legitimacy is in question. They are, as it were, the "private judgments" of later Christians who allowed their piety to get away from the plain teaching of the apostolic authority of the canonical Scriptures.

Finally, there is, of course, an issue of the relation between the canon and the contemporary church, but this is a properly theological issue, and it needs to be addressed as such. Kevin J. Vanhoozer states the matter correctly: "The real theological issue at stake in the debate over the relative authority of Scripture and tradition (not that one has to take sides, only prioritize) is actually *Christology*. Are there postcanonical, Spirit-inspired or -illumined insights into the way of Jesus Christ that do not have the canonical testimony to Christ as their ultimate source and norm?" (*Drama of Doctrine*, 189.) Newman's theory of development demands that there would be such post-canonical insights, but his arguments are incoherent, his epistemological dilemmas produce skepticism, and his theory of development as a solution to ecclesial identity despite acknowledged doctrinal changes

simply begs the question of whether or not the later Roman Church can be identified with the church of the apostles.

Presence and Estrangement: A Mystery Sermon

Exodus 17: 1-7

Colossians 1: 15-23

This morning's lectionary readings have to do with a mystery—not a theological mystery, but a mystery in the sense of a detective novel. In a mystery, there are a number of clues, but how they tie together, and how they provide the solution to the problem is not given until everything is wrapped up at the very end of the story. Our Old Testament reading sets the stage for the mystery, by providing us the clues. The epistle reading takes the very same clues and ties them all together to answer the question raised by the Old Testament reading.

If we compare the Exodus reading with the epistle reading from Colossians this morning we will find that both touch on a similar theme, identified by the question the people of Israel ask in the last verse of this morning's reading: "Is the Lord among us or not?" The question raised has to do with the presence of God, and how we know whether or not God really is present with us. This, then, is the mystery: how is God present with his people? Or is he?

The setting for the question in the Old Testament is a series of three tests to which God had put the people of Israel after having delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The first test took place shortly after Israel was delivered from the

pursuing Egyptian army at the Red Sea, and God provided water for them after the water at a place called Marah was too bitter to drink. At the next stage in the journey, there was no food, and God again provided by giving the people manna, a kind of bread in the wilderness, and quails, to eat. In this last reading, there is no water at all, and God commands Moses to strike the rock at Horeb so that water can flow, and the people can drink.

There are several implicit assumptions raised by the question, "Is the Lord among us or not?", and the passage addresses each one of them. First, the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" raises the possibility that God is only present if he provides for our needs. If he does not provide, he must not be present.

Perhaps surprisingly, neither Moses nor God challenge the assumption of the question. Rather, the question is answered, but in such a manner that the questioner is questioned. By giving Israel what they want, the problem of judgment shifts from God to Israel. So, first, God's presence with the people has already been shown in that he has delivered the nation from Egypt and formed them into a nation. God's presence had already been shown in his creation of a community. At the same time, however, there is a paradox in the text in that the questioning of whether God is present indicates an estrangement between God and the very community he had created by the exodus from Egypt. By questioning God's presence, Israel indicated its estrangement from the very God who had created the nation by delivering them from slavery. Could the God who had created Israel as a people, and delivered this people from slavery, not provide for his people in the desert?

Second, in the miraculous signs of providing water and the food of manna and quails, God showed that he could indeed provide for his people, but the miraculous nature of these signs shows that God can provide because he is the Creator. The God who can bring water from rocks and manna from the

desert is the God who shows that he is present with his people because he is the Creator of all that is, including the natural world in which there are deserts with no food and water, but also food and water in the desert. God could no more be absent from his people than his people could be absent from the very world in which they live, the world he created.

This leads to another paradox. Because God has provided for the community he has created with food and water in the desert, he has demonstrated that he is indeed present after all, but in such a way that his presence now calls the people he has created into question. Where Israel had demonstrated their estrangement from their Deliverer by asking whether God is present, God's demonstration of his presence shifts the question of judgment. The people failed the test that God had set for them by bringing them into the desert by showing that they did not trust in the presence of the God who had delivered them and would continue to provide for them.

And this is where the Old Testament passage leaves us. God is present for his people, but in such a way that his very presence calls his people into question at the same time that he answers their prayers. We also might ask, how can God be present for us when his very presence calls into judgment the estrangement created when we question whether he is present for us or not, whether he can be depended on to provide for us.

When we turn to this morning's epistle reading in Colossians, we find the very same themes appear, and the same answers given, but in each case, there is a twist, something new that resolves the mystery raised by the questions "Is the Lord present among us or not?" . . . "How can God be present with us if we are estranged?" The key to the puzzle is in the verse just before the one where our epistle reading begins this morning. Paul writes, "[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

(Col. 1: 13-14) Jesus, God's beloved Son, is the solution to the problem of how God can be among us when we are estranged.

So, in answer to the main question: "Is the Lord among us or not?," Paul's answer is that the Lord is indeed among us. Where his presence with Israel had been that of Creator and Deliverer, his presence in Jesus is more than that; it is a personal presence. Jesus, Paul writes, "is the image of the invisible God." "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Just as, in Exodus, God demonstrated his presence as Creator through miraculous signs of water and manna and quails, so, also in Jesus, God's presence is indicated through the miraculous sign of new life in his resurrection from the dead. As Paul puts it, Jesus is the "beginning, the firstborn from the dead." God can raise Jesus from the dead because he is the one who creates life to begin with. But the resurrection of Jesus does more than point to God's presence as Creator. Because Jesus is God's personal presence, "the image of the invisible God," the Son whom God has raised is also the pre-existent Son, the one through whom God has created the universe: Paul writes, "For by him all things were created—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1: 15-17)

As God had created a new people with his deliverance of Israel from slavery, so now God has created another new people, through the personal presence of his Son. Because this new people, the church, is united to Christ in his resurrection, the church is Christ's body. As Paul writes: "And he is the head of the body the church." (v. 18) But where, in Exodus, Israel failed God's test by asking whether God was present, and God's answer to the question in gifts of water and food was not only a sign of presence, but also indicated a judgment on Israel's estrangement in asking the question, things are different with Jesus.

In Jesus, God is present not only as the God whose presence we

wonder about, the God who might calls us into question, but as one of us who who has taken on our very question. He is the answer to the question of whether God is present by himself being God's presence as one of us. In Jesus, God is a human being. In this, Paul indicates, lies the solution of how God can be present among us when we are estranged from that presence. Where, in Exodus, our estrangement means that God's presence calls Israel into question, in Colossians, the opposite happens. Jesus takes our part on himself, and God in Christ embraces our estrangement. So, says Paul, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." (Col. 1: 20) Through Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus has undone the estrangement that humanity had placed between itself and God when we questioned, as we still question, "Is the Lord among us or not?" So Paul writes: "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled, in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." (Col. 1: 21-22)

Finally, in the desert, God responded to Israel's question, "Is God among us or not?" by demonstrating his presence. He gave them the water they asked for. In Christ, God not only has become personally present for us, but, through the waters of baptism, God is present for us as he enables us to share in the very resurrection life of Jesus his Son. In Christ, we are not only reconciled from our estrangement from God, but we live a new life that comes from our sharing in the resurrection life of Christ himself. Paul writes later in Colossians: "For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority . . . [H]aving been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses . . . God made

alive together with him.” (Col. 2: 9-10, 12)

So, wrapping it all up. Here’s the place in the mystery novels when the detective steps on stage and explains how it all ties together. How do the clues fit to answer the questions: “Is the Lord among us or not, and can we trust him to provide for us?”, and, “How can God be among us when our very asking of the question indicates our estrangement, our lack of trust of whether he is with us and can be trusted?” And here is the answer. The Lord is indeed among us. He has among us in Jesus. Jesus is God’s personal presence among us. He is the one through whom God created the world, the one who took on our flesh, who died and rose as one of us, and took our estrangement on himself. When Jesus came among us, God himself, the very Son of God came among us, as one of us. Although we showed our estrangement to his divine presence by putting God-with-us to death, his resurrection overcame our estrangement by bringing us a divine presence that means forgiveness rather than judgment, and new life, rather than death. When Jesus rose from the dead, he created a new community, a new Israel, his body, the church; he is the rock from which we drink the new living waters that cure our estrangement, and give us life.

Is the Lord among us or not? Jesus is “Immanuel.” He is God with us. Amen.